



Remembering



Mechtilde Gerber, CSJ

November 11, 1928 – March 14, 2018

Sister Mechtilde was born in Mexico City on November 11, 1918 – an hour-and-a-half after the official end of World War

I. That victory was celebrated in her long train of baptismal names: Aline Thérèse Emanuele Vittoria Maria Francesca Giuseppina. Twenty-five years later, inspired by a 13th-century mystic with whom she shared a devotion to the Sacred Heart as a symbol of divine love and human compassion, Aline Gerber chose Mechtilde as her name in religion. The name also signifies “mighty in battle,” and during her half-century as a nurse, Sister Mechtilde fought long and tirelessly on behalf of her patients’ health, welfare and dignity. Her colleagues at Daniel Freeman Hospital aptly christened her “The White Tornado.”

Her parents met in Mexico. Herbert Emil Gerber, a wealthy New York businessman of Swiss-Prussian origin, had established an international business there. Their Italian-born mother, Eugenia (Jenny)

Bozzano, traveled to Mexico on vacation, decided to stay and within nine years was awarded the founding Chair in Italian at Mexico’s National University. Herbert was one of her evening-class pupils, and after a courtship of five years they married. Their middle child, Aline, was preceded in birth by her sister Ilda in 1917, and followed by Anna Maria in 1923.

With its firmly international roots, the family moved frequently between Mexico, New York and Europe – Aline was just four months old when she made her first sea voyage – and between the two world wars they crossed the Atlantic in first-class splendor at least two dozen times. But Herbert’s work required him to travel even more frequently, and Jenny was parted from her husband for long periods at a time. Soon they began to leave their daughters in the care of relatives, nannies, tutors and in Swiss finishing schools.

Their principal home was

in Mexico City, but because of the country’s political instability the Gerber daughters were kept behind locked gates. Nevertheless, whenever Herbert and Jenny were away, the servants introduced the girls to another world, sharing some of their tasks (like polishing silver) and treating them to foods forbidden by their father (like popsicles). Also hidden from the skeptical Herbert, they taught the girls prayers. Nanny Martina took them downtown to visit the parish church and take part in Mary’s Day celebrations. When Martina gave Aline the autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, it became a life-changing revelation for the girl.

Even when Aline was a toddler, her grandmothers described her as “strong and independent, cool and tough, logical and decisive.” But her parents were shocked when just short of her 25th birthday, Aline secretly entered the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in 1943, followed by her sisters Anna Maria (Sister Hildegarde) in 1947 and Ilda (Sister Aline Marie) in 1948. The battle which ensued lasted almost a decade and was taken all the way to Pope Pius XII, but it eventually ended in peaceful reconciliation.

Jenny and Herbert first met the Sisters of St. Joseph in the mid-1930s, when they were wary of living in Europe and seeking an American boarding school for their daughters. The girls already had a diploma from the École Cardaire, but St. Joseph’s Academy in Tucson changed their lives. Its principal, Sister Marietta Braly, was a convert to Catholicism and an engaging teacher with a Wild West background. For the first time, Aline – the middle child – felt at home, and when she later decided to become a nun, Marietta became her

sole confidant.

After graduating from St. Joseph’s Academy in 1939, Aline enrolled at another CSJ institution, Mount St. Mary’s College in Los Angeles. Sensing that something might be afoot, Herbert cut her stay there to two years and brought her home to cool her heels for a whole year. Coincidentally, in 1941 Burl Ives recorded the ballad “I Know Where I’m Going,” and by then Aline knew too. Ignoring her father’s specific instructions to enroll in a state college in Santa Barbara, Aline traveled with her sister, Ilda, to the Bay Area in 1942 and took her Junior year at Lone Mountain, a college operated by the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. After handing over her earnings from a summer job to Sister Marietta, on September 6, 1943 Aline Gerber entered the CSJs, and on March 19, 1944 she was received into the order as Sister Mechtilde.

Two years later, she was assigned to St. Joseph’s Academy in Prescott, Arizona, where she remained for ten years, teaching three elementary grades plus early-morning language classes. She also coached afternoon sports (including the football team) and took over the duties of a departing nurse, which included staying up nights to administer medications.

“I always wanted to be a nurse; it was a great joy for me.” In 1955, Sister Mechtilde was sent to St. Mary’s Hospital in Tucson where she earned an R.N. in pediatrics. After returning to Los Angeles in 1959 she completed her Bachelor’s degree at Mount St. Mary’s College, and then joined the staff of Daniel Freeman Hospital, founded four years earlier by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

For the next 48 years, Sister Mechtilde filled the hospital’s halls

with her famous “Hello, darling!” She both supervised and served in the Operating Room, Intensive Care and Critical Care units. As the Director of Nursing, she saw no incompatibility between high standards and a pleasant disposition. “If you’re going to do it, she said, do it correctly and consider the patient’s point of view.” A “walking, talking personification” of the hospital’s mission “to serve God’s sick as total persons,” she also looked after the families of patients, translating or finding meals for them when needed. She cleaned clothing discarded in the ER and distributed it to the homeless.

Known as the “Queen of IVs,” she was constantly paged to deliver them quickly and painlessly. An expert in team building, she organized staff parties, making her own flower arrangements and sewing decorations. These skills were also helpful when the hospital was at the critical center of the 1992 civil unrest; and for the hospital’s exceptional performance, she and Sister Regina Clare Salazar were honored by the City of Los Angeles and the County Board of Supervisors.

Sister Mechtilde’s many honors included the 1999 “Sr. Mary Kevin Award” for exemplifying the “mission and values” of the Carondelet Health System, and in 2011 the Los Angeles Archdiocese recognized “her dedicated and loving service to those in need” at its annual “White Mass.”

After Daniel Freeman Hospital was closed, Sister Mechtilde joined the St. Mary’s Community at Carondelet Center in September 2007 as Holy Family Support Staff and Nurse Companion. Citing her mother’s work of “serving the poor, especially ministering to the sick,” she insisted, “I’m not retired,

I’m always doing something.” She accompanied the sisters to doctor and hospital appointments. For some time she was also in charge of flower arrangements and Sacristy linens. Most importantly she stayed up entire nights with the dying, smoothing their passage. Among them was her beloved Sister Aline Marie, whom she lovingly tended – as she had for Sister Hildegarde – until her death in February 2009.

But as her own health began to decline, Sister Mechtilde moved to Holy Family Community on July 2, 2012. As one would expect, she resisted in many ways, but often expressed her gratitude to the staff for their attention.. During her final days she was surrounded by her dear friends Mary Ann Barnett, nurses from Daniel Freeman and the Yuja family. Cora, Rouff and their daughter Rosanna were with Sister Mechtilde to her quiet and graceful end.

In the early hours of March 14, 2018, Sister Mechtilde was welcomed by her parents and sisters into the eternal embrace of “the Love that moves the sun and other stars.”

~ Written by Mary Ann Bonino