



Sister Anne Gertrude Fitzgerald, CSJ
June 17, 1915 ~ November 27, 2022

On June 17, 1915, Francis Fitzgerald and Anna Ryan Fitzgerald welcomed their third daughter, and fourth child into their family. They named her MARY PATRICIA FITZGERALD. She was born in Spokane, Washington. The Fitzgerald's subsequently added five more children to the family.

While in Washington State, Francis was diagnosed with severe asthma and was advised to settle in a dry climate. Thus, abandoning Francis' lifelong dream of being a successful farmer, the family first tried San Diego, then Santa Ana, and finally ended up in San Bernardino. Mary Patricia was just entering the first grade.

Since the Fitzgerald's were a very religious family, the children were enrolled in Catholic School. In the early part of the 1900's the Immaculate Heart Community had a combination elementary and High School, St. Bernadine's, to which the Fitzgerald children were sent. The family had very close ties with the Sisters of St. Joseph since their mother's two sisters were Sisters of St. Joseph from St. Paul. The aunts frequently came for the summers to visit the family and enjoy California weather.

As Mary Patricia grew, she watched her two eldest sisters join the Sisters of St. Joseph: becoming Sister Catherine Anita, and Sister Constance. She, however, made up her mind that SHE was not simply going to follow that path. Thus, after graduation from High School, she searched for a person with whom to share her life and values as did her beloved mother. Her mother Anna had a very strong influence on Mary Patricia exemplifying truly Christian values in her life. These values were not so much taught as caught.

It wasn't until Sister Catherine Anita's final vows that Mary Patricia felt a personal call, being deeply moved by the words of the vow ceremony. Almost in a flash she decided that she, too, would become a Sister of St. Joseph. In a whirlwind of preparation and lots of help, she left for St. Mary's and the Postulate one month later, Sept. 15, 1934!

Though Mary Patricia admired the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart, her elementary and high school teachers, and in particular Sister Mary Helen whom she described as the essence of goodness, she also had appreciation for the commitment of her two aunts each so dissimilar. One aunt was very reserved and quiet, and the other fun-loving and out-going.

Her period of formation, along with 7 other young women, was blessed by having Sister Francis Bernard as Postulant and Novice Director. Sister was a real human being who set an example worth following. There were, however, a lot of restrictions during formation: the silence, prohibitions from going outside when one felt like it, and the enticing places, like the attic, which were off limits. There were really unpleasant consequences for even small failures: to keep silence during recreation, or to stay inside when one could hardly wait to breathe the fresh air outside.

Mary Patricia was received into the Novitiate on March 19, 1935, and given the name Sister Anne Gertrude. She really wanted to be named after her mother and father, Anna Francis. Where, she wondered, did Gertrude come from?

As a novice, Sister Anne Gertrude proved herself to be extremely responsible. When Sr. Ann Jeanette, the cook, broke her arm, Sr. Anne Gertrude was asked to cover the kitchen. She was quite capable at this as she knew how to plan and prepare meals coming from a large family. The aspect of getting her fellow novices to do as they were told while on kitchen duty was completely another story!

After a two-year Novitiate, Sister Anne Gertrude was accepted to make first vows on March 19, 1937. She pronounced her final vows on August 15, 1940

Throughout Sister Anne Gertrude's ministerial life, she showed a willing readiness to do her best wherever she was sent. Her first missions were primarily in elementary schools, starting as a novice when assigned to be a 5th grade teacher at St. John Evangelist nearby. After her vows, she was sent to eight different schools throughout the Province. From 1951 to 1970, Sister taught primarily 8th graders for 19 years, certainly a master teacher, with a total of 33 years directly in charge of students.

To illustrate Sister Anne Gertrude's openness, in 1970, she was asked to serve as Secretary, first at St. John's in San Diego, then the House of Studies, and finally Our Lady of Angels in San Diego, contributing her secretarial skills to advance the mission.

While at Our Lady of Angels in San Diego, Sister answered the call to serve the elderly homebound as part of needed parish ministry. She followed that assignment with a similar role with the elderly In Martinez at St. Catherine of Siena Parish.

As an example of Sister Anne Gertrude's versatility and responsiveness to need, she spent 7 months working in the Archives at Carondelet Center, followed by serving as a driver until 1982.

1982 was a turning point for Sister Anne Gertrude, occurring at a time many retire. It was that year that Sr. Anne Gertrude felt called to serve in the missions in Brazil with her Redemptorist priest brother, Father Bill. He was stationed in Bahia, Brazil, serving the poorest of the poor, along with 3 religious women from another community.

Life in Brazil was very difficult and resulted in a truncated stay and a return to the United States under doctor's orders after 7 months. Sister went directly upon arrival to another brother's home in Lake Elsinore with orders from the community to get well. Lo and behold, when Sister was strong enough, the pastor in Lake Elsinore invited her to remain and provide services to the elderly/homebound through St. Frances of Rome parish. She remained in Lake Elsinore for 22 years lovingly and creatively serving many her same age.

Certainly at the age of retirement, Sister Anne Gertrude returned to San Diego. Did she retire? Not really, as she became a volunteer at the Community Christian Services in San Diego. Then, in approximately 2005, Sister Anne Gertrude opened her heart to what could be described as an "experimental community" in the home of an associate, Fran Owen. They called their community "San Jose by the Bay" since it overlooked Mission Bay. The two dedicated women prayed together, supported one another, opened their community to others, especially in San Diego, and continued to participate in cluster and parish activities as they were able. Only when there was a decline in health so that the necessary activities of healthful living became unreasonably difficult did Sister Anne Gertrude decide to come to Holy Family Community in 2015. Besides, her elder sister, Sister Constance, had made a similar earlier decision to come to Holy Family. They could spend their final years in the close company of one another, a delight not ever available to them before.

Sister Anne Gertrude was a woman who was always ready to be of service in any need. She gave generously of herself well beyond the age of “retirement”. Even when others were off for summer, Sister Anne Gertrude gave two summers to the United farm Workers at their local office in La Paz at the height of the UFW’s difficulties in organizing in 1973 and 1974.

In her own words, Sister Anne Gertrude describes having enjoyed good community; surviving poor community relatively unscathed, and coming to be free of the “trappings” that had begun to weigh down her spirit prior to the experience of utter simplicity of life in Brazil. For a short while she did experience a retirement of sorts, described by Joyce Rupp as “a time to sip contentedly from the fragrant wine of your life.” In gratitude, she now has offered her gift of life and self to her prodigally provident God. She is now at Peace.

This Necrology was written by Sister Annette Debs, CSJ