

Memento for Sister M. Gertrude Anne, CSC

(Gertrude Anne Otis)

July 10, 1922 – February 17, 2019

These memories were shared by Sister Mary Ellen Vaughan, CSC, at the Memorial Mass on March 4, 2019.

In 2007, Gertrude Anne wrote her autobiography. This memento grew out of her own words.

Sister Gertrude Anne was born in 1922 in Wesley, Iowa, a small, northern rural area bordering Minnesota. She was one of six children and the last to die. Both her parents were Catholic. Joseph Otis was a farmer who died when Gertrude was 12. Her widowed mother, Mary Schwiderski, a housekeeper from Bavaria, Germany, was a woman of deep faith and provided her daughter with her earliest spiritual formation. Her devoted mother would invite the children to kneel together to pray each evening. The Bible held a prominent place in their living room. The Otis children attended the local Catholic elementary school and were taught by Franciscans. Gertrude Anne's sister Mary became a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet. Gertrude attended public high school and went on to Hamilton Business College in Mason City, Iowa, graduating with high honors. "I had an inner drive or ambition to achieve the best, to get to the top," she acknowledged. Later she recognized that this trait actually contributed to her call to religious life.

Her first position after business college was in the corporate office of International Harvester in Mason City. Within a year, she moved to Des Moines, Iowa, where she quickly advanced through two other positions in the Department of Social Welfare and a civil service appointment in the Veterans Administration. As she said of herself, she was "quickly climbing the corporate ladder!"

These were turbulent years as World War II raged across Europe, and the United States as a nation was experiencing hardships. No one in her family had served in the military, so it was quite out of character and more out of curiosity that she followed a WAVE (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service for the U.S. Naval Reserve) into a Des Moines recruiting office one day. "With little counsel or discussion, I enlisted," she recalled. This

leaping into decisions was a quality impelling her entire life.

Gertrude Anne was sent to Hunter College in New York City for her orientation to the Navy. Because of her business experience, her first assignment was in Washington, D. C., to the headquarters of the commander in chief of Naval Operations, five-star Admiral Ernest J. King, who after the war was succeeded by Admiral Chester Nimitz, who had been commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

How Gertrude Anne's naval journey was launched into an entirely new ocean is a fascinating story. "The recognition of one's vocation often comes only after a long process of discernment. This was not true for me." To summarize, Gertrude once joined her friend Betty on a Sunday afternoon trip to Philadelphia to visit Betty's friend, Sister Celestine, RSM. The young women enjoyed their afternoon and regaled the sister with stories about their fascinating lives in the Navy. Gertrude mentioned that she was working in the headquarters of the commander in chief of the U.S. fleet and chief of Naval Operations, the top man in the Navy. In a moment alone with Gertrude as the women were preparing to head home, Sister Celestine in a matter of fact way said: "It must be very exciting to work with the commander in chief of the Navy. Did you ever stop to think what it would be like working for the commander in chief of heaven and Earth?"

In Gertrude Anne's words: "With the power of God's grace at work, I realized on the spot that I could do no better than give my life to God in the service of His people. I was hooked by my characteristic ambition to climb to the top." It was another instant decision.

Through Father Lawrence Miltenberger, a priest in Washington, she learned of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. On a trip home to Iowa in the winter of 1945, she stopped at Saint Mary's and immediately fell in love with the campus and the sisters she met. Again, in an instant, she knew this was where she belonged. She entered the following February.

As a novice, Gertrude Anne read *The Praise of Glory: Reminiscences of Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity, a Carmelite Nun of Dijon, 1901-1906*. Gertrude Anne was profoundly impressed with Elizabeth's choice of Ephesians 1:3-15 as foundational for Elizabeth's spirituality. Gertrude Anne herself was inspired by Paul's use of "praise to His glory" four times in that passage. As Gertrude Anne wrote, "From that time on, I have aspired to being 'a living praise to the

glory of God.’”

Although it was assumed that Gertrude Anne would further her education in business, during her second novitiate year she was granted her request to study for a bachelor’s degree in theology at Saint Mary’s College. Making her initial profession of vows on August 15, 1948, she was sent to teach religion at Bishop Noll High School in Hammond, Indiana. In 1950, Sister M. Madeleva (Wolff), CSC, asked her to join her administrative team at Saint Mary’s College. During those years, Sister Gertrude Anne continued her theological studies in the School of Sacred Theology, at Saint Mary’s, ultimately attaining both a master’s and a doctoral degree.

In 1958, she experienced a wonderful sabbatical year in Europe where she was able to travel and to attend classes at Regina Mundi, a graduate school of theology in Rome where women religious from across the world studied. Her charge was to evaluate whether the academic courses would meet standards for a master’s degree from the School of Theology at Saint Mary’s. An extraordinary grace of that year was her being present for the coronation Mass of Pope John XXIII. She also attended Mass on the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, the Apostle, on January 25, 1959, at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, when the pope announced he was convoking an ecumenical council. “From that experience,” she declared, “I claimed ownership of Vatican II.”

In 1963, Gertrude Anne returned to Saint Mary’s to become director of novices. She tells of having experienced special grace during those four years. We who were her novices also experienced special grace. She was filled with exuberance for every word coming out of Vatican II. She fed us breakfast, dinner and supper reading from the world’s great theologians of Vatican II. She nourished us with a special love for Scripture. Our liturgical life was vibrant as we implemented the Decree on the Sacred Liturgy. That ownership she claimed for Vatican II was embedded in us who were novices during those four years.

Upon completing her novitiate term, Gertrude Anne taught theology at Cardinal Cushing College in Brookline, Massachusetts, until its closure. During the next 25 years, she moved through diverse ministries, crisscrossing the country: from Boston to Tucson to coordinate a Southwest study program for Saint Mary’s College; then to Washington, D.C., to serve as associate dean of

the School of Religious Studies at Catholic University of America.

In 1976, she was invited unexpectedly to direct the pastoral care program at St. Joseph's Hospital in South Bend. "Those four years were a difficult learning for me. I also realized I was removing myself from the academic world." When a position opened at Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida, to implement a newly designed master's degree in pastoral ministry, she moved south. After nine warm, happy years in Miami, she was invited by the Brothers of Holy Cross to join their staff at their spiritual center at Valatie, New York. This was a valuable experience in prayer and retreat ministry. In 1990, she crossed the country to serve in Saint Joseph's Parish in Spreckels, California. She spent every Friday at Carmel-by-the Sea in prayer. During those summers, she worked with the Jesuits at retreat houses in Azusa and Los Altos. "Thus, began the very special ministry of spiritual direction and retreat ministry which I did for the rest of my life," she recalled.

In 1992, she was invited to return to Saint Mary's to join the staff at Mary's Solitude, our retreat center where she had always envisioned she would one day serve. After barely unpacking, she was invited to go to the Holy Land to teach John's Gospel at Mater Ecclesiae, our renewal center for religious in Tiberias, Israel, overlooking the Sea of Galilee. That semester brought the pages of Scripture alive to Gertrude Anne in ways beyond books.

She loved her years at Mary's Solitude until its closure in 2002. She accompanied scores of women and men of all religious traditions on their spiritual journeys. After the closing, she moved her ministry to a little office on the first floor of Lourdes Hall. During these years her eyesight was diminishing. She moved to Saint Mary's Convent to accommodate to its physical setting while she still had some sight. She lists her actual date of retirement from her spiritual direction ministry as August 8, 2018. Gertrude Anne was strongly committed to keeping well informed about the wider world and particularly justice-related issues ranging from climate change to children at the border. Using technology for the blind and with the help of another sister, she made her voice heard regularly on a wide range of legislative issues. It was a part of who she was.

When our Congregation offered us the new opportunity to select green burial, meaning the body is placed in the earth soon after death with a memorial Mass celebrated later, Gertrude Anne invited me into her

discernment about what she wanted. This was not the “I know instantly” experience for her. She struggled. She considered donating her body to medical research. After weighing all her alternatives, she gradually came to see that she did want green burial because of the theological, ecological, and financial factors. She wrote her Christmas letter to her family in December 2017 explaining her decision. She loved them and wanted them to understand. (I could only imagine it was the most unique Christmas greeting they ever received!)

On February 17, Gertrude Anne died. On the following day with a simple service here at the baptismal font, her body was taken to our cemetery and returned to the earth from which it had come. Today we gather to honor and celebrate this woman’s amazing life and the depth of her inner vision that was always there but became even sharper during these last years when her eyes could no longer see.

She longed to be, in the words of Ephesians, that “living praise to the glory of God.” It does seem that’s exactly what happened.