Remembering Sister Rose Bernadette Van Ooteghem, IHM

Feb. 8, 1928 – June 27, 2013

Born Josephine Van Ooteghem

This Remembering consists of selections from Sister’s autobiography followed by reflections and stories about her life and character.

Sister’s autobiography is brief, speaking of family, faith, ministries, experiences, blessings and her goals in life. She writes...

“My parents, Oscar and Alice Van Ooteghem, were born and married in Belgium and came to America in 1919. My father, who was a builder, lost his job during the Depression and became a boiler operator and maintenance manager at St. John Berchman Parish in Detroit.

I was the second youngest of six children. My little sister died shortly after birth. We all attended St. John Berchman Servite Grade School, which was right across the street from our home. Later, riding our bikes, four of us attended St. Martin’s on the Lake for high school. Our family life was centered on parish and school activities. The faith of my parents gave us an environment of prayer and Catholic formation through their prayers, example and sacrifice. Early on, I wanted to be a Sister since I admired my father, who was so kind and dedicated, and I wanted to be like him. When we would say the family rosary at night, he would add so many intentions for the world and Russia...

As we grew up, my mother had epilepsy which limited her ability to take on many domestic responsibilities. My oldest sister, Mary Jane, took over and we all shared in house responsibilities.

During high school...one of my work places to earn tuition...was to wash dishes at the convent during noon hour. This opened the way for me to know more about the IHM Sisters.

On July 1, 1945, with the family Model T, my brother drove us to the Motherhouse where I entered the postulancy... My father died on the feast of St. Joseph when I was a novice, and I was able to go home to see him before he died...an unforgettable reunion... I was professed in January 1947. My college education began in Monroe and continued at Marygrove with a BA and M.Ed.”

...Sister goes on to list her ministries which included many years in elementary education in Port
Huron, Dearborn, Trenton, Monroe and Detroit, missionary work with Sister Bernie Booms and later with Sister Eileen Markey as pastoral associate in Grenada, West Indies. Returning to Detroit she spent a couple of years teaching at Gesu and then in 1984 began what she calls “19 years of blessings and good experiences” as a member of the team at St. Rose Senior Center. There she poured herself out in her work “to coordinate the activities, programs and personnel, and to help plan and implement enriching activities and needed services.” Always one to draw out the gifts of others, in 1997, a volunteer program was begun at St. Rose, appropriately called, “Seniors helping Seniors.”

In 2007, she retired to the Motherhouse and found great joy in working with the volunteers who come to assist our sisters and guests with various needs. When Cindy Dragan lifted the responsibility for directing the growing number of volunteers from Sister’s shoulders to her own, it gave Rose much peace knowing this important effort would be in such good and gracious hands.

Over the years, in the spirit of her beloved father, Sister worked for peace and justice advocacy, attended a School of the Americas Watch rally in Nevada, participated in the Monroe Vicariate Peace and Justice Committee, served as a director of a Christian Service committee, visited the homebound and helped at a food pantry.

Three major trips were noted as highlights in her life. For her 25th jubilee, she went to Belgium to discover her roots and connect with family members there. For her 50th, Sister Marilyn Schneider took her to Alaska, and for her 60th, a parishioner from Star of the Sea sponsored her trip to Rome and Assisi.

Sister also recounts a frightening incident that occurred just a few years ago. She states, “A rescue incident that disrupted my life in a fearful, yet miraculous way, was when I was hijacked on one of the streets in Detroit. My car was broken into and I was assaulted by two young boys. I refused to get out of the car and screamed, “Jesus, help me!” Then I was pulled out and carried to the trunk, kicking all the way. I was thrown in on top of a pile of pillows that I was going to deliver to St. Rose’s. As the trunk was closing in on me, I stuck my leg out and with God’s miraculous power the assailants let me out and went off with my car. What a Divine intervention this was!”

Sister concludes her brief autobiography with a short paragraph which states simply, but profoundly, what her life was about. “My life has been filled with blessings of family, friends, and community, and opportunities to minister and grow in my religious commitment. My desires are to continue to be open and respond to God’s love through the continuing gift of myself.”

When Sister asked me to write her Remembering, it was on the very day she had received the worst possible news regarding the gravity of her condition. She was so composed; I had no idea, until she told me weeks later. She was so brave.

The following are taken from the reflections of several individuals who knew her well. The fact that there are many similar comments dramatically bears witness to the patterns of her life and character.
• Sister exuded a joyful spirit, always concerned about others, never a negative or uncharitable word, a much-loved teacher of little children, a friend to all she met, a prayerful person, so calm, such a peaceful spirit...
• A classmate recounts an incident in the postulate in Father Carnes’ Political Science class. Each student had a chapter to outline on the board. Father, not known for gentle ways, tore apart her work, but Sister didn’t appear troubled. When asked later how she could be so composed, Rose’s answer was, “I didn’t hear him. I was praying.”
• Totally present to the Now moment regarding herself and the other, a good listener, attentive to the needs of others, open to knowing and understanding, reaching out in love, using her gifts, activating others’ gifts, spending her energy for others, focused in and with Jesus...
• A gentle, caring friend, strong-willed mentor, amazing role model for prayer and faith... a doer of the Word, not only a hard worker, but one who inspired and encouraged others to help one another...always had time for others, so humble and unassuming...
• She had great devotion to the Good Shepherd. She loved to meditate on His picture in her room, comforted by the gentle hands of the Shepherd lovingly holding the lamb. This image of love was central to her spirituality.
• She was a very holy person, grateful for anything great or small that anyone did for her, prayerful, very artistic, using drawings during prayer to keep herself centered and to grow...
• A marvelous religious, a gentle soul, an iron will, determined and courageous, soul of a missionary, a compassionate heart, goodness personified...She wanted to take in those who thought themselves to be insignificant or lonely, to gather them into her great heart, to know that they were loved and valued.
• Sister Rose was so happy that her friends from St. Rose Center were members of the IHM Garden so they could enjoy the peaceful beauty of Monroe and she could see them. Their comments included: “She’s so nice.” “She cares about us.” “We love her.”
• Quietly relentless in being and doing good, compassionate of heart with an ability to inspire others to recognize and share their giftedness to care for each other, to be aware and concerned about the big picture, to have a world view but never to lose sight of the neighbor, the individual, the person sitting right next to her...
• A grateful person, sending thank-you cards for your thank-you card, always looking for opportunities to serve, small in stature, a giant in her faithfulness and service... She did not let the burden of her poor hearing handicap her generosity.
• Sister had her doubts, frustrations and even fears, but she carried them quietly and well, placing her trust in her beloved Good Shepherd.
• She was very intuitive and seemed to know just what to do for others, just when they needed it... a picnic on the river, a movie, sharing an inspiring talk or event, a treat, a phone call or visit...
• She was genuinely interested in every person who came into her life. Even with her limited hearing, one always knew Rose heard with the heart.
• She had a knack for matching resident needs to volunteer service. She was full of love and made people feel they were making a difference in the lives of others. She made volunteers feel so welcome at the Motherhouse. She spoke and wrote from the heart.
• Did she have a certain naïveté? She did... in her simplicity, her hopefulness, her
openness, her belief that goodness is in everyone, that the world can be a better place if we all value and care for each other.

• When IHM Associate DorisAnn Meloche was visiting here, DorisAnn became very ill in reaction to a medication. Sister sat with her for a considerable time and then early the next morning got dressed and brought DorisAnn some breakfast. In typical fashion she asked, “Isn’t there more I can do for you?” Then Rose and Sister Dorothy McDaniel walked the now recovered DorisAnn to her car. Who knows at what cost this kindness, but she would do nothing less for it was her way. Sister Rose Bernadette went back to bed exhausted. This was on the day before she entered the hospital for the last time.

• How very grateful she was for the kindness of family and friends, especially dear friends of almost 50 years, Sisters Val Knoche and Noreen Wholihan, for the loving support of pastoral staff member, Sister Donna Prickel, and the medical personnel who ministered to her, so many she wanted to thank. “I’m treated like a queen, morning, noon and night,” she remarked, overwhelmed with the love that surrounded her.

• Over many years, she always greeted one friend with the mantra they shared from the title of a book about St. Alphonsus, “Never Enough”. Who would ever have thought that she was in her mid-80s even as her strength began to leave her and she was poured out like the proverbial libation, even to the last drop.

When Sister left St. Mary of Redford in 1976 to serve in Grenada, a story titled, “The Cloud with the Silver Lining,” was written for her. Although not scientifically correct, the story tells about a cloud community and how each cloud was responsible for its patch of earth, bringing shade, rain and sky signs. One of the clouds was very special and all the clouds loved and admired her, for she was the one with the silver lining. When this cloud announced: “My fellow clouds, I will not be with you much longer. I am soon to set out on a journey, for my presence is needed in a land far away.”

“But you are needed here, and not only for your patch of earth but for our cloud community,” said the other clouds.

But the cloud with the silver lining was firm in her resolve. “I must take this journey, for I can bring cooling rain, provide shade, bring sky signs and show the earth that there is indeed a silver lining.”

The other clouds protested. Why must you go? Who says you must?” “The wind tells me,” said the cloud with the silver lining. “My heart tells me too. I have tried to listen to the wind all my life. What has long been a whisper is now a strong, clear call.”

Later, alone with her thoughts, doubts troubled her. In the quiet of the night with her cloud heart brim full of tears, sometimes under a canopy of stars, sometimes beneath a dark, dark sky, she would listen for the wind; but the wind was silent, for it had spoken and she had answered and that was that. The time of her departure drew near. Her heart was happy and sad, hopeful and yet a little anxious. But she was a determined little cloud and she knew for sure in her listening heart what the wind had asked, and so, masking her tears beneath the ever-present brightness of her magnificent silver lining, she bid her sister clouds, adieu.
“Soon my place will be empty,” she said. “Perhaps another cloud will come to take my place.” “No, no, never a cloud quite like you,” they answered, “For you are one-of-a-kind.” “Remember me,” said the silver-lined cloud, “And send a message with the wind now and then.” “Oh, we surely will,” they answered. “We wish you well. Come back to us some day.” Then, giving herself over to the power of the wind, she let go, set her face bravely to the south and soon was on her way.

The other clouds were proud of the cloud with the silver lining. They knew she would make a difference in that far away land. Oh, they would surely miss her, but they would always remember that silver lining.

Just then, the clouds noticed something. How strange that they had never seen it before. And then they realized that it was her gift to them. They knew that they would never forget her, this wonderful cloud who had changed them all. For as they looked at each other more closely, they began to see that each of them was growing a silver lining.

Just days before she died, Sister Rose Bernadette had a vision. She kept seeing beautiful shining faces of all kinds of people from around the world and even cats and dogs. There was so much joy she could feel it and there was music and radiance everywhere and a rainbow and everyone was welcome. She was enthralled with what she saw. It was as if all she had to do was reach out and touch them. When asked what she thought it all meant she said, “It is all the images of God’s love.” “Everything,” she said, “was there in God’s love.” And now, dear Sister, you have joined those shining ones, touched the face of God and melted into the embrace of that all-encompassing Love which you reflected so well.

Eternal rest...

Written by
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