

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER M. TERESINA BRIDGES

July 29, 1916—March 2, 2015



". . . and the child grew in wisdom, age, and grace . . ."

Even by today's standards, a young person at 15 may be considered a child, a minor, a juvenile.

Mary Margaret Bridges was 15 years of age when she declared her intent to enter the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill. She was the oldest of three children; her father had died when she was ten years of age and her mother was in poor health. Her mother was hesitant but supported her wish. However, someone, probably one of the sisters at Our Lady of Mercy, contacted Mother Eveline (Fisher) and expressed concerns about accepting Mary. In her recorded oral history, Sister Teresina recalled that she took the letter to her pastor, Father Mullane, who arranged for her to travel to Greensburg to meet with Mother Eveline. We don't know the details of their conversation . . . but Terry said, "At the end of our meeting, Mother Eveline asked me whether I still wished to enter. I told Mother "yes." And so, on September 8, 1932, Mary Margaret Bridges left Johnstown for Seton Hill to begin her 82-year journey as a Sister of Charity.

More amazing is Terry's recollection that her mother was hospitalized at the time but chose to leave the hospital for the day in order to accompany her daughter to Seton Hill. What LOVE!

Aunt Mayme O'Connor lived with the family and helped care for Jimmie, then 14, and Dorothy, 12; she also cared for Mrs. Bridges, who died two years later.

In the years that followed, Teresina's gift as educator was evidenced over and over. Her first assignment was to teach fourth graders. Thereafter, she was assigned to the primary grades, usually first grade, where her gentle but firm approach gave numerous little ones their start. Some years later, superiors recognized her administrative gifts and she was assigned to a succession of schools as principal: Cathedral School, Greensburg, Saints Peter and Paul, Tucson, Arizona; and

St. Jane de Chantal, Bethesda, Maryland. For several years, she served as the diocesan elementary supervisor for schools in the Altoona-Johnstown area.

In 1961, she and the other sisters assigned to Our Lady of Lourdes School in Louisiana, experienced a Mary Poppins moment when tornado Carla blew through Kaplan. Their house was blown off its foundation and, if not for the warning cries of several small children who lived nearby, the sisters believe they would have been killed. They were badly shaken but not hurt and were more concerned for the children who had been blown into the dry canal and emerged unscathed.

In her oral history interview of 2000, Terry spoke warmly about all her assignments. But as I listened to the tapes, it seemed to me that one was more special than all the others. It occurred in 1953. Teresina along with Sisters Ida Marie and Grace Marie were the three musketeers sent to open the new little school in Bethesda . . . to plant the seed of (the now flourishing) Saint Jane de Chantal School, sisters' living quarters, and classrooms, all under one roof. Terry taught one of the first grades there for three years and then returned ten years later as principal.

So this is a brief summary of what Terry "did." But how will we remember the Teresina Bridges with whom we shared life for so many years.

Many will remember her as an exacting school woman, who set high standards for herself and those on her faculty. Others will recall how much Terry enjoyed a party . . . an occasional G&T or a Black Russian. She had several vacations to far-away places, and relished a year-long sabbatical in California. She was respected by the clergy with whom she worked and by those who worked with her in schools and parishes.

Over the years while she moved from one assignment to another, she held fast to her love of family. She remained close to her sister Dorothy, until her death. She maintained contact with her brother Jimmie and his wife Velma. She had a standing order with Brown Candies in Mt. Pleasant to send them a box of Christmas chocolates. She spoke often and fondly of the nieces and nephews, of grand-nieces and nephews, and of those who married into the family. In later years when she needed help addressing Christmas cards, she could tell you who was who in her address book . . . both friends and relatives.

She who "left home" at age 16, never "left home." Mention Johnstown, and she beamed. She carried home in her heart, praying unceasingly that those she dearly loved would love one another.

In her years here at Caritas Christi, she could be seen resting peacefully in her big chair, eyes closed, feet up, rosary beads in hand—not sleeping—but quietly praying for the many she loved. Until recently, she might get herself up and head over to the chapel balcony to pray in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament.

We watched her grow ever more graceful as she embraced the loss of sight and hearing. She was asked to relinquish the control and independence that served her so well throughout the years of active ministry. She, who was a reading specialist, now gratefully accepted the kindness of other sisters who would stop in and read to her. More than one sister was heard to remark that Teresina exemplified what it means to "grow old gracefully."

In September 1937, five years after entering, Sister Teresina wrote to Mother Rose Genevieve to ask to pronounce final vows. In her letter she wrote (and I quote) ". . . I hope that in the coming years of my religious life God will give me the grace I need to be a good religious . . ."

I would like to submit that God answered Terry's prayer.

". . . and the child grew in wisdom, age, and grace . . ."

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Patricia Mary Wilson
March 5, 2015*