

SISTER CATHERINE FRANCIS KERN
April 20, 1917 - July 18, 2008

“He who has begun the good work in you will carry it through to completion right up to the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil 1:6)

The good work for Ellen Marie Kern, daughter of Frank and Catherine Rauch Kern began with her birth on April 20, 1917. Ellen Marie, known to family and friends throughout her life as Nellie, was baptized on May 6, 1917 and confirmed in April of 1931, in Holy Innocents Church in Sheridan. The sixth of nine children, Nellie had six brothers: Francis, Joseph, Lawrence, John, James, and Clarence and two sisters, Betty and Rose. At some point, the family moved from Holy Innocents Parish and Nellie entered the community from Saint Philip Parish in Crafton, PA.

Nellie attended grade school at Holy Innocents and then moved down the street to Langley High School where she studied the college prep course and enjoyed many leadership roles in the extra-curricular activities of the school. Nellie was a star on the tennis team, a member of the swim team, in the National Honor Society, and an officer of the class throughout the four years of high school. A serious student and a fun loving teenager, Nellie enjoyed life to the fullest.

She enrolled in Pittsburgh Hospital School of Nursing following graduation in 1935, and once again excelled in her studies, but was equally at home in all of the other activities offered such as dancing, swimming, tennis and field trips. Nellie was consistently an A student. Her interest in the most active types of nursing such as emergency room and operating room were evident in her grades. Most of the studies involving surgery received 98 to 100 %. Nursing of children and medical diseases placed slightly lower in the 90's. Of course, in the days that Nellie studied nursing, instructors seemed to have no trouble giving actual percentage grades to very subjective things; such as, enthusiasm, common sense, dignity and loyalty. I am pleased to report that her grades in these items were well over 90 %. She even received a grade in hospital housekeeping. All of these set her on the path for future assignments.

After Nellie graduated and successfully completed the state licensure exams in 1938, she worked as a nurse for 2 years and taught nursing for 2 months. During this time, she struggled with a call to religious life and on September 8, 1940, she said yes, and entered the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill. Father Oliver Keefer wrote in a letter to Sister Theodosia, “I am very happy to recommend Nellie Kern as a candidate for the Sisters of Charity. I have known her since her days in grade school and I feel that she has those splendid qualities which would make her a fine religious. She has always been a good girl, of excellent reputation. She is docile, industrious, reverent and a very sincere and straightforward person.” Last evening we heard from a nursing friend and confidant in a letter written on September 8, 1941, her first anniversary in the community, of the satisfaction and completion of a dream of Nellie’s that she should serve God as a religious woman.

On January 1, 1941, she received the habit and the name Sister Catherine Francis. She never lost the name Nellie, but now she also took on Catherine Francis, Kate and sister. She also moved into religious life as she had with all life. There was a zest for life in Catherine. She studied hard, worked diligently, made friends quickly and success followed. We have read and heard of the many types of work she accomplished. (Operating room supervisor, clinical instructor, director of nursing, teacher of nursing). We have also heard of her qualities. She was an excellent role model, mentor and professional. She was kind, caring, efficient and brilliant. Sister Catherine Francis could walk with the mighty but never lost her ability to talk with and care about the “little ones.”



One could say her life was blessed. Her professional life was most successful. She was definitely multi-tasked throughout her nursing days. She was also able to say as she prepared for Jubilee, "It has been a very rewarding life and the best opportunity to serve God by ministering to the ill."

She had many opportunities to travel and she enjoyed these to the fullest. She loved vacations with her friends at Finley Lake and travels with the Eidemillers to the West. She and Sister Geraldine accompanied the auxiliary on their many trips. The first short trip was three days in Las Vegas. Catherine enjoyed gambling and she didn't want Sister Geraldine to see her playing the slots. The women kept Sister Geraldine busy so she could do a bit of gambling. As they were waiting for the bus to leave she was attracted to a nickel machine. In went the nickel and out came so many nickels that everyone had to help her retrieve them. Needless to say, Sister Geraldine also was party to the win. She was also at home at a Halloween party in Jeannette or Pittsburgh, or a Christmas dinner shared with Bernadine, Anita, Isabelle and Davey.

The Nellie in Catherine came out when she went to a Pirates game and said, "Where else but a ball game could you let loose and yell to your hearts content." To a young sister student at Pittsburgh Hospital, Sister Catherine Francis seemed formidable. She demanded only the best and she insisted on things being right. Patients deserved all the care and concern we could give and nothing less was acceptable. But this same person would travel with Sister Geraldine to Harrisburg to the Federal Surplus Warehouse and be delighted with the findings of fabric or a car, or some medical item at a very cheap price. She loved putting up the crib in the lobby of the hospital in preparation for Christmas and enjoyed the hospital and community Christmas parties.

When the sisters moved from the hospital quarters at Jeannette to the house across the street, Sister Catherine Francis worked to get the pool ready each summer and welcomed sisters for a swim. It was a new kind of life for Catherine after years of very institutional living but she adapted to a small group and a new way of living community with her sisters.

However, as blessed as her life was, Sister Catherine Francis faced many losses. She is the last surviving member of her immediate family. Her parents and eight siblings predeceased her. She suffered many serious health problems, including diabetes, heart by pass, glaucoma. Finally, Sister Catherine Francis lost the precious gift of sight and her hearing became less and less acute.

We saw glimpses of the early days when Gene Forish had music sessions. She especially enjoyed "*Over the River and through the Woods*" during the holiday season. The nursing supervisor took over when the nurses were taking too long and received the command, "Hurry up." The grade of 98 % she received for "courtesy" as a student nurse continued to the end as she frequently expressed her thanks to Sister Bernadine and to the nurses who cared for her.

Yes, Nellie Kern, Sister Catherine Francis, submitted to God's plan and allowed the good work begun so many years ago to continue to the day of Christ Jesus. May God hold her close, reward her faithfulness and may we remember her love for life, for community, and especially for God as we bid her farewell tonight.

Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Louise Grundish
July 22, 2008