

## REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER MARY GILES BRANDT

April 30, 1917-March 18, 2014



Preparing the eulogy for one of our Sisters is always a privilege and a gift. To have the opportunity to spend some quiet time with a Sister by reviewing her files always raises more thoughts and feelings than can be easily summarized in a brief reflection. And so it was with this time with Sister Mary Giles.

Two recent experiences created an unexpected frame for these reflections. One is the reading in common of the Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill. This week, we have been hearing the about governance. Article by article, the reader reads the lengthy lists of rights and obligations for each office—not too exciting in the category of spiritual reading! The other experience was some personal reading of a book called *The Life of Meaning*, a collection of reflections and observations about what constitutes a meaningful life. And of course, among such reflections, the modern dilemma about being “spiritual but not religious” gets attention. For some, “religion” connotes rules and obligations, awareness of God according to a specific tradition, and caring for others. “Spirituality, on the other hand, seems for some to be about individual freedom, creativity, to the individual search for meaning and for the divine. Faced now with the fact of her completed life, where would we situate Sister Mary Giles? Was she “religious” or was she “spiritual”?

1917-2014—these are the 97 years that measure the length of Sister Mary Giles’ life. Regina Josephine Brandt was born April 30, 1917 in Swissvale. Having entered the Sisters of Charity on March 25, 1934, she will be celebrating her 80th jubilee in heaven among her family members who were surely there to welcome her: her parents, Giles and Mary Estella Fisher Brandt, her sisters Marie, Rosalia, Louise, and Anne; her brothers Lawrence and William; her paternal aunt, our Sister Mary Regina Brandt; her cousin, our Sister Jean Ann Wilburn; and her dear friend, Sister Mary Paul Wheeler.

On March 24, 1939, Sister Mary Giles wrote to Mother Rose Genevieve: “Tomorrow, March 25 marks my fifth anniversary of my entrance into the community. My Novitiate years have been happy ones in which I have learned to love and appreciate Religious Life. Now it is my duty to ask to be admitted into the Community Room if you, Mother, see fit.”

A simple, straightforward statement: “I’m here, I have learned, I am happy, and I want to stay.” Sister Mary Giles’ papers record that she made temporary profession in 1936. Since that was during the years when we made annual vows, she actually did not make perpetual vows until 1949. Without much further ado, her record states that she began to teach elementary and junior high school in 1936. In 1954, she began a six-year term as principal and Sister Servant. Until she retired from the schools in 1985, she continued in both of these roles—sometimes in one, sometimes in the other, and

sometimes in both. Still having energy, she then worked at St. Peter Parish on the North Side for fifteen years. On a ministry survey in 1998, she wrote, “The ministry in which I serve gives ample opportunity to proclaim the Gospel message and to honor Jesus Christ in the persons of all whom I serve.” Long lists of assignment after assignment, the record of a woman obediently living the structured religious life of a Sister of Charity—was it simply a life of “duties, rules, and obligations”? Somewhat hidden among all the facts in her file, we find what it was that made all the difference.

Asked for a comment when she was celebrating her 70th jubilee in 2004, she wrote, “Having lived 70 years in the religious life, I have fulfilled a life-long ambition without ever feeling regret. Deo gratias!” In 2006, responding to the International Spirituality Committee, she wrote:

*“My Catholic faith is the greatest gift God has given to me. It is the foundation of my life as a Sister of Charity. I know from my faith that God had a plan for me before I was born. I pray every day that God will help me to carry out that plan to the best of my ability.*

*I became a Sister of Charity in March 25, 1936. One of the special gifts that St. Elizabeth Seton gave us is the desire to make Christ the center of our lives. We are to carry Christ to all whom we serve in humility, simplicity, and charity; and [we are] to remember that God is ever present. There are many stories in my life that could capture this spirit. One story comes to my mind. I was a very young sister teaching second grade at Holy Cross School in the south Side of Pittsburgh. I had a poor little girl in my class. She did not have good hygiene and her clothes were torn and soiled. Some of the children made fun of her, as children will do. I got her a clean dress and some soap. Every morning she would come to the convent, take a sponge bath and put on her clean dress. This was a special way that I could help the poor.*

*Now I am retired and some pressures are lifted. I have an inner peace.”*

So, what do you think? Was Sister Mary Giles religious or spiritual? Is there really any dilemma here? Did she live a life of meaning?

Take your rest now, dear Sister Mary Giles. Thank you for being a selfless, serene, and stately presence and witness among us. Thank you for sharing with us something of the roots of that selflessness and serenity.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection  
~ Gertrude Foley, SC  
March 21, 2014*