

September 1, 2010

Dear Sisters, Associates, Family, and Friends

Sister Agatha Gerlits died peacefully at 1 A.M. Thursday, August 12, 2010, at Holy Family Health Care Center, Victory Noll. Sister Agatha had a pacemaker; the battery had been changed a short time ago. Recently she declined and her body was failing. Agatha expressed her wish often that God would take her home. The morning of her death the nurse had checked on her and turned her, around midnight. When they went in again, Agatha had died in her sleep and looked very peaceful. Monica was called and she and Lupita prayed at her bedside. Despite the fact that Sister Agatha was severely deaf, until recently, she came to community meals and other activities. She was unable to participate in the conversation, but she loved being among the sisters.

Sister Agatha was born in York, Nebraska, on September 10, 1913, to Edward and Grace Hittner Gerlits. She is survived by one brother, Edward Gerlits of Trinity Center, California. Four brothers preceded her in death, Lawrence, John, Sylvester and Wilfred Gerlits, and three sisters Rose Buhr, Marcella Usman, Sr. Teresa Gerlits, OLVM, preceded her in death.

Sister Agatha entered the Congregation of Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters on August 28, 1936. She made her first Profession of Vows on August 5, 1939, and Perpetual Vows on August 5, 1945 in Redlands, Calif. Sister Agatha asked that we share her vocation story in this letter. Our Sunday Visitor was a weekly visitor in her home in Mt. Angel, Ore., when Agatha was growing up. The article about the Missionary Catechists caught her attention. She was drawn each week to read about the Catechists mission to the poor in our own country. Agatha began to feel God was calling her not only to Religious life, but to be a Missionary Sister. Mt. Angel was blessed to have a Community of Benedictine priests, brothers, and sisters. One day a Benedictine Sister asked Agatha to join their Community. Agatha told the sister that she wanted to be a Missionary Sister. She was also asked by a Mercy Sister in Portland, Ore., to join their Community. However, Agatha's heart was set on being a Missionary Catechist, and she was convinced that this was God's will for her, to join the Missionary Catechists. One night Agatha had a dream. She saw Our Blessed Mother who was wearing a very large cape. Under the cape were many, many poor children. Her arms were spread out in a gesture of supplication. She heard Our Blessed Mother say to her, "Teach my children." Agatha was so impressed with this image that she knew this was a sign for her from Our Blessed Mother to teach in the Missions as a Missionary Catechist of Our Lady of Victory. She said that it was a long train ride from Oregon to Indiana, but it was worth it to become a Victory Noll Sister. Agatha said that she gives thanks to our Lord, Our Lady of Victory, our Founder, Father John Joseph Sigstein, Archbishop John Francis Noll and Our Sunday Visitor for her vocation as a Victory Noll Sister. Her adventures were many as she taught and visited among God's poor.

Agatha served in the Missions of California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Texas and Florida. Sister Agatha served as Local Superior in the Missions of Tulare, Calif., Los Banos, Calif., and Elko, Nev. Agatha's primary ministry was Religious Education, Pastoral Ministry and Social Service work with the poor in Florida, and the Imperial

Valley, Calif. Her gentle manner and great compassion toward the people who came to her for assistance was a healing presence. From 1985-1990, Sr. Agatha volunteered in El Centro, Calif., as a Pastoral Minister. She touched many lives by her ability to listen with compassion as people unburdened their hearts to her. Agatha was also a great help to Sister Maria Luisa in assisting with the media and library work at the Office of Catechetical Ministry. Another important ministry for Agatha was her seven years of living and ministering at St. Andrews Towers in Coral Springs, Fla. Here she used her listening skills as she visited the home bound. She would bring them Communion, pray with them, always reaching out in friendship and love. During this time Agatha had the companionship of her blood sister, Sister Teresa and other Victory Noll Sisters who lived and worked at St. Andrews Towers.

Sister Agatha wanted her "Colorado Adventure Story," told in her letter. One time when she was visiting her brother Ed and his wife Kathy, they invited her to go camping with them. They left on a bright sunny day and camped by the Colorado River near Parker, across the river from Lake Havasu, Ariz. Agatha was all set for a peaceful, relaxing time enjoying God's creation. Ed took the kayaks along that he had made. He decided to go across the river to the Arizona side. Agatha thought Kathy would go with him, but Ed had a different plan. He invited Agatha to go, and to row one of the kayaks across to the other side. She said that Ed had more faith in her than she had and insisted that she could accomplish the feat. The river was blue and peaceful as she eased herself into the kayak without tipping it over. She managed to follow Ed's instructions and was beginning to feel somewhat brave. However, when they reached the middle of the Colorado where the water ran swifter, Agatha began to feel scared. Ed said, "Row, row Agatha, or we will sink and I am not ready to drown." Agatha said, "We made it across and back, and what a blessing to put my feet back on good old Mother Earth again." Agatha was 72 years old at that time.

In 1997, at age 83, Sr. Agatha made a five-day Pilgrimage to New Mexico with 17 of our Victory Noll Sisters. Agatha shared that it was a special privilege to have an opportunity to make this Pilgrimage during our Jubilee year. It was a tremendous inspiration for her to visit the missions where our first Catechists planted the seeds of faith in New Mexico to untold numbers of God's people.

In 2005, Sister Agatha retired at Victory Noll. She lived in Holy Family Building, and shortly before her death moved up to third floor because of her need for additional care. During these years at Victory Noll she was a quiet, gentle, loving presence among the sisters.

On Friday evening, August 13, 2010, our sisters gathered for the Vigil Service. Sister Agatha's brother Ed and sister-in-law Kathy were unable to be here. They were very close to Agatha and had visited her during this past year. This evening they were with us in spirit. The opening hymn which Agatha chose was "Hail Mary, Gentle Women." Agatha had a great devotion to Our Blessed Mother, and loved this hymn. It was appropriate for it described Agatha who was also a gentle woman, one who shared her wisdom and her love with others. The reading she chose was John 14:1-8. In this reading Jesus tells us to have faith in Him and not let our hearts be troubled. He promises that he is going to prepare a place for us and will take us there, and show us the Father. Agatha believed Jesus' words, and in recent months longed to go with Him to this place of rest where she would meet the Father. During the sharing of memories several sisters shared their experiences with Agatha. Sister Irene said that Agatha was her superior in Powell, Wyo. She struck Irene as a very gentle and soft spoken person. She said that Agatha liked to do things on schedule. Therefore the breakfast bell would ring for them to be there at 7:05 A.M. Irene said, "I was from the country, where we would holler out breakfast, come and get it." Pat Knapp shared that Agatha was usually very quiet, except

when it called for a good laugh. She had a wholesome disposition, and was always sharing some clever anecdotes and interesting facts for us and the St. Andrews residents in Florida.” Terry Earhart told the story of a picture she has of Sister Agatha looking out over Lake Wawasee. Sister Agatha responded to Terry’s invitation to the sisters to spend a day at the Lake house. Sister Agatha was delighted to be at the Lake house, and she asked Terry to take a picture of her standing outside looking out over Lake Wawasee. Sister Agatha wanted the picture as a treasured reminder of the joy of that day. Alodia said, “Considering Sister Agatha’s many years in ministry, if we had here this evening the many people she loved and served, they would fill our chapel many times over. There would be much gratitude and love expressed to her. Knowing this, we are very grateful.” Dorothy Anne shared that when Agatha’s brother Ed and sister-in-law Kathy were visiting her several months ago, Ed brought some of his sculptures to show Agatha. She put them out in the dining room and was pleased that the sister saw and enjoyed them. Sister Alma tells a humorous story that happened when she lived with Agatha in the missions. They had borrowed a rancher’s old truck to transport some benches for the children to sit on when they taught CCD. The driver’s seat could not be adjusted, and Alma could not reach the pedals. The shift was not automatic, and Agatha did not drive a standard shift. They found a solution. Agatha sat at the controls and started the motor. Alma yelled above the noisy motor “Clutch.” Agatha pressed the clutch, and Alma moved the shift to second gear. Alma yelled “Out” and Agatha released the clutch and Alma shifted to “First.” They were on their way.

On Saturday August 14, 2010, we celebrated the Mass of Christian Burial. After the sprinkling with Holy Water, Sister Mary Jo Maes, and Sister Anne Veronica McNulty placed the Pall on the casket. Sister Rose Zita Rosonke placed the Crucifix on the casket. Sister Sharon Rose Eshleman, and Sister Alodia Carney were the Gift Bearers. In his Homily, Father Fahey shared that Agatha in Greek means good. Father said this suited Agatha Gerlits. She was a good woman. He said that Agatha knew that everything she had here was transitory and passing away. She was looking forward to something greater. She was looking forward to being with Jesus. She surrendered her life into His hands, and was praying for the joys of eternal life. Father said, Sister Agatha must have said, “Dear God you let me have such a long life, 96 years, every day was a blessing and now I thank you.” The Gospel Agatha chose was the Resurrection of Lazarus. In this story Jesus states “I am the Resurrection and the Life; whoever believes in me will never die.” What Jesus is saying is Agatha is alive and well. These are the words of Jesus. So now Sister Agatha is an intercessor in heaven for us.

After Mass we processed to the cemetery, where we laid Agatha to rest with the final prayers, blessing of the casket, and the singing of the hymn to Our Lady of Victory, “We Have a Holy Mother.” A delicious dinner to celebrate Sister Agatha’s life followed.

Agatha, you have found the Pearl of great price, and are now celebrating at the table of the Lamb. We rejoice with you, and thank you for your loving presence among us these many years.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sister Elizabeth Anderson, O.L.V.M." The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

Sister Elizabeth Anderson, OLVM  
General Secretary