



**SISTER ROSE ELIZABETH BREEN**  
**September 18, 1912 — December 8, 2007**

Last Saturday, the Church celebrated the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. This feast honors Mary's unique role in our salvation history, but at the same time it reminds us of what we have in common with Mary: each of us is called and chosen to respond to grace God so lavishly bestows. This is far better stated in the letter to the Ephesians, the second reading of the feast day liturgy and our second reading this evening:

*In Christ, we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intended plan, so that we might exist for the praise of God's glory, we who first hoped in Christ. (Ephesians 1: 11-12)*

How appropriate that on this past Saturday's feast day, Sister Rose Elizabeth came to the full realization of her final destination: chosen in Christ, in accord with God's purpose and plan. Throughout her life, Rose gave evidence of unshakeable faith in the One who accomplishes all things, and unswerving hope in the Christ who came among us. In her active ministry and in her very presence, Rose shared this faith, this hope and her undeniable joy that all are called and chosen: the poor of Pittsburgh's Hill District, the underprivileged of Abbeville (Louisiana), the affluent and influential of the DC suburbs. For Rose, there were no exceptions: rich or poor, black or white, benefactor or someone in need. As true Sister of Charity, Rose was "open to appeal, ready to respond and willing to serve" wherever needed; as true Sister of Charity, she loved all to whom she was sent, – and they loved her.

Margaret Evelyn Breen, one of six children of William and Elizabeth (Heckathorn) Breen, entered the community from Saint James, Wilkinsburg, on September 8, 1933. Prior to entrance, she had taught CCD classes for two years. Father Walsh, pastor at St. James, comments in his letter recommending the "exemplary Catholic girl" to the community: "On Sunday after Sunday she went to the poorer places of the diocese to instruct the children in their religion..." Even then, Rose revealed a special and abiding love of the poor.

Following novitiate, Rose pursued an undergraduate degree in education at Duquesne University while starting her teaching career at our parish schools (Saint John the Baptist, Saint John the Evangelist, Saint James) in the Pittsburgh Diocese. In 1951, she was assigned to the House of Mary in the Hill District. In addition to offering outreach services to the poor and visiting the sick and elderly in the area, Rose was asked to begin a kindergarten, housed, in her words, "...in the dilapidated Saint Brigid's School on Wylie Avenue." Despite the condition of the building, the lessons taught in her classroom were of the highest educational standards, as evidenced by the success of students she instructed. Grateful for the foundation they received, many kept in touch with her through their adult lives. And occasionally, she would pull out old class pictures, fondly recalling not only names but their special stories.

Two of the notes frequently mentioned by Rose were Kenneth Stevenson and Frederick August Kittel. Kenneth Stevenson, after "graduating" from the House of Mary kindergarten and some further studies, became an honored Air Force commander, but gained international

recognition for his scholarship as editor/recording secretary of the research on the Shroud of Turin. And yes, he sent Rose a copy of the book he published. Frederick August Kittel, Rose recollected, was a promising and creative student. Others would come to know him after he wrote a series of plays set in the neighborhood of his childhood. At the time he began publishing his writings, this former student decided to use his middle name instead of his given first name and he adopted his grandfather's last name. The boy Rose called Frederick in his kindergarten days became known to the world as August Wilson. Perhaps these stories show that there is some truth in the maxim *all we really need to know we learned in kindergarten*. More than that, though, I hear overtones of Rose's life-long influence on her students in the lines of a character in one of August Wilson's plays: *"All you need in the world is love and laughter. That's all anybody needs. To have love in one hand and laughter in the other."*

After serving for 12 years in the Hill, Rose was sent to teach first grade at Our Lady of Lourdes School in Abbeville, Louisiana, where Sisters of Charity had been invited some years earlier to "...staff a school for ...African-American parishioners." During her years in Louisiana, Rose also participated in an exchange faculty program with the Holy Family Sisters and taught at Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Lafayette. In 1968, she returned to Abbeville, and continued teaching there until 1973, when the Sisters of Charity withdrew from the area.

Rose's longest tenure--22 years-- was at Saint Jane de Chantal School in Bethesda, Maryland. A geographical distance from both Abbeville and the Hill, Bethesda presented Rose with a very different economic, social and cultural milieu. But as warmly and unquestionably as she embraced her students in previous settings, so Rose extended the same love, concern, patient understanding and gentle kindness to those now entrusted to her charge. And true to form, her students responded in kind to her. As tribute to her excellence in education, Rose was honored as the 1991 recipient of the University of Maryland's Celebrated Teacher Award. What mattered most to Rose, however, was imparting lasting lessons of living faith. Among the papers in her file is a copy of the Saint Jane de Chantal School newspaper story and photo of Rose showing her kindergartners how to string beads to make rosaries. The story notes: "By the end of the school year, most of the kindergarten children know the fifteen mysteries of the rosary." Quite a feat for five-year olds! Also included in the file is a student's prize-winning essay about the way Rose touched her life. After citing her reasons for admiring "Sister Rose," the young essayist states that the most important lesson she learned was "...how to pray.... not just saying the words, but feeling them too. I treasure the rosary we made together and think of her every time I say Mary's special prayer." Rose remained on staff at Saint Jane de Chantal School until the community withdrew from serving there in 1995.

After a long absence of over 30 years, Rose returned to the Hill District of Pittsburgh, this time to residency and volunteer service at Saint Joseph House of Hospitality. Of course she brought to her new ministry the compassion and care characteristic of her service in all other areas. At the House of Hospitality, Rose was given charge of the clothing room, and the residents soon learned they could come by for a shirt, slacks, shoes, or sundry accessories, but also for a listening ear and sage advice. When clothing donations arrived, Rose would sort through and neatly arrange the items by size. Because she knew her clientele so well, very often Rose would see something that she knew a particular resident would like and she would set it aside as a birthday gift for him.

As much as Rose loved the people she served, she made no bones about extending her affection to “all creatures of our God and King,” and especially to Bingo, the old dog at the House of Hospitality. We’d be hard-pressed to call Bingo a watch dog or to say he offered protection for Rose. Bingo, her cohort and companion in the clothing room, would lie at Rose’s feet while she sat –and frequently cat-napped–at her desk in wait for one of the residents to stop by. At the end of her day after dinner, Rose would return the favor to Bingo, going to his basement quarters to be sure he had been fed, and then she would sit near him till he fell asleep.

Because the residents at Saint Joseph’s held Rose in such high esteem, they decided to do something special to commemorate her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. They took up a collection among themselves, appointed a delegation to select and purchase a gift, and made a grand presentation by gathering around her in the dining room, singing “Happy Birthday, dear Rose” and giving her a music box that played 15 Christmas carols. The card accompanying the gift had a poem enclosed, addressed

*Dear Sister Rose  
Of the wonderful people that we have met  
You are the one we’ll never forget.  
You carry with you God’s sweet graces  
And bring warm smiles of joy to our faces.  
May God grant that you’ll always be there  
To shower us with your tender care.*

The poem was signed *With Love*, and listed the names of all the residents of the House of Hospitality.

Not long after this celebration, Rose was hospitalized after suffering from a lingering cold through the winter months. Her weakening condition and failing health led her to make the decision to relocate to Caritas Christi. March 13, 2003, was the designated “moving day,” and Mass in the convent chapel was attended by more men than usually come, even on Christmas! Word had gotten around that this was the farewell gift Rose would most appreciate. Fortified with blessings and prayers and fond well-wishes of all, Rose made the trip here.

I regret that I am not able to offer this tribute to Rose in person tonight, and I am most grateful to Sister Grace who agreed to share my reflection. The timing may not have been good for me, but the timing couldn’t be better for Rose. Advent is cut short for her this year; while we continue to pray ‘O Come, O Come Emmanuel,’ Rose has come into the fullness of God’s presence. She lives now and forever with the One for whom we still long.

Rose, we ask that you pray for us in our Advent waiting and in our ardent hope. May we grow ever more aware that, with you and all the saints before us, we too are *chosen in Christ, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intended plan, so that we might exist for the praise of God’s glory, we who first hoped in Christ.* Amen.



*Funeral Liturgy Reflection  
Sister Joyce Serratore  
delivered by Sister Grace Hartzog  
December 12, 2007*