

Remembering Sister Elizabeth (Alexia) Zeestraten, IHM

Dec. 31, 1908-Dec. 23, 2011



If devotion to one's parents and hard work contribute to a long life, then Sister Elizabeth is proof that this adage is true. In her Book of Life Sister wrote, "Rejoice always, never cease praying and render thanks; such is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Sister Elizabeth lived St. Paul's advice throughout her long and beautiful life.

Her parents, Cornelius and Cornelia (Stassen) lived in Holland—now the Netherlands. Nine of their children were born there, where four died at a very early age. Cornelius and his wife traveled to North Dakota with their five living young children in March 1908, at the urging of his four brothers who had moved there earlier. There Elizabeth's father farmed on rocky soil amid frequent droughts and primitive conditions. Elizabeth was born in Strassburg, N.D., on New Year's Eve in 1908, and two more children were born shortly after. Later the family moved to Montana where Elizabeth was confirmed in 1919.

Few of us knew that Elizabeth was a poet, but she put her early childhood memories into verse—14 stanzas! Let me read a few lines:

*Mother and Dad were very poor,
Yet to none did they ever close the door;
Of children they raised all of us eight,
And they taught us how to go straight.*

*Our home was a dugout in the ground,
Where no luxuries could be found.
Dad and we kids would till the soil,
And let me tell you it was hard toil.*

*All of our clothes were of course hand-made,
But mother knew how and made no mistakes.
We were sometimes the envy of the store-bought kids
Our clothes were the best in other kids' minds.*

*But through it all with work and strife,
All eight of us kids are still alive;
All of us learned a basic lesson too:
That we love one another and therefore YOU!*

When and why the family moved to Michigan is unclear. Probably the family came to Dearborn because of the auto industry. Sister Elizabeth wrote that she cooked for Father Sharp at Sacred Heart Rectory, Dearborn, "little realizing that this experience prepared me for future assignments as an IHM sister."

Elizabeth attended Sacred Heart High School for two and a half years, entering the Motherhouse Convent Febr. 2, 1932. She was received August 15 of that year and given the name Sister Alexia. For the next three years she taught primary grades at St. Michael School, Flint, and Our Lady of Help and All Saints, Detroit.

For the next 40 years Sister took complete charge of the Motherhouse Diet Kitchen and laundry at the Motherhouse and at Marygrove and the kitchens at Marygrove Convent and at Christ the King Convent.

Sister Rose Carmel related that she was assigned several summers to help in the Motherhouse laundry and found Elizabeth wonderful to work for. Marie Hopkins remembers Elizabeth as being very quiet and very prayerful. She wrote, "When we had a major feast and hence a major kitchen production, she would put all of us Sisters out of the kitchen and handle the food preparation with only the lady who helped there. She said when we were there we made more work than we did good!"

Other sisters who lived at Marygrove when Elizabeth worked there recall her as a simple sister who loved to help others. Mary Ellen Glosser remembers stopping by in the kitchen one afternoon only to find Elizabeth mopping the floor while the lady who was hired to help her was telling Elizabeth stories from her own childhood! But it wasn't all work and no play. Josephine Sferrella was surprised to learn that Elizabeth and her retired sister friends kept up on their afternoon soap operas and would talk about them the next morning at breakfast! Elizabeth also knitted, crocheted and worked jigsaw puzzles with Sister Christina Swartz. She DID change after Vatican II to ordinary clothing, but someone told her the only way she could be buried in the habit was to be wearing it and then she went back to the habit and veil.

In 1979 Sister joined Sister Frances Rita Belanger in the Hobby Shop where they created various crafts for the Annual Christmas Sale. After 10 years Sister's failing eyesight and hearing caused a move to the Infirmary. Sister had taught herself to play the harmonica and wrote that she "frequently passed the lonely hours playing for my own enjoyment and that of others." Sister Gerry Demech made note of an event which affected her profoundly. In 1999 Sister Elizabeth was told of Gerry's birthday. After practicing for an hour on her harmonica, she walked down two flights of stairs to play "Happy Birthday" in Gerry's room.

Wanda Vandermeer, a second cousin of Sister Elizabeth, was a regular visitor who came to be with Sister and check on her health. Sister Bernie Booms has been especially devoted to Elizabeth in her later years, washing her linens and visiting her faithfully. Bernie was always amazed when she stopped by to see Sister Elizabeth to see the love and care all the nurses and aides gave to her. One day Bernie commented, "I never hear you complain." Elizabeth responded, "There's nothing to complain about!" Sister Pam from Pastoral Care tells us Elizabeth would say, "Everyone is so nice to me! I don't

know why everyone is no nice to me.” Sister Pam told Elizabeth, “It’s because we love you!”

Another time, when she was reminded that she was 98 years, old Elizabeth asked, “What am I doing here?” Well, all of us know what you’ve been doing here, Elizabeth. You have taught us gracious patience, a love for the Eucharist where you faithfully participated daily until recently, and an unfailing love for God amid physical suffering. Now after many long years of not seeing or hearing, you, like your patron Saint, Elizabeth, can see God face to face and hear God speak distinctly, “Come, beloved Sister, enter the place prepared for you for all eternity.”

Written by Sister Mary Laubacher, IHM
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