

Remembering



Sister Suzanne Steffen, CSJ

March 14, 1928 ~ August 24, 2016

“By their works shall you know them.”

This gospel phrase clearly describes Sister Suzanne Steffen who died the early morning of August 24, 2016. Suzanne’s whole life was filled with generous works in diverse ministries too numerous to count, never speaking her own praises, just responding wholeheartedly and creatively to the needs of the times and the people she met. Her works spoke eloquently of the gift of her life to embrace the CSJ charism: to love the dear neighbor without distinction.

Suzanne was raised in the town of Fresno, though born in Los Angeles on March 14, 1928. Her parents, Cletus Steffen and Loretta Mary Butler, were both from Minnesota.

The parents moved to California in 1927, the year before their first child Suzanne was born. Suzanne’s birth was followed

by the addition of two beloved brothers: Michael, and Peter. The family left L.A. because her father, Cletus, during the trying times of the Depression, was offered a job in Fresno. Suzanne described her life in Fresno as a specially happy time. In a small town, one really knew the neighbors, something rare in a big city.

Though the family moved to three homes in Fresno, only the last one did they come to own and make of it their family home. Using her own natural creativity, this home was lovingly and artistically decorated by her mother Loretta with beautiful handmade braided and hooked rugs still in use in her brother’s home.

Suzanne loved her grammar school and high school years at St. Theresa which had both a grammar and high school at that time. In fact, Suzanne convinced the pastor, Monsignor Dowling, to allow the girls

in her class to finish their senior year and graduate from St. Theresa’s rather than transfer to San Joaquin Memorial which was opening their graduation year as the first co-ed High School in Fresno.

It was there at St. Theresa’s that the seeds of Suzanne’s religious vocation grew. She praised her teachers for being terrific, projecting happiness and real concern for each student. She was particularly influenced by Sr. Laurentia Digges, her high school teacher, who was a great challenger. It was no irony that Sr. Laurentia was a gifted author who wrote the inspiring work, “Transfigured World”. The irony is that Suzanne fully embodied in herself a creative spirit moving among the most marginated doing just that: transfiguring the world through her presence and care.

After graduation, Suzanne followed her call to become a sister of St. Joseph, entering as a Postulant in September, 1946. She received the habit on March 19, 1947, and was given the Name: Sister Mary Cletus, after her dad. She professed first vows on March 19, 1949, and was finally professed on August 15, 1952.

As most sisters during their early formative years, Suzanne was sent to teach elementary school: her assignment was St. Patrick’s in West Oakland, one of the poorest parishes in that diocese.

Very soon after getting her feet wet as a teacher in other elementary schools, Cletus, later known as Suzanne, was sent to be Principal of Our Lady of Guadalupe School in Oxnard, and also teaching the 7th and 8th grades.

Following that, Suzanne was sent to various schools: in San Diego, Kennewick, and back to Fresno to teach at her alma mater.

Then, Suzanne accepted an appointment in the diocese of Santa Rosa, California, to become the Religious Education Coordinator—for her a new ministry and one to which she brought creativity, ability to build connections and to invite collaboration.

What followed was a sequence of generous responses to diverse calls to service and leadership.

Suzanne served as a parish visitor while at the same time creating an innovative program called Work Net set up to assist sisters leaving education to find new work.

During the period of Amnesty for undocumented immigrants in 1986, Suzanne worked for the L.A. diocese as counselor for the hordes of people taking advantage of the new law to become legalized. Once the program was up and running, Suzanne accepted responsibility for being a Pastoral Associate at Holy Spirit parish. From this site she started community organizing, established a soup kitchen, and in collaboration with two neighboring parishes opened St. Peter Claver Thrift Store. This was in response to the need for low cost clothing for the people in the area. Suzanne spent a one year sabbatical at GTU in Berkeley, California. Besides enriching her commitment to a Vatican II mindset, being in the Bay area found Suzanne captivated, along with Sisters Carol Ann O’Marie and Maureen Lyons, with the need for homeless women to have a place where they could get away from the street at least for some respite. Thus, “A Friendly Place” was born offering a homey feminine place to relax, get a cup of tea or a snack,

take a shower, and wash clothes. After getting A Friendly Place up and running, Suzanne was called to serve as a regional superior in the San Diego area. She accepted this role graciously, supporting the sisters, and befriending many. But, she did not simply devote herself to that: Suzanne also allied herself with several Catholic Charities’ projects such as outreach to the immigrants living in open fields near San Diego, and being a vital part of the Welfare Reform Network, among other works.

What followed next was a string of generous responses to needs: Advocate for the elderly, and work for the L.A. Office of Detention. It was in this role that Suzanne worked with Suzanne Jabro, and together they envisioned the “Get on the Bus” program. Women prisoners expressed their greatest need: to be able to see their children. This ministry has unimaginably expanded from its early start: from one bus to dozens! Suzanne came to Carondelet Center in May of 2009, recognizing a speech impairment identified as

an effect of Alzheimer’s. Though speech therapy was slightly effective, it never restored the verbal communication facility that once Suzanne used so effectively. We recognized her struggle to get words out, yet she recognized and acknowledged us, her friends and her family. She returned to time for painting, a gift shared by her mother and brother Mike. Some of her beautiful paintings decorate her room.

Perhaps this loss of speech was God’s way of letting Suzanne know that a transfigured world is something to be seen not heard. In her compassionate way Suzanne showed by her deeds of all-inclusive love the CSJ charism. Indeed Suzanne, like the earliest sisters, followed the charge to divide the City and respond to the needs of the times. Her example of generosity, creativity and deeds of justice is a lasting gift. Go in peace, Suzanne. You will be welcomed by the Creator of all good works. ✠

Written by Sister Annette Debs, CSJ

