

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER THOMAS JOSEPH GAINES

October 12, 1940–May 12, 2014



“Gold and silver, I have none. But what I have, gladly I give.” Some in this chapel remember hearing those words proclaimed over the years by Sister Thomas Joseph. She was so proud of her part in the novitiate program presented by her “group.” She practiced this line and proclaimed it with conviction. Over the years, she often recited the words—perhaps when reminiscing, perhaps when a situation called for them, perhaps when a bit of the Spirit awoke in her. In retrospect tonight, we can say that it was no accident that TJ claimed these words almost as her motto. Because whatever she had, she shared; whatever she was asked to do, she jumped right in; whatever new called for her energy, she “gladly gave.”

Judith Gaines entered the Sisters of Charity on December 28, 1959 from Oakmont. Sister Thomas Joseph, affectionately known as Sister TJ, took her religious name after her father and brother.

She taught elementary school for a number of years before becoming a parish social minister at Saint James in Wilkinsburg. During her eight years in that ministry, TJ branched out, eventually to the point of impacting practically every agency that served the people of that town. There was Meals on Wheels, there was Telecare, then the Saint Vincent DePaul Society, and the Wilkinsburg Community Ministry of which she served as President. The Mayor of Wilkinsburg named her the “Citizen of the Year” for her social and spiritual leadership. Then there was TJ, the ambulance driver! Many a Friday night you could find TJ, as EMT, driving the emergency van and administering basic life support services. Her co-workers often asked her if she had brought her bottle of holy water with her. What she had, she gladly gave.

In 1981, challenged by the founding spirit of the Sisters of Charity, in the example of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Elizabeth Seton, she became chaplain at Kane Hospital. She ministered to the spiritual needs of the residents by providing for a variety of religious services and promoting faith sharing sessions. She involved clergy of many denominations and ordinary people from local congregations. But she herself was the Good News, the gospel in action, to the patients, to the administration and the staff during the 33 years that she served as chaplain. What she had, gladly she gave.

With her life rooted in charity, she was like a vine transplanted from Oakmont to the Sisters of Charity. Growing in the soil of Saint Vincent’s love for the poor and Elizabeth’s care for others, TJ branched out, offering her loving service in areas that extended far beyond her immediate assignment. At one point in her ministry, she was asked to coordinate the volunteers at Kane. These volunteers, many of whom were older, were a real blessing to TJ. Because of her compassion for the sick and the frail residents, she felt it was important to add to their comforts.

She and her long-time volunteer assistant, George, worked hard to raise money for various projects. It took years, but with special appeals, donations and many fundraisers, TJ was able to see the completion of the Garden of Reflection (soon-to-be-renamed the “Sister TJ Garden of Reflection”) with its fountains, patio, and benches. She helped create a space where the residents and staff could go outside to enjoy the flowering blossoms and plants. Her own love for living things was evidenced here at Caritas Christi when, in her wheelchair, she performed inspections and minor garden tending just outside the building. With whatever physical energy she had left, she wanted to make her world a better place.

Sister Thomas Joseph nurtured the seed of charity in others by inviting both young and old into her ministry. She had the local First Communicants come for a May Crowning at Kane. She also instituted a program for older students along with teachers and parents to wheel the residents to and from Mass on Sundays.

Sister TJ never counted the cost of her time and energy when ministering to those who were dying or to their family members. Her calming presence was the best witness to the God whom she served. What she had, gladly she gave—neither silver nor gold—but a calming presence, a gentleness and patience that revealed God’s great love and compassion.

Both in her ministry and community life, TJ accepted the differences in others and always found the “good” in them. TJ lived the words of Elizabeth Ann Seton, “judge no one, leave all judgments to the Lord.” She loved life, and was able to find humor despite the difficulties she encountered. No matter where TJ lived or ministered, she did it with a joy for life, simply and generously.

After the 911 tragedy, Sister volunteered and was trained by the Red Cross to be a part of a Spiritual Response Team that provided care through grief and bereavement counseling to victims of disasters. She served in areas hard-hit by devastating storms: areas of Florida, Texas, and Mississippi, spending two to three weeks in each area. It’s been noted by others who worked alongside her, that the people were very receptive to her hugs and prayers. TJ was always grateful that the administration at Kane Hospital gave her the freedom and the support to serve in this capacity.

When praised for her service, TJ often said, “You get out of life what you give.” What she had, she gladly gave. She gave much—her love, gentleness and enthusiasm, her simplicity, compassion, and encouragement to all those with whom she came in contact. When thanked for her ministry, she responded that she was the one who received the gift from those she served.

Thankful for her legacy, we remember Sister Thomas Joseph tonight. May she be blessed eternally for the seeds of goodness she has sown in God’s name.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
~Sister Claudia Stehle, SC
May 15, 2014*