

Reflection in Memory of Sister Gertrude Foley, S.C.  
March 18, 1932 – June 16, 2023



Sometime in May, Sister Geri Marr, our pastoral care associate, had an informal interview with Sr. Gertrude Foley in which Gertrude made definitive statements on two issues: Caritas Christi and her vocation. So we begin with her words:

*“Caritas Christi—what was it intended to be:*

*First, a home for the Sisters, a beautiful home.  
And second, here we care for the elders and the sick.*

*Geri exclaimed: “Gorgeous job!!!” to which  
Gertrude replied: “I am grateful!”*

The second issue was her vocation:

*“I have always wanted to be a Sister, and I am not  
disappointed! I don’t regret one day of my life!”*

And so we begin this reflection based in part on an autobiographical paper written by Sister Gertrude sometime after 2007.

Gertrude Foley was born in Etna, Pennsylvania, on March 18, 1932. She was the daughter of a master electrician, Joseph V. Foley, who had won the hand of the efficient, competent bookkeeper, Stella Blitzko; it was an Irish/Polish rose romance.

The first daughter of the eight sparks in this family was Gertrude. She loved to be with her dad, who on family walks would proudly point out special electrical projects wired by the Raphael Electric Company. She never forgot her father’s wit and talent at drawing sketches for them as well as play acting—even carrying his humor to that last good-bye to her on the way to the ambulance waiting to take him to the hospital. Joseph Foley died on Christmas day in 1945.

While she would forever miss the spark of his presence, she carried his gifts of good humor, love and talent in music (rather than art). From her mother, Stella Blitzko Foley, came the love and desire for learning; whenever the opportunity came for a new experience her mother would say to Gertrude, *“Let’s go; we might learn something.”*

After her father’s death, as the oldest of the six girls and in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Gertrude began to assume household responsibilities while her mother returned to the Raphael Electric Company, and her grandmother, Julia Blitzko, cared for the youngest children. Gert was a good student, and from her first encounter with religious (the Sisters of the

Immaculate Heart of Mary) she experienced a deep desire to be a “Sister.” She felt the call strongly in her high school years at St. Mary of the Mount, Mount Washington. It seemed to be a given that she would join the Sisters who taught her, but in her senior year, she surprised her teachers and friends when she informed them of her decision to enter the Seton Hill Sisters of Charity. The McKenna family connection made through Sister Frances Teresa Masur led her to becoming acquainted with us, along with the vocation retreats where she met the future Sisters Francesca Kunkle, Betty Stock, and Mary Philip Aaron. By September 8, 1950, Gertrude was ready, and with her mother, Stella Blitzko Foley, boarded the train from Pittsburgh to Greensburg and Seton Hill. It must have been difficult for her mother, but she supported Gertrude’s choice despite the loss of her presence and help in the family—neither of them ever looking back.

From novitiate days, Gertrude Foley exhibited leadership qualities—mending and sewing habits, giving advice or help with study, leading conversations at recreation with sparks of that good Foley humor. She was sent out as a novice and early on assigned to teach Latin and music (the flute was her instrument). Because of her excellent training at St. Mary’s, she continued to study in the classics and music both at Seton Hill University and Duquesne.

During this time, she was deeply involved in learning and teaching effective methods for presenting the faith in the light of Vatican II to high school students, especially through working with the faith formation for the teachers. It was at this time that she met Brother Tom Giardino, Marianist Brother from Dayton, and began to be involved in the work of renewal for other congregations—sparks of renewal that took her to the four corners of the world, from Australia to South Africa.

In 1967, she began doctoral studies in theology at Fordham University where she received an M.A., and later completed doctoral studies at Aquinas Institute of Theology, Dubuque, Iowa, and St. Louis, Missouri.

In 1973, Sister Gertrude was elected for the first time as a member of the General Council of the Sisters of Charity. She began the task of overseeing initial and ongoing formation through a program called Community Formation and Development. The participation of 120 Sisters who met monthly, gave those who participated a real sense of empowerment; those early sparks of renewal are still remembered.

When Sister Gertrude left office in 1977, she began teaching at Seton Hill College, now University. Later she served for years on the Board of Trustees, exercising an influential role in the area of mission effectiveness. She was always keen to hear what was going on at “the Hill” with questions that sparked animated discussions.

In 1979, she accepted a position at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota. At St. Catherine’s, she could develop her expertise in both theological and pastoral education, to prepare adults for participation in church ministries. She was always conscious of her primary strength as an educator, writing “*My lifestyle vocation is religious life as a Sister of Charity; my ministry vocation is teaching.*”

Early on in her teaching experience, she was sent to Louisiana for one summer to teach in a religious summer school for children. Trying to explain the mystery of the Trinity, she began asking the small class to name the first Person--*God the Father*, the second Person--*God the Son*, and the third Person. . .silence fell on the little group. As I am sure you can imagine, Sister Gertrude tried to coax. Suddenly a hand shot up, and quiet Ben shouted out with conviction: *God the moon!*

When Gertrude was elected again to the council in 1981, she took on the task of organizing the Sisters living in Arizona and California. She did this so that they could arrive at a majority decision to request that Arizona be established as a Region. This was approved by the 1985 Chapter. Sister Gertrude was then elected Regional Superior and served for seven years. While there, she accepted a position with the Diocese of Phoenix at the Kino Institute of Adult Faith Formation, her field of expertise and mission, again never missing an opportunity to generate her teaching sparks.

In 1993, she was elected Major Superior and served in that position for nine years. During this time she oversaw the building of a new Motherhouse for the Seton Hill Sisters in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. In Gertrude's own words:

*"This (building of Caritas) was a daunting and costly endeavor which was completed in 1999. Again, while accepting the full responsibility for my executive role, my approach was that of participative leadership, involving many Sisters in the planning and execution of this vision."*

Sparks of creativity abounded, and we gratefully live today in the midst of this expression of beauty and practicality.

Her leadership during this period was crucial in another area, the establishment of two provinces, United States and Korea, and for the General Chapter held in Korea under the new governance configuration. She loved and enjoyed her work with our Korean Sisters and her trips to their beautiful country.

When she left office in 2002, Gertrude accepted the position nearby as Executive Director of the Office of Education and Spiritual Formation in the Diocese of Greensburg. Five directors came under her supervision. Schools, faith formation, youth ministry, lay ministry formation, and liturgy reported to her and she wanted to unite them in one vision, in her words *"to cultivate an integrated approach to all these offices. . . diverse expressions of a common vision faith formation, not isolated silos of interest."*

For health reasons she left the position in 2006 and turned her skill and leadership to Seton Family as the Coordinator. Here again she tried to bring new sparks of energy to this 2002 initiative. She refocused it within the teaching of Vatican II and the indispensable role of the laity in the Church rooted in the spirituality of St. Vincent dePaul, St. Louise de Marillac, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

The creation of the network structure by the 2007 Provincial Chapter led to Gertrude's last elected position. She became the chairperson of a group of 25 Sisters who formed

the Network for Lifelong Learning as Sisters of Charity. The challenge of this group would be to “*re-energize our understandings of community, ministry, and spirituality by reclaiming our roots in the Vincentian-Setonian tradition of apostolic religious life*”- goals that Gertrude had lived, encouraged, and taught for over 50 years.

Up until Sister Gertrude was really no longer able, she taught on-line as a facilitator and course designer of ecclesiology for the Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation sponsored by the University of Dayton.

Sr. Gertrude Foley’s leadership generated a kind of electric current in religious life of our Congregation, and each of us felt sparks of her scholarship, leadership, friendship, and beyond through her writing, lecturing, teaching, conducting workshops, and serving as facilitator-consultant. She sent currents of her learning, teaching, and writing to religious communities and the laity of our Church worldwide. Yet, she always remained our Gert, ready for a chat and especially a new idea.

Last evening and this morning we are truly blessed with the presence of the Sister Gertrude’s family members and Brother Tom Giardino. And this morning with the arrival of Father Jerome McKenna. You have come from near (Pittsburgh and State College) and far (Kansas, Ohio, West Virginia and Connecticut.) How she loved to hear from you and, especially, to share in those Foley stories that brought tears and laughter. We are moved to see you here and to hear your shared memories of Aunt Gert.

Aunt Gert, Gertrude, Sister Gertrude Foley’s last move was to the second floor, room 221, where she continued to engage nurses and aides, Sisters, and visitors in conversation that often turned into shared learning. Rabbi Abraham Heschel was one of her favorite guides, and she often shared his message—“*just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy.*”

Sister Gertrude Foley, our Gert, we felt the sparks of your scholarship, leadership, friendship, laughter, and love. We, family, friends, and Sisters, are deeply grateful. Dear Sister Gertrude Foley, dear Gert, may you rest in the peace of the Lord, but do keep those Foley-Blitzko sparks flying.

~ Sister Gemma DeIDuca, SC  
June 22, 2023