

Heartbeats

Servants of the
Holy Heart of Mary

January, 2018

Volume 1, Issue 5
Kankakee, Illinois

Sister Elsie Gamez 70 years

Sr. Elsie Gamez has a special wish in her heart. She wants to be a grandmother! Not just any grandmother, an “abuelita”, a loving Spanish-speaking grandmother who will listen to the hopes and dreams of some of the little ones who are part of St. John Paul II parish, Kankakee. “Doesn’t that sound lovely?,” she smiles. Elsie wishes to nurture not just little ones, but also any young person who would like someone approachable and understanding to listen to them—like the young man at the Verizon store who gave her his card and said, “Call me if you need anything – not just phone help.” Sister Elsie won’t forget him and when the time comes, he will be called and a casual

connection may lead to a meaningful friendship.

On January 25, Sr. Elsie will celebrate 70 years of vowed life as an SSCM. Five young women entered together. Elsie still keeps contact with one of them, Rosemary Clarkson, who left and married a soldier returning from World War II. Maxine Mailloux and Theresa Balac also entered with Sr. Elsie, but their paths led them elsewhere. Only she and Sister Virginia Marie Derk remained. She remembers Sister Virginia Marie as a young woman, “quiet, soft-spoken, frail. There was always a question of retaining her because of her delicate health but there was also the unspoken thought that she would someday be in leadership.”

What does she remember of her vow day in the dead of winter? Her mother was present and the other sisters told Elsie that she was “beaming with joy”. A far cry from the face her mother presented to Elsie as she often begged her to leave the convent and come home to her. On the day of her first vows, Elsie was so happy that she wished that

Sister Elsie



she “could go to bed with my habit on.” Her first assignment, after a few weeks in Beaverville, was to St. Patrick’s Academy in Momence where she had spent two year as a student.

Over the years Sr. Elsie has given service in a number of areas. One of the most extensive was in the area of Hispanic ministry in the Joliet diocese and beyond. The education she attained in social work and theology gave her a taste of where here deepest talents resided. With the hours she accomplished in Clinical Pastoral Education and the opportunities to visit psychiatric wards, it looks as though she might have made a good psychiatric social worker. That role was not in God’s plan for her. God’s Plan—Sr. Elsie has a theory: God has a plan for each of us and it is for our good. We struggle to find it and when we do, we are at peace. As far as others are concerned, “who am I to say anything?” Sr. Elsie asks,

What is the future of religious life? Sr. Elsie believes that there will always be religious, even if only a few. There may be a day when religious live at home, have their own lives and have a loose affiliation with other like-minded people who live an appropriately regulated life. Or, she muses, there might be lives comparable to some charismatic groups – like the case she once heard of where teachers came together to help the cause of some under-housed poor villagers in Mexico. They shared life in common with all its friction, prayed and worked out a common ministry using their gifts and talents.

Elsie is not a professional counselor but she does meet with 3 or 4 persons to share prayer and to help them be open to the Holy Spirit’s work within them. “I companion them. The Holy Spirit directs them,” she attests. The Prayer of St. Francis is dear to Elsie’s

heart and summarizes her view on life.



Sister Agnes Cunningham

75 years

Agnes Cunningham met the Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary early in her life. When her family moved to south Albany Avenue, Agnes (nee Mary) became a pupil at St. Gall school. Sr. Mary Cecilia was her teacher. Sr. Mary Elizabeth became her piano teacher for “25 cents a lesson.” Even after they moved to Visitation Parish, she continued to take piano lessons at St. Gall’s, beginning in 3rd grade and lasting to her first year of high school. Her mother’s illness prompted the Cunningham’s to

investigate boarding school possibilities for Agnes' younger sister, Helen. Holy Family Academy, Beaverville, was chosen. One summer Agnes visited there for a few weeks and "fell in love with the sisters and the atmosphere."

Agnes entered the Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary

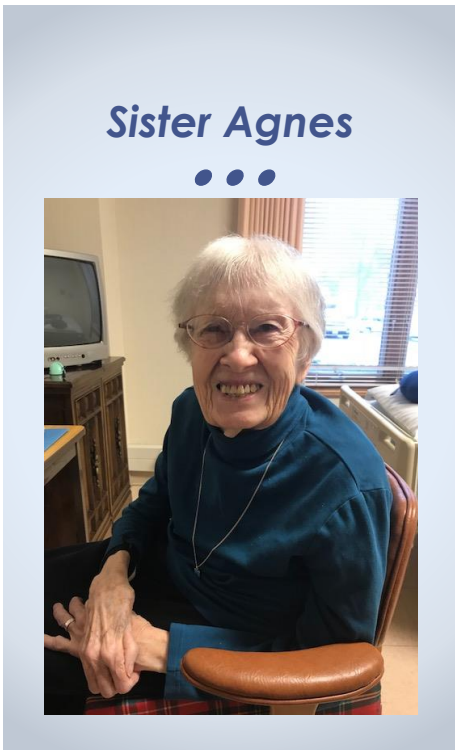
does not remember the day very clearly. Her sister, a student at HFA, was most probably there but she wonders if her parents made the journey because of the time of year and weather conditions. She knows, however, that they were at her perpetual profession.

Sister Agnes mentions Fr. Richard French, CSV, as being a special light in her life. Fr. Richard was born in the same town in England as Agnes' mother. Once introduced, he and the Cunninghams became fast friends, even occasionally vacationing together. Fr. French often drove them to see her. On one occasion, a box of candy appeared. Agnes assured her visitors that she could not have any of the candy. Fr. French promptly called the superior of the house to the parlor and achieved the permission for Agnes to partake. She remembers him saying, "Just one at a time," as he passed around the box.

Agnes has had a remarkable life, filled with much travel and great opportunities. All her adventures were made possible because Agnes had answered the call of obedience. She said "yes" to the requests of her superiors and always had the blessing of obedience to continue with her education and ministry.

Agnes studied music at DePaul University School of Music and English at St. Louis University where she received an MA in that discipline. She was set to go on for a Ph.D. in English, but obedience called her to become principal of a new foundation, St. Mary Magdalene School in Joliet, Illinois where she—who had never taught—learned to be a principal". After three years she was appointed principal of St. Gall School with its 1200 students and 25 Sisters.

Obedience again called when universities opened theological studies to



and made her first profession on January 25, 1943 along with Sisters Mary Lucilla and Ann Catherine (Rita Joan). Another young woman, June Winberry, had entered but did not remain. Agnes

women. Sisters Agnes, Virginia Marie and St. Benedict (Ruth Traman), went to study theology at Marquette University. The renowned theologian, Bernard Cook, was head of the department. Upon receiving her M.A., Agnes taught at a Mundelein College in Chicago for 3 years and headed an SSCM "juniorate" at the college.

Then followed study at the Catholic University of Lyon in France for her doctorate. Upon her return, her involvement with Newman at the U of I Champaign included overseeing the lesson plans of presenters so content would be substantial enough to receive credits for the courses. And, of course, there were the years at Mundelein Seminary, where she taught patristics and mentored many seminarians, now priests, from all over the country. As she celebrates 75 years of vowed life, Agnes believes that religious life is "not going to die or go

away. We will have what the Church needs for its situation. God will keep us prophetic and mystical." For right now, Agnes is content to work on translations, prepare presentations and delve into a good mystery book now and again. "God will take care of the rest."