

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER HELEN ELIZABETH McELWAIN NOVEMBER 16, 1923–AUGUST 21, 2016



It is always a joy for me to be asked to do the eulogy for one of our Sisters. As I reviewed our written memory of Sister Helen Elizabeth, the image of a treasure hunt came to me. The territory is familiar—the file—but you don't know what you will discover. The second thought that occurred to me came as we celebrated the feast of Saint Bartholomew yesterday. We have grown used to hearing about a great many saints, "We really don't know much about them." This is often the case with our Sisters: her life was a treasure, but we don't know much about her. So it is with Helen Elizabeth.

On November 16, 1923, Hugh and Elizabeth McCaffrey McElwain became the parents of a daughter, Helen Elizabeth. Eighteen years later, September 8, 1941, Helen Elizabeth entered the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill from Burgettstown, Pennsylvania. After receiving her habit, she simply added "Sister" to her baptismal name. As an eighth grader, Helen Elizabeth, when asked about her desire to become a Sister, had said, "It just seemed right." Perhaps this same thinking led her to the simple adding of "Sister" to her name.

Sister Helen Elizabeth received her B.A. from Seton Hill College and her M.A. from Catholic University, both in sociology. For ten years she served at Seton Hill as dean of women and teacher of sociology. Then, her ministry took one of the typical Sister of Charity sharp turns: for the next seventeen years she began teaching French and serving as a guidance counselor at Sacred Heart, Elizabeth Seton, Holy Innocents, Boyle, and Greensburg Central Catholic High Schools. To prepare for teaching French, she received two NDEA grants—one in 1964 for a summer at the University of Kentucky at Lexington and another summer in 1968 at the University of Toulouse; in 1974, she spent a summer in Paris. Then, another sharp turn, and her sociology background re-surfaced when she served for ten years on the staff at Saint Joseph's House of Hospitality and ten more as the first manager at Etna Commons. On leaving Etna Commons, Sister Helen Elizabeth wrote to her family and friends, "I will be living at Saint Columbkille Convent with Sister Patricia Best who has a large responsibility for religious education in the parish. Perhaps I can be of help in some way, but exactly how I'm not sure." In 2004, she and Sister Pat Best initiated a 2-day vocation event at the parish, "Highlighting Vocations at Saint Columbkille." Sister Helen Elizabeth retired to Caritas Christi several years ago. This past July, she celebrated her 75th anniversary as a Sister of Charity of Seton Hill.

So, there you have it, another version of "Happy Memories of a Sister of Charity." Nothing spectacular on paper records; who can say they really knew much about her? But surely we can number her among our saints. The people who really knew our saint are not with us

tonight. In 1999, Sister Helen Elizabeth received the Manifesting the Kingdom Award from the Diocese of Pittsburgh not for any heroic deeds but “for her generosity and energetic service at Etna Commons and All Saints Parish, Etna.”

We discern the treasure more clearly reading Sister Helen Elizabeth’s telling on her golden anniversary of how she always wanted to serve the poor. She that said she got her wish when she served the low income residents at Saint Joseph House of Hospitality, “in their own world.” At Etna Commons, she again demonstrated the presence of Christ through her respectful, caring service to the tenants there.

In Sister Helen Elizabeth’s casket, there is a tiny hand-lettered card which she may have received to celebrate her vows. It reads, “I do not think of my love as a gift but as an exchange—a fair exchange for something great by something small: poverty, chastity, and obedience.” On her golden jubilee, her favorite quotation was, “Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life.”

Helen Elizabeth, you were indeed a treasure, and most certainly a saint that we don’t know much about, do we? Thank you from the hidden depths of our hearts for being so quietly among us all these years.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Gertrude Foley, SC
August 25, 2016*