

Reflection on the Life of Sister Carita Shields

August 10, 1933–November 8, 2015



The Irish have a saying: Sudden death, sudden glory! We rejoice with Sister Carita who now knows the glory, as we, while we mourn, celebrate her life among us.

Florence Shields grew up in the Swissvale neighborhood of Pittsburgh, the daughter of Hugh and Flora Desmond Shields. There were six children in the family: Buddy, Betty, and Kathy have died; Mary Lou, the oldest in the family, and Terry, the youngest (sometimes referred to as “my baby brother”), are both here tonight. Florence went to Saint Anselm

Elementary School; then made the long streetcar trip across town, walking up Capital Hill to attend Elizabeth Seton High School.

After working in a secretarial position for a year after graduation, Florence rang the doorbell at Elizabeth Seton Convent one afternoon. When the door opened she began to cry, then asked for Sister Mary Agnes (Schildkamp), telling her that she wanted to be a Sister. Sister Mary Agnes told her that was nothing to cry about!

Let us view the next sixty-some years as though we were looking at a beautiful gem, cut and polished so that all its facets shine and reflect the various facets of Sister Carita’s life. I think, in her case, the gem would be a beautiful green emerald. Each of its polished sides would shine forth upon a different phase of her life, a different manifestation of her love and service.

Basic to all facets of her life was Sister Carita’s spirituality. She never minded telling the story of her leaving the community after the first year and a half. She got her old secretarial job back and thought it was over

as far as a religious vocation went. However, she was pursued, she always said, by the “Hound of Heaven.” After two years, she reentered and lived almost sixty years as a Sister of Charity.

Her consciousness of God’s presence was clear. She prayed faithfully—and very early in the morning! If she was asked to pray for someone, especially a sick person, she mentioned that person by name in her prayers every day. Her deep faith carried her through the illnesses and deaths of Buddy and Kathy from muscular dystrophy and the death of Betty from cancer. She began and lived each day in faith and hope.

As we turn the sparkling emerald, another facet shines. It is her work in education, first in teaching primary grades, then as principal of three different schools, then as high school guidance counselor. In pictures of her during those 37 years, she is often with children, always smiling and happy.

Sister Carita moved then into the world of finance, becoming a bookkeeper, then payroll manager for the Sisters of Charity here in Greensburg. Kindness and understanding of people, as well as perfection and accuracy marked her 21 years at De Paul Center.

The next facet of the emerald illuminates Sister Carita’s care and concern for her family and for the Sisters in the community. Sister Carita cared for her mother in her last years, living with her as she became more frail. She did what she could to help her sister-in-law, Anna Marie, to care for Bud; she helped Jim Walter care for his wife Kathy. She was a tremendous help to Sister Katie when she faced (and recovered from) serious illness, and to Sister Joan McGinley who suffered from Parkinson’s. Sister Joan wrote a tribute to Sister Carita in which she called her “a real live angel in action” because of the daily help she gave with such loving care.

Another facet of Sister Carita’s life shines forth in her ability to make friends, to gather relatives and friends together, to make people happy.

There's another Irish saying: "May your home always be too small to hold your friends." This was often literally true when families and friends gathered together. Sister Carita became a significant part of the Gallagher family. She welcomed the families of any Sister with whom she lived. She welcomed her own family, especially for Thanksgiving dinner. She welcomed those with whom she worked. She welcomed the friends of Sisters with whom she lived. She enjoyed birthday celebrations, Jubilee celebrations, almost any celebration!

The emerald turns again to reflect perhaps its center, and the center of Sister Carita's life: her very life and being were focused on Christ, in Christ, and with Christ. The Breastplate of Saint Patrick captures this best:

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger . . .*

So we put our emerald with its many gleaming facets aside for a while, but know that Sister Carita, represented in a shadowy way by the emerald, lives, through Christ, around us, and in us forever.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Brigid Marie Grandey
November 13, 2015*