



Remembering

Sister Ellen Joseph Russell, CSJ

February 4, 1922 - July 24, 2019

Joseph Bernard Russell and Adelaide Josephine Garrel were born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, where they eventually met, married and settled in their home town. After the sorrow of losing two girls, their son, Joseph was born, followed by Thelma Rita and then on February 4, 1922, their second daughter arrived. They named her Katherine Ellen. Another son, Chris lived just two years. Son, Jim, became the last of the Russell children.

Joseph was an insurance salesman. He and Adelaide thought they would continue to live as a typical Southern family. However in 1928, Joseph received a transfer to the new office in San Francisco, CA. After six months in the City by the Bay, Adelaide wanted to move to a warmer climate. Another transfer sent the family to Los Angeles, where they found a home in St. Brigid's Parish with an elementary school staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph. Katherine was placed

in the morning kindergarten; her sister, Thelma, in the all-day first grade, where Katherine spent her afternoons until brother Joe arrived to walk his sisters home. At the end of the year, she had learned all first grade lessons and was promoted to second grade with her sister. From St. Brigid's she attended Catholic Girls High School graduating in 1939. It was a surprise when her sister, Thelma, left high school in the middle of her senior year and entered the Sisters of St. Joseph. Katherine also was drawn to the Sisters' way of life. In February 1940, she too entered the postulate at St. Mary's Academy. In March 1940, Thelma became Sister Rita Joseph. In August Katherine received the habit and became Sister Ellen Joseph. She made first profession of vows in 1942; final vows in 1945. She earned her bachelor's degree in History from Mount St. Mary's College, and then a California elementary credential.

When thinking of her 36 years as an elementary school teacher, she said, "Some of my assignments were in other grade levels, but it was the middle grades that I loved." Besides St. Joseph's Academy, Prescott, AZ, all her teaching assignments were in parish schools in California, from Banning to Sonoma. In some of the schools she was responsible for organizing libraries, a skill she had learned during summers in the Mount library, one of her "quiet and peaceful places."

One favorite memory was at St. Basil's, Vallejo. On her golden jubilee, she was surprised with a special liturgy and reception at which the parishioners and students toasted her along with all the CSJs who had touched their lives. Three years later as she and Sister Beverly Ann Flynn prepared to leave St. Basil's, a grateful parish again thanked the Sisters of St. Joseph for their 44 years of dedication. The words in the bulletin read: "We say farewell not only to Sister Ellen and Sister Beverly, but to all the Sisters of St. Joseph and an era that has shaped the existence of Catholic schools, leading us to a new era where we must continue their good work, the work of God."

During 1993-94, she spent her sabbatical at ROCKHAVEN in St. Louis. She returned refreshed and decided she still wanted to be in a school atmosphere. The office position at Carondelet High School, Concord, fit her perfectly. Then S. Regina McLaughlin offered her a similar position in Los Angeles. She accepted and was delighted to join not only St. Joan of Arc School and Parish but also to live with other CSJs in the nearby convent.

When S. Mary Brigid Fitzpatrick, with whom she and S. Regina had entered, also arrived, along with S. Patricia Arnold, they became the "golden oldies" in the house. As the younger sisters left to accept other ministries, Sisters Regina, Mary Brigid, Patricia and Ellen remained until Ellen's health persuaded her to join Holy Family Community at Carondelet Center. Not long after, it was she who welcomed the other three to Holy Family.

Probably most would portray Ellen as quiet and unassuming. Sisters who lived in community with her used the phrase, "To know her is to love her." Shy, maybe, but it gave her the strength to reach out with kind words and thoughtful generosity to others. She loved nature..... gardens with flowers, small animals, but especially the ocean, which she said "refreshed her spirit." She was creative---crocheted, dabbled in watercolors, helped to prepare for any parties.

She loved her family, keeping in touch with phone calls, notes and traveling to see them for special occasions.

Many were surprised that she was very progressive spiritually. She read new books, tried new prayer forms with women in the parish and attended workshops that would stretch her thinking.

Ellen accepted both the gifts and challenges of her life. When stroke symptoms were apparent a few months ago, she accepted but soon was up and about and able to attend the Holy Family retreat which was led by her good friend, S. Carol Quinlivan. It was a peaceful time. In early July, she was hospitalized

and diagnosed with cancer. With surgery not an option she accepted the situation with her usual grace and resignation. Even in her rapid decline she smiled her gratitude to her caregivers, family and friends who visited. On July 24th she died peacefully and quietly as she had lived.

In the Book of Proverbs a question is asked. "Who shall find a valiant woman?" Quoting some of the words that follow may remind us of Ellen... "When she opens her mouth, she does so wisely and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue." May we learn from this gift you have left us, Ellen. Now go... "receive the reward of your labors"...everlasting happiness in the arms of a loving God. ❖

~ Written by Sister Barbara Dugan, CSJ

