



SISTER HILDA MARIE SHAUNESSY
February 12, 1921 - March 25, 2008

Sister Hilda Marie told me what to say at her funeral. She thought it was sufficient to tell you that, “I am a born and bred Altoona girl, a graduate of the wonderful Cathedral School and the wonderful Altoona Catholic High. I was the oldest of nine children and was kept very busy helping my mother with the younger children. By the time I entered the convent, I was more than an average seamstress, and a good cook, especially my speciality, the best beef barley soup ever made.” Hilda paused, then waved her hand and said, “Now that is enough about me. No one wants to hear any more.”

I think she deserves a little more remembrance. A remembrance of the person who was Hilda Marie. Six of the people who could tell us much have preceded her in death. Her parents, James and Hilda (Conrad) Shaunessy, and her siblings, James, Walter, Josephine and Barbara. John, Catherine and Frances are still living, but could not be here this evening. Alverta is here. She said she is the number 6 child; she could easily pass for Hilda’s twin.

I have often thought that one reference point from which to think of Hilda is found in her name, Hilda Julia. A book on the meaning of names said that Hilda gives the impression of a strong, stout-hearted person—a worker. Julia gives the impression of a softer, gentler, person—a doer of good. Both describe Hilda. They blended well, but often one showed more prominently than the other.

As I left work on Wednesday, Florence, one of the volunteers, asked which sister had died. I told her that it was Sister Hilda Marie. Florence said, “Oh, she was so much fun and always smiling.” Florence was a student at Saint James, West End. She saw the Julia side.

Several sisters and I were reminiscing about Hilda. Two of us, who had lived with her at West End, were in absolute awe—as in scared—of her. We saw the Hilda side.

I worked with a young woman who had been a student of Hilda’s at Saint Anselm. She thought that Hilda was the kindest and sweetest teacher she ever had in grade school. She saw the Julia side.

And then there were those boys at Holy Innocents who, “were not going to tangle with Sister Hilda Marie.” They saw the Hilda side.

Our paths crossed many times, especially when teaching in the same school. One summer after a trying school year, she served as cook at Marymount, and I was visiting for a week. Hilda was relaxed and doing something she loved to do—cook. She was all Julia. The stress of school was gone and she showed the wonderful side of her personality that so many children could see.

She certainly touched the lives of many children. Resurrection, Brookline; Saint Joseph, Mt. Pleasant; Sacred Heart, East End; Saint Luke, Carnegie; Holy Innocents, Sheridan; Saint James, West End; Saint Anselm, Swissvale; McNelis, Altoona; Saint Teresa, Munhall; Our Lady of Mercy, Johnstown, where she was sister servant and principal; and Saint Michael, Pitcairn, where she was also sister servant and principal.

After 43 years as a teacher—mainly of English, Hilda served at Saint Joseph House of Hospitality, Assumption Hall, Doran Hall and finally Caritas Christi. For a period at Assumption and Doran she was an aide for the Seton Center Adult Day Care, and a telephone relay person.

When Hilda entered the community, Monsignor Denny, wrote one sentence in his recommendation. “It is a pleasure to recommend Hilda Shaunessy as a candidate for your order.” I suspect he knew her well and knew that she would prove herself in a very short time.

Her letter of October 22, 1945 reveals, I believe, her gentler side and her desire to be a Sister of Charity.

Dear Mother Maria Benedict,

It hardly seems more than yesterday that I came to Seton Hill to stay. These past five years have been happy and peaceful ones because they have been spent for the Lord. Even amidst the ordinary sorrows and trials of convent life there has always been a peace which can be found no where else.

The Lord is good to have called me from the world. How little gratitude I sometimes show Him! He has given me the grace of perseverance and now it is time to ask permission to leave the Junior Professed group. I shall endeavor to be a good Sister of Charity, one who is faithful in all her duties. With God's grace and my cooperation, Saint Vincent will not be ashamed to call me one of his daughters.

Fifty years later she wrote:

Dear Sister Mary Ann and sisters,

Thank you for remembering my jubilee with such a special gift. I appreciate the relic of Mother Seton. Thank you, too, for your part in making Sunday such a very special day. It was just lovely, wasn't it?

Blessings on all of you and those dear to you.

The Cathedral Church Bulletin of December 20, 1990 paid tribute to the golden jubilarians from the parish:

"Fifty years ago, September 8, 1940, Sister Harold Ann Jones, Sister Hilda Marie Shaunessy and Sister Thomasine Steel, newly graduated from Altoona Catholic High School, left their families, friends, and the Cathedral Parish to become members of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Greensburg. God has blessed these women with perseverance in their religious vocation, and with good health, and they have served the church well, particularly in the field of education."

Hilda did many things in her life, even building, with four others, a pioneer woman scarecrow, which won 1st place as judged by a Fine Arts professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

Two weeks ago, I held Hilda's hand and asked her if she knew my name. "Sure do, Pat." She was vulnerable and very weak. Hilda had not been able to cook or sew for many years. But most would agree that her eyes told you if she were in the Hilda or Julia mode. She was a beautiful blend of both. If she could speak to me now, I know she would say in her clipped tone, "Well, you did not do what I asked—make it short." Hilda, I only scratched the surface.

Hilda, as you said in your letter requesting final vows, "The Lord is good to have called me from the world."

O loving God, we send your daughter home to you, home to a place of everlasting love. Receive the soul of Hilda Julia and let eternal light shine forever on her.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflections
Sister Patricia Collins
March 28, 2008*