
Sister Etheldreda of the Infant Jesus, O.C.D + Elysburg Carmel



In the last century, ninety six years ago to be exact, a baby girl was born to a devout farm couple in rural Lancaster in Ohio. She was baptized Helena Etheldreda Kilbarger, a strong sounding name, a queenly name. Helena was the mother of the Byzantine emperor Constantine and Etheldreda was an early, saintly queen of England. [queen of Northumbria , d. at Ely, June 23, 679] This child Etheldreda would become a strong woman, a humble, loving contemplative nun, a beloved sister to us and and cherished friend to many.

Sr. Etheldreda , or Reed as she asked to be called, had a happy childhood as she enjoyed the very simple play of a farm girl, running through the meadows, climbing wooden rail fences, in fact climbing, as she said, every tree she encountered. Her good mother observed her exhaustion after this exhilarating activity and pointing her finger toward her daughter, remarked to a friend, "I don't know about this one; she's not strong." Reed shared this anecdote with us over and over!

It was from the example and practice of her parents that she internalized her Faith. Each evening, notwithstanding how fatigued her mother was from working in the fields and then doing the house duties of cooking and cleaning, she would gather the children around her for the evening Rosary.

Reed developed into a lovely young woman, working at a country club as cook. She brought home her salary to help with the expenses of the large family. Life in the country was challenging with long hours of work tilling the soil, drawing the domestic water from a well and caring for the 12 children.

Her happy personality, her stylish dress, her self-confidence attracted friends and admirers. But Reed felt the call to give herself in religious life. She searched several communities and at the Carmel of Wheeling discovered the life, a life of penance and prayer, in which she felt she could give in sacrifice to God. Soon after she entered she told her family: this is home!

Strong was the word to characterize Reed in her life as a lay sister in Wheeling. ["Lay sister" was a category of nun in past centuries; the lay sisters did not have the obligation of the Liturgy of the Hours; they were assigned more of the domestic work of the monastery.] Interspersed with her hours of prayer, she did much demanding work: cooking for the community, scrubbing rough wooden floors, doing the weekly laundry, and helping as care giver for a paralyzed Sister for 12 years.

In all of this, her cheerful personality was evident. Farm girl that she was and as she loved to describe herself, she always had a garden of flowers and vegetables. Each year as winter slowly yielded to Spring, Reed could be seen wrapped in coat and shawl, braving the wind, viewing the garden area, planning what she would do when the Spring came. She prayed easily in the garden: God was there as equally as in the Choir; the wind, the earth, the seed, the earth spoke of Him and

she responded in silent, spontaneous prayer. One might say her garden was another Chapel for her. She spoke to the birds and they seemed to chirp back to her; the chipmunk would stop his feeding and cock his ear toward the sound of her voice. All of nature spoke to her and she in her own way spoke to it.

She was very successful as a gardener, given all that she learned on the farm at home and she had enthusiasm! One day, in a moment of eagerness, she pulled up, out of the soil, a fledgling carrot to see how big it was!

With the changes in the life of the whole Church brought by Vatican Council II, and at the initiation of Sr. Christine, prioress at the time, Sister Reed became a Choir Sister, taking on the privilege and obligation of the praying of the Liturgy of the Hours. She was very faithful to this and even, in her later years when, sometimes, she was unable to pray out loud because of shortness of breath, she would appreciate so much listening to Sr. Alberta pray the Office with her.

In 1975, the Wheeling Community merged with the Elysburg Community and Reed took her place in the new community with ease as cook, as gardener, as friend. Many of our local people came to know and love her. Her wisdom given in simple, direct words -that cut through seemingly complex problems was valued. Her smile, expressive of the simplicity and love she had, won everybody's heart. Children hugged her; to some she was a grandmother figure. To some adults she was Aunt Reed. To us she was a beloved sister and confidante.

Heart disease began to slow her down but she kept on faithfully with her prayer and attendance in Choir. More than once she startled us by her appearance at Vespers after a morning of irregular heartbeat, oxygen and medication.

She loved living but she often said, "You know I can't live forever. How old am I now? I think my mother [in heaven] must be wondering where I am?"

Her mother, her father, all of her siblings preceding her in death now welcome her into their company again. By God's loving mercy she is with Him after 71 years of religious life. We thank God for her long life and vocation. She is remembered as she is on the memorial card, big broad smile, engaging eyes, expression of goodness and love.

God be praised.

[Remarks at the end of the Mass of Christian Burial, August 27, 2005]

