

Sister Mary Rozanne's Story (1912-2006)

Although there were many notices posted on our kitchen door having to do with Sister Rozanne's leaving us, there remains a beautiful Hallmark card we have not taken down. The card, bearing a rose, reads: "Friendship has no special season. It blooms the whole year long." This was certainly true of our Sister Mary Rozanne Heller. She knew how to be a friend up to the very last moment.

Usually, when someone is 93 and has chosen to go along with the angels who have come for her, there are not many friends left to bid her goodbye. However, this was not the case with Sister Rozanne, who made that journey back to God, March 15, 2006. Sister Rozanne, who always got things done swiftly and with great determination, was only acutely ill for two days. On the morning of March 13, the community received a call from The Alverno Health Care Facility in Clinton, Iowa, saying that Sister had experienced a "change of condition". The Alverno Health Care Facility is about 45 minutes from the Eldridge Carmel, and is run by our close friends, the Clinton, Iowa, Franciscans Sisters. On Tuesday evening, that same day, our community gathered in Sister's room. We sang, we prayed, and we gave our Sister Rozanne little messages to take along. Twenty-four hours later, we received a call telling us that Sister had slipped away to God. In the days that followed, Sister Rozanne's sister, Genevieve Szawicki, and nephew, Richard McShane, both from Omaha, Nebraska, were able to be with us, as was Sister's cousin, Jeff Jauron.

Daughter of William and Amelia Heller, and youngest of seven children, Sister Rozanne was born in Dunlap, Iowa. She received the name of Rose Margaret at Baptism. Sister entered the Congregation of the Sisters of the Humilty of Mary, then located in Ottumwa, Iowa, (currently in Davenport, Iowa) in 1930. Sister made her First Profession of Vows as a Sister of Humility in 1936. She received her B.A. from the University of Iowa, and her M.A. from the University of Minnesota. During her time in active ministry, Sister Rozanne taught at the St. Vincent Home in Davenport, Iowa. She also taught in Santa Paula, California. Sister was a member of the House of Prayer in Davenport, Iowa, from 1970 to 1971. In 1971, Sister Rozanne transferred to the Carmelite Monastery in Bettendorf, Iowa, and made her Solemn Profession of Vows in 1973. The Carmelite Community of Sisters has since relocated to Eldridge, Iowa. This occurred in 1975.

If nothing else, during the Visitation, Wake and Funeral, we realized, again, what a colorful person Sister Rozanne was. For example, Sister held the belief that a true Carmelite never leaves the monastery, but instead stays at home, prays for the world, and quietly communes with God. This, indeed, Sister did. However, there were times when necessity intervened, and Sister had to go out. When this happened, Sister returned glowing, and on fire with new life and joy. She loved people. She also loved the countryside and the out-of-doors. On the day her friends gathered to say their last goodbye, we could just hear her say, "Guess who came to my funeral!" again glowing all the while.

There were many amusing stories told about Sister at the Visitation and Wake - stories too good to forget. To begin, we relate the following. Our Sister Rozanne had a very “proper” streak inside of her, especially where important people, in her opinion, were involved. For example, Sister always wanted the front of the monastery to “look nice” when the Bishop came to visit. She usually had men helpers on deck to help her with these projects. However, she failed to notice that as she got older, so did her helpers. One day, Sister asked one of these “volunteer” helpers (age 83) to tidy up the front of the monastery because the “Bishop was coming”. Very politely and wisely, our faithful friend responded, “Sister Rozanne, tell the Bishop to look the other way.”

There were many of her students who also came to say good-bye to the teacher they loved, including some of our priests. One of them shared how Sister Rozanne taught them how to divide a circle in three equal parts, something that would be so necessary in later life, or so they thought.

Our Sister Rozanne, herself, had a great love for learning. She was a reader. When she was no longer allowed to work outside due to fear of falling, she had the ingenuity to wait at a spot inside, a place we humorously refer to as the “bus stop”. She waited to engage any unsuspecting passer-by, whom “Jesus might send”, hoping that some Sister would stop and have a conversation with her about the exciting thing she just read. She had a way of motioning with her hand much like the Pope does when he is greeting the pilgrims in Rome.

And, there are more stories, including the one where Sister Rozanne’s phlox got mowed down on both sides of the property on the same day by two of our, then, newer members. Sister Rozanne used these blossoms to make her Flora-Gem cards. She was absolutely grief-stricken. It gave a new meaning to watching your phlox by day.

On a more serious note, we need to mention that our Sister Rozanne knew how to pray. She was very faithful to this call. Early in the morning, she was in the chapel for her hour of prayer, and then again in late afternoon, from 5:00-6:00, for the second hour. It was in this hour that God came to take her home.

Bishop Franklin celebrated the funeral Mass, and Father Edmond Dunn, an old-time friend, had the homily. (We saw to it that the front of the monastery “looked nice”, even though the Mass took place at St. Ann’s in Long Grove.) Fr. Dunn spoke of the Martha and Mary in Rozanne. He left the assembled with a profound quote from theologian Paul Tillich, who said that one of the most difficult things in living the Christian faith is “accepting acceptance”. Rozanne always worried that she was not doing enough. But now, our Sister Mary Rozanne knows better. We like to think that when she, at long last, beheld the face of the God she loved so much, she heard the words, “Rozanne, Rozanne, you worried about many things. All you needed to do was to accept that I love you.”