

Sister Anita Marie Hensel
May 19, 1928 - June 16, 2009



Sarah Marie Hensel was born in Springdale, Pennsylvania on May 19, 1928, to Fred and Genevieve Hensel. She grew up with five brothers and sisters, Frederick and Jane, deceased, George, Genevieve and Regina who are here with us this morning. The Hensel family were members of St. Augustine Parish in Lawrenceville.

Sister Anita Marie loved her family very much. Those of us who lived with her enjoyed the joy and excitement of her home visits. We knew about the weddings, the First Communions and the new arrivals. She was fortunate to be a member of such a close family

Sarah entered the Sisters of Charity in 1946. She spent most of her years teaching children in the primary and middle grades in the Dioceses of Greensburg and Pittsburgh, Lafayette, Louisiana, Phoenix, Arizona, Baltimore, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

Sister Anita Marie loved every child she ever taught, but she had a special love for the poor and neglected Afro-Americans in Louisiana where she taught from 1959 to 1964. She returned there again from 1967 to 1968. I taught there with Sister and observed first hand how much she loved those children. On the playground, she reminded me of the pied piper. Remember him? He played his pipes and all the children followed him where ever he went. When Sister appeared on the playground the little ones would all run to her for their hugs and then run along side of her wherever she went. When we met children on the street or in the store, we would hear a sudden chorus of "Sister, Sister" and she would be surrounded by laughing children, so happy to see her.

A year or so ago, she and I were reminiscing and I asked her which of her years were her favorite ones. "I loved them all," she said, "but I have to confess the best years were the ones in Louisiana where I taught my little black darlings."

I learned only yesterday that Sister Anita Marie was a Pirate fan and loved the game. St. Therese's parish bulletin featured an article by Sister in which she professes her love for the game. "I became a Pirate fan when I was a young child as I paced out the tensions of the game on the heels of my pacing grandfather." It seems that as a younger man her grandfather had played baseball with a team and he passed that love for the game on to her. "I still love that game", she wrote, "and make my classes fans too. Of course, in Pittsburgh and Greensburg they had to be Pirate fans.

Last evening we heard the story of the tornado in Louisiana that almost took the lives of our four sisters. I am not going to repeat that story, but I'd like to share Sister Anita Marie's reflection about it. I hope I have the details correct. She told me that when the tornado picked her up and threw her, she thought she was going to die. Then out of the blue she heard children's voices, "Sisters, Sisters. Where are you? Are you all right?" She said that the children's voice sounded like angels calling. "I thought I was dead. The children ran for help and adults came to us". That event changed my life," she told me. She said that that episode made her realize how precious her own life was. She felt God had saved her for some special reason. In thanksgiving for another chance at life, she promised God that she would use it to make life better for the little ones she would be teaching and make every effort to help them know how much God loves them. That became the cornerstone for the remainder of her life.

How did it play out in the years to come?

We heard over and over again yesterday afternoon and again last evening, from family members, our sisters and other friends who came, descriptive phrases and words describing Sister Anita Marie. “She was always happy. She never spoke unkindly to or about anyone. She was so much fun. She was thoughtful. She was so loving. She was always giving . She was our angel. She never seemed to think of herself. She was never too busy to help someone in need. She brought joy with her.” These were only a few of the many descriptive words I heard and recorded. I think these phrases tell us how her promise to God played out in her life. She was people centered. People were her life and people gave her life.

As the years passed and she grew older, that promise she made to God in Louisiana changed too. She finished her teaching years and the children were no longer as much a part of her life as in the past. She moved on to another group of people who needed her—the elderly at St. Therese High Rise—people at the opposite end of the life cycle from the children . There she continued her life of giving and doing and being . She loved them too, as she had loved her children before, and in her, they too, saw Jesus .

As her life moved on, she began experiencing ill health and she came to us here at Caritas Christi. We, her sisters, became the recipients of her love and each day we were made aware of God’s love by her presence among us. Here, too, she extended herself beyond walls of Caritas Christi. She volunteered to call a shut-in who lived in the Greensburg area. She checked on her, chatted and prayed with her. It seems that she found ways to embrace anyone and everyone, no matter where she was.

What a gift God gave us!

Anita, you were a wondrous and precious gift to us, for you bore within yourself God’s own image and likeness. On this day, as we celebrate your new life, we praise and thank God for you. Keep your eye on us and help us live our lives for all, as you did.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Harold Ann Jones
June 19, 2009*