

SISTER MARY AGNES SCHILDKAMP

April 21, 1912 – November 3, 2006

There is a legend in the Schildkamp family that when the first daughter was born, she was so tiny and fragile that she was carried around on a pillow. Her mother prayed to the Blessed Mother, promising that if she could keep little Florence she would give her back to God some day. Florence did survive and was given to God 16 years later when she entered the Sisters of Charity, taking her mother's name and becoming our Sister Mary Agnes. When she entered on July 2, 1928, the pastor at Saint John the Baptist in Scottsdale, Father Lambing, wrote that "Miss Florence Catherine Schildkamp ...is a very good girl...and will give satisfaction if admitted [to a religious community]."

Sister Mary Agnes earned a Bachelor's degree in English, biology and history from the University of Pittsburgh and a Master's degree in English and philosophy from Catholic University. She became an outstanding teacher of English. Her students' compositions were well-organized and correctly written. Her students learned to love literature. I recall that in a college English class, she taught Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven", unfolding and analyzing every image in that poem replete with images.

Before that though, and before I actually met Sister Mary Agnes, I felt as though I already knew her, so vivid was her impact in the Community. I knew that she had big black eyes that could carry all kinds of messages. I knew she was a strict Sister Servant, a demanding teacher and principal. I knew that she inspired respect, awe, and love. Above all. I knew that she was SMA.

At Elizabeth Seton High School when she was principal, she would write notes on the chalk boards signed SMA. Sometimes she would come into a class and leave a note on the teacher's desk. When the student to whom it was addressed opened the note at the end of class it would probably say, "Please see me. SMA."

While she was at Elizabeth Seton, Sister Mary Agnes supervised the construction of the 1952 building which included a convent for the Sisters. She moved on to be principal at Saint Luke's High School in Carnegie and Saint Pancratius in Lakewood, California. She spent six years as a Council member for the Community and then became director of Project Forward, a federally-funded educational talent search program. During those years at Project Forward, from 1969 until 1980, Sister Mary Agnes branched out in many directions, all areas which touched the poor and disadvantaged. One strong interest was GED tutoring at the state correctional facility in Greensburg. She was very proud of her GED graduates.

In 1980 she returned to her first love and taught English at Greensburg Central Catholic High School until her retirement in 1987. During her retirement, Sister Mary Agnes remained active in many organizations in Westmoreland County.

Throughout the years of her community life Sister Mary Agnes was devoted to Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. She was often called upon to give talks about Elizabeth. And her love for Mother Seton attracted ten women she sponsored as they became Sisters of Charity – beginning with Sister Mary Donald Cusick and going to Sister Pauline Grentz.

Sister Mary Agnes received many honors and awards during her life, the most recent, being named in 1994 to the Seton-LaSalle High School Hall of Fame in recognition of her ministry at Elizabeth Seton High School. In 1991, Seton Hill University bestowed upon her the degree of Doctor of Letters, *Honoris Causa*. The citation captures the story of her life and ministry: "Your first passion was education where students remembered you for your 'fairness' and it was this sense of fairness that informed your second passion-a

passion for justice. You have been called a talent scout, a beggar, an educator par excellence, a friend of prisoners, a bag lady, a pinch penny, and an unflinching grammarian. You have been seen in Baptist churches, hotel ballrooms, congressional hearing rooms, and Appalachian ‘hollers.’ You have touched thousands of lives in your determined, compassionate, and unassuming way.”

A truly remarkable person. One to be admired and revered. It was not until I helped Sister Mary Agnes move from Assumption Hall to the Greensburg Central Faculty House and then from the Faculty House to Caritas Christi that I saw another side of her personality – the loving person who cared so much for each person. In 1996, when she moved from Assumption Hall she had quite a collection of cards and letters from her brothers, Harry, Alfred, and Robert, then deceased, and from her sister Dorothea, also deceased, and of course from her sister Genevieve, as well as from former students and professional associates. We went through every card, letter and gift. I would say, “Now what about this?” And Sister Mary Agnes would look at the card and say, “Now, that’s important.” So, not much was thrown away! She loved her parents, Harry and Mary Agnes, her brothers and sisters, her nieces and nephews. She always wanted to know where the younger members of the family were going to school, what they were studying. Until three years ago she attended all the family reunions. The reunions have a theme and she always took part. Once she was Carmen Miranda with the fruit on her head. Another time she had a large umbrella and on the spokes dangled pictures of all the nieces and nephews, grand nieces and grand nephews.

Once I was at a Community committee meeting where many ideas and thoughts were discussed. No one seemed to know how to proceed. Finally, Sister Mary Agnes said, “I begin to see a thread.” We knew everything would be all right – the task would be completed because Sister Mary Agnes saw a thread.

What thread can we see in Sister Mary Agnes’ life? We see a great organizer and strong administrator. We see one who on a cross-country trip wanted to go to restaurants where there were tablecloths, but who sat patiently at the prison helping a person struggle to pass a GED test. We see a woman who served easily on Boards and Commissions, yet treasured small cards and gifts.

Church, to family, to the ideals of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, to the Community of the Sisters of Charity; we see outstanding commitment to the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden.

Sister Mary Agnes, a true daughter of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, can this evening at last echo Elizabeth’s words:

Oh my soul, there is a heaven! There is a Savior. There is pure and perfect felicity under the shadow of his wings. There is rest from our labors, peace from our enemies, freedom from our sins. There we shall be always joyful, always beholding the presence of Him who has purchased and prepared for us His unutterable glory.



Elizabeth Ann Seton

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Brigid Marie Grandey
November 6, 2006*