

SISTER ROSE ANGELA CUNNINGHAM

April 8, 1906 – January 30, 2007



Tuesday night, January 30th, our dear friend, aunt, sister, Sister Rose Angela opened her eyes for a brief moment, took her last breath and finally realized her desire to “go home.” For those of us who witnessed her death, 11:47 p.m. was a graced moment. The words of Simeon were reflected in our hearts.

“Now , . . . , you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word” . . .

Sister Rose Angela was born Catherine Ellen Cunningham in Waynesburg, PA on April 8, 1906. She was the fifth of six children born to James Cunningham and Catherine Costello Cunningham. Sister’s oldest brother, Joe, was a bit of a free spirit and left home in his mid-teens to see the world. Bill and Marty Goodman, who are with us tonight, have pictures of Joe and his little sister, Catherine, wearing his sailor cap when he was home on leave in April 1918. Joe married a woman from Costa Rica and they had three children, two of whom, Catherine and Jim, attended Sister’s 100th birthday party. The other children were Mary (Sister Miriam Francis), Jim, John Leo, Catherine (Sister Rose Angela), and Elizabeth (Lib), the mother of Bill Goodman, whose birth was witnessed by both aunts at Pittsburgh Hospital.

When Catherine was sixteen years old, her mother, while in the hospital for routine surgery, died unexpectedly from an overdose of medication. Catherine dropped out of high school and she and her little sister Lib, looked after her father and brothers, Jim and Leo, ironing their shirts, cooking their meals and doing other house work. It was during this time that Catherine developed her culinary skills and eventually was able to bake bread that she described as “almost as good as the bread Mom made.”

On September 8, 1925, two nineteen year old friends rode the train from Waynesburg and entered the Sisters of Charity together. In her inimitable way, Catherine stepped back and allowed her friend to enter the front door of Seton Hill before her. Thus Sister Corinne, her “junior” by seven weeks became Sister Rose Angela’s “senior” in community. As we all know she and Sister Corinne remained life-long friends and in recent years were inseparable in their mutual joy of sharing religious rituals together.

After she entered the Sisters of Charity, Sister Rose Angela completed her high school education and Mother Mary Francis McCullough assigned her to join Sister Anselma Clougherty as a student of home economics. She graduated from Seton Hill College in spring 1930, and joined the Home Economics faculty that fall. By attending summer sessions at Columbia University, Sister earned a Master of Arts degree in Nutrition in 1941, and in subsequent summers pursued post graduate studies in Child Development at Iowa State University and Advanced Nutrition at Cornell University. During her many years at the college, Sister was an active member of Kappa Omicron Phi and the American Home Economics Association.

Over her lifetime, Sister Rose Angela touched the hearts and minds of countless individuals. In June 2000, she was honored as a Distinguished Alumna of Seton Hill College. On that occasion, Sister Sara Louise wrote the following:

Sister’s inspiration as a teacher extended beyond the boundaries of the college. As did many of the sisters and students at Seton Hill, for most of her years there, Sister generously devoted her Sunday mornings to catechetical instruction of children, having served principally in parishes located in Tintown and Avonmore.

Wherever there was a need, Sister Rose Angela was always eager to serve. In 1975, when the Sisters of Charity sponsored a Vietnamese refugee family, Sister assisted by instructing Mary (the mother) and her two nieces in the fundamentals of western style nutrition and meal preparation.

After her retirement as an active member of the faculty in 1979, Sister Rose Angela continued to give volunteer service at Bayley Hall. . . .She also found more time for her favorite hobby of gardening.

All of us have favorite memories of Sister Rose Angela. I have two that I would like to share with you.

During the years that the sisters awaited the completion of this lovely mother house, Sister Rose Angela moved to Jeannette District Memorial Hospital and shared a room with her sister. Wanting to give the Sisters an opportunity to get away for a day, I decided to invite them and some of their friends to Thanksgiving Dinner at Seton House on the Seton Hill campus. They immediately accepted. I soon realized that, although I could transport them easily, how could I get them from the driveway to the house with their walkers and wheel chairs? When I mentioned this quandary to Howard Finney, he said, "if it's for Sister Rose Angela we can build a temporary wooden ramp for you."

On Thanksgiving, with the assistance of our nursing staff, I was able to transport Sister Rose Angela, Sister Miriam Francis and Sister Maura to my car. On our way to campus, we stopped at Doran Hall to pick up Sister Corinne. I wish you could have witnessed the appreciative joy as Sister Rose Angela tilted her head with a smile that reached her eyes when she saw the properly set table, with the best china, flatware and linen napkins that I had borrowed from Bayley Hall. The memories of the day that she told and retold prompted me to plan for another outing on Easter. We continued to celebrate Thanksgiving and Easter together until 2000, when the Sisters were finally in their new home.

Last April, I was in eastern Pennsylvania for a conference that ended on Sister's birthday. I drove through pouring rain to be get back to celebrate with her. I arrived at Caritas Christi around seven in the evening with DQ sundaes for Sister Rose Angela and Sister Corinne, and a single red rose for my friend. After Sister Corinne said good night, Sister Rose Angela asked me to help her open the multitude of cards and gifts that she had received in honor of her 100th birthday. "We must thank them all" she said. So she dictated and I wrote notes to everyone who had acknowledged her birthday. It took a long time because she needed to read each note to be sure that I had written what she had dictated. It was nearly midnight when we finished the task. As I was leaving her room, she gave me a hug and a kiss and what was her usual farewell blessing. "Good night and God bless you and thank you for all." The graciousness and attitude of gratitude that I admired as a college freshman continued to be reflected through her years of diminishment.

This evening we are gathered one last time to celebrate the life of Sister Rose Angela. As we present her to God on this feast of the Presentation, we say, Good-bye and God bless you, and thank you for all.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Victoria Marie Gribshaw, S.C.
February 2, 2006*