

Sister Nora Gurnett, CSC

(Sister M. Vincetta)

September 25, 1937–February 7, 2021

These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister Ruth Marie Nickerson, CSC. They were read by Sister M. Adria (Connors), CSC, at the funeral on February 16, 2021.

John O'Donohue's poem "Entering Death" brought comfort to me when I received the word that Sister Nora had died. An excerpt of it reads:

... When your time comes, may you have
Every blessing and strength you need.

May there be a beautiful welcome for you
In the home you are going to.

You are not going somewhere strange,
Merely back to the home you have never left. ...

Referring to her birth in 1937, Sister Nora wrote, "I made an unexpected appearance to a protesting and disbelieving doctor!" Her identical twin sister, Sheila, had been born 10 minutes before her. She was the extroverted twin, and Nora the quiet, reserved one. But on February 7, 2021, Nora was the first one home.

Nora's parents, Mary Kathryn Cassidy and Gail Vincent Gurnett, raised their family in Depue, Illinois. Both were from the area and not far from their extended Irish Catholic families. They had five children: Mary and Kate were the oldest, John in the middle, followed by "the Twins," as they were known to family and friends. Sister Nora's dad was a chemical engineer and headed up the zinc plant in Depue. Mary Kathryn was a

stay-at-home mom. Sister Nora was told her mother was “a great person, a good conversationalist, had a great sense of humor, was a great person to be around, and everyone loved her.” Her mom, however, suffered from severe asthma. One time the twins, aware of her being ill, decided they would help around the house and waxed the kitchen floor with Crisco! As she continued to struggle, Mary Kathryn’s physician prescribed that she convalesce in a climate conducive to healing. When Nora was 7 years old, her mom went once again for the treatment, but she never returned home. Her death left Gail struggling to care for his young family as he also administered the zinc plant. Then, six months after Mary Kathryn’s death, John, after cutting his foot, died from blood poisoning. The two losses were almost more than their father could bear; he turned to the Gurnett family for assistance in raising his four girls. However, at home the sisters formed a stronger bond. Almost like the “home bubbles” of today, it was their safe place. Mary assumed the role of mother as best she could at 14 years old. Throughout her life, her sisters loved and respected her for caring and keeping them together.

The formative years for the twins meant spending most of their time together; at home they were always just “the Twins.” It’s not surprising, as they looked so much alike, finished each other’s sentences, and had the same mannerisms. Nora claimed her father never could tell them apart! They grew up sharing a bedroom, house duties, even classrooms and homework. Together they soon learned they could get through the homework assignments quicker if shared—you do half and I’ll do half. This gave them more time for sports, in which they excelled. Sports brought them hometown recognition, and in sports Nora was on par with Sheila.

As the Gurnett girls grew and began to make life choices, their dad suggested first to Mary that she attend Holy Cross Central School of Nursing in South Bend. She went and soon Kate followed. Mr. Gurnett wanted them close to his alma mater, hoping a nice University of Notre Dame student would find his daughters. When it was time, Sheila and Nora headed to South Bend, too. When the twins were on duty as student nurses, a patient once called the floor supervisor to report that she thought the hours put in by students were entirely too long. She had one evening nurse, who was also on the night shift, who then appeared again the next morning. Nora and Sheila were assigned the same patient but were on different shifts!

Shortly before graduating from nursing school, Sheila made the decision to become a Benedictine Sister. Nora rethought her direction and decided to enter the Sisters of the Holy Cross. Though together in choosing religious life, their decisions reflected Nora and Sheila's growth in independence. It would be the first time they were apart.

There is a tale that goes along with this decision. When Sheila was to receive the habit, Sister M. Vincetta (Nora's religious name) was given permission to attend her sister's ceremony in Nauvoo, Illinois. While at the monastery, Sister Vincetta exchanged habits with Sheila (newly named Sister Sean). Sheila put on the Holy Cross habit and Nora the Benedictine habit. Their family caught on, but few others recognized the exchange. Years later Sister Sean left the Benedictines, and Sister Vincetta stayed with the Sisters of the Holy Cross. Always twins, but their life experience changed their life choices.

The bonds of love among the Gurnett sisters grew even stronger as time moved on. Nora and Sheila spent most vacations with their sister Mary and her husband, Chip Dooley (by the way, a ND grad), and their eight children, either in New Jersey or at their summer home in Canada. Often sister Kate and her husband, Charlie, and their eight children would join them for a grand time. Nora was able to visit Kate in Cincinnati, Ohio, often, for she was close by in Anderson, Indiana. Sister Vincetta wrote that, when the family was together, she frequently sought more stories from Mary about their mom and their early days in Depue. As difficult as their life had been, and their father's continued struggle with loss, Mary would say, "How much better off we were than other people." Sister Nora credited Mary for keeping the spirit of their mother alive in their hearts.

Sister Vincetta was an excellent nurse. At St. John's Hospital in Anderson, Indiana, she was a surgical floor nurse and then surgical head nurse. She loved the ministry, and the doctors and patients loved her. For a short time, she was at Holy Cross Hospital, Salt Lake City, Utah, before going to Holy Cross Hospital, San Fernando, California, where she was the beloved sister nurse in the ER. It was the time following the 1971 earthquake. A replacement hospital was being built, space was at a premium, the can-do spirit prevailed. But after a busy day at the hospital, we'd hear "might as well be in Cleveland," and that was the signal to get ready to go to the beach for vespers. All six sisters would pile in the car and Sr. Vincetta, or "Vinney," would bring the thermos of Constant Comment to sip while watching the sun go down.

While in San Fernando, Sister Vincetta began using her baptismal name, Nora, and enjoyed a healing visit from her father and his wife. Sister Nora earned a bachelor's degree in management from La Verne University, La Verne, California, and in 1986 was transferred to Saint Agnes Medical Center, Fresno, California. In Fresno Sister Nora left active nursing to manage the Total Life Center, an adult day care, childcare and wellness center with a healthy catering café. After a couple of years, the center was redesigned, and Sister Nora moved on to information systems, where she could put her nursing and health care knowledge to work in assisting with electronic medical records.

If ever around Sister Nora, you quickly learned of her love of God—a deep love, shaped by Celtic spirituality. Her contemplative spirit would rest in God as she watched the setting sun on the Pacific, or took in the size of a grand sequoia in the Sierras, or observed a loon on the lake in Canada. She searched nature to understand better the mysteries of life.

She knew that sometimes her ways were challenging and misunderstood. She worked to understand and soften them. As with her family, Nora sought a safe and trusted bubble of friends. Though her shyness never left her, she found ways to reach out. In her easy way, she would say something nice or encouraging or just make someone laugh.

The Congregation was her home. God's transforming love spoke to her heart. She loved her bandmates and loved community gatherings. Ministry was how she served. Her whole life she ministered in one of our sponsored ministries. In her last years, the convent staff was so patient and kind, sheltering her and helping her in her last days. She was happy and at peace.

We cannot close without mentioning that the Fighting Irish teams were her passion. My fondest memory of this love was when Notre Dame beat the University of Southern California at the Coliseum! She was not quiet! On game days, she'd set a little altar near the TV. There, on a Notre Dame blanket, she'd place a lighted candle, an Irish rosary, and a statue of Our Lady!

Nora, you are home in the loving embrace of God, welcomed in by your parents, sisters Mary and Kate, brother John and all your Holy Cross sisters. You now have all the answers to your questions. Intercede for us who are still on the journey.