SISTER RITA CELESTE GRAEF
1925-1979

Clothe yourself with heartfelt mercy, with kindness, patience. . . . Bear with one another; forgive one another. . . . Put on love, which binds the rest together.

This excerpt from Colossians was taken from one of the readings in the Liturgy of the Resurrection celebrated in Holy Rosary Chapel for Sister Rita Celeste Graef. In large measure, she, a wholehearted, youthful woman whose death occurred prematurely, lived in accord with it.

She was Catherine Rita Graef, born in Detroit on July 31, 1925, the youngest of the nine children of Catherine Mary Fisher of Hancock and Anthony Graef of Detroit, Michigan. When she was four years old, her father died and she grew up in the affectionate concern of her mother and sisters and brothers. Even as a little girl, she thought that the attention she received should be given to others. Consequently, after school she lined up the pre-school children of the neighborhood on the front steps of her home and taught them something of what she had learned at St. Martin School that day.

Her call to the vowed life also came early. When she completed her first year at Dominican High School, she announced her desire to register at the Prep School (then an experiment in the Adrian Dominican Congregation) in the hope that her entrance into the novitiate would be hastened. There was relief in her home when Sister Edmund Harrison, at that time principal of Dominican, urged her to complete her high school education.

A member of the charter class, she was graduated in 1944, but in deference to her family after the death of their mother, she waited until her 21st year. During the interim she worked at Chrysler's in Detroit.

Meanwhile she had kept in touch with Sister Siena Tehan and other teachers. Among them the consensus was that she was ready-made for Adrian to the extent that one remarked on the day of burial:

Every one of us at Dominican recommended her, whether we had taught her or otherwise. She had herself together, and embodied so much of our spirit in those pioneer years.

She received the habit on August 13, 1946, and professed her vows on August 14, 1947. Known then as Sister Rita Celeste, she went to St. Celestine, Elmwood Park, Illinois, on her first teaching assignment. The following year she was sent with Sisters Incarnata Hlavac, Francis Gertrude Nolan and Marie Arlene Berg to open Guardian Angels School in Clawson, Michigan. The annalist of that year (1948) has left us a glimpse of the beginning:

In the midst of brick, cement, nails, insects, men, women, children and ceremony, the sisters found their way to their contemporary quarters in two classrooms on the second floor. . . . Registration and classes were held under trees, each sister

claiming a tree. When the rain fell we ran to the church. We were well into October before we had a classroom, and then only with workmen still drilling and pounding.

From that period, Sister Marie Arlene recalled Sister Rita Celeste's life-giving optimism: young but ready for rough times; hungry for apple pie but flexible. "No apples? Let's use pears!"

Her next assignment took her overseas to the Dominican Republic. This meant entering a country unknown to her, and dwelling among people of a different culture and language. In that era, a knowledge of anthropology in the background of the one sent was accidental. Nor did one go speaking Spanish "trippingly on the tongue." In later years, Sister Rita Celeste was to look upon this mission as most difficult, but also most valuable as a special time for risk-taking growth. She never wanted it out of her life, for her whole being had been opened to a new and wider view, a new understanding of the charity of Christ among people who reflected it.

At the end or six years in the Dominican Republic, she taught in Michigan five years: two at St. Mary, St. Clair, and three at Sacred Heart, Bad Axe. Memories of days in the Thumb have been fondly recalled by Sister Charlotte Francis Moser. In Sister Rita Celeste, she found a vigorous enthusiastic friend who liked to roller skate and dance, but who also wanted to sit down to talk quietly about deeper and more complex matters, especially those she hesitated to discuss in a group.

After five years in Michigan, she was surprised with an appointment to Buffalo, New York. It was here that the mother of one of the sisters identified her as "the rock," a fitting epithet.

Her next assignment to our Lady of Loretto, Hometown, Illinois, was a prelude to her appointment as principal-superior to Sacred Heart, Munising. Here with Sisters Charlotte Moser and Jeanine Boivin she found community, prayer, and apostolate–a "shining hour" that came to a hard end in 1970 when the changes erupting from Vatican II struck. Sister shortage, with its subsequent retrenchment and school-closing, was being faced. The bell tolled for Sacred Heart School. For those three sisters, it was like lowering a live body into a grave. Sister Jeanine remembered the "strength of Sister Rita Celeste in the confusing event at the time"; and Sister Charlotte Francis, "the calm manner in which she handled the situations that arose."

With a clearer understanding of the mystery of what appears to be defeat, she took to the road, this time to St. Paul, Grosse Pointe, where she taught four years before surrendering to an invitation to teach at St. Lawrence O'Toole in Oakland, California. She was anticipating her fifth year there when the cry went out for a principal at St. John in Lemon Grove. Never one to turn her back on a need for which she was qualified, she responded. In the placement form for 1978, she listed herself as an elementary school principal, but she added that she was "educator, faith facilitator, team worker, people person, bridge builder, counselor." In self-evaluation papers she did not claim to be these. On the contrary, they were ideals–a large part of her constant inner struggle. She wanted to be a listener; "yet I find it so hard to listen to a disagreeable person talking about a disagreeable subject." She wanted to be honest in a confrontation; "but with some people I find this scary."

In notes from her meditations she wrote:

> *My meaningfulness is here and now. It may be enough if I am of value to some one today . . . enough if I can make a difference by listening. . . . I must not be afraid of my problems. . . . I must acknowledge them, and know that often there are no solutions. . . . I must let them die. Others will take their place. I am thankful to God that He is with me in my strife and I must make Him known through mercy, patience, kindness. These help to add up to love*
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> *If I could give a present from my heart to people who come to me, it would be the peace of Christ. . . .*

In one or her last conversations with Sister Helen Clare Doyle, a long-time friend, she said:

> *I am a present person. . . . Not that I disregard the past. I respect and cherish it, but I do not worry about my mistakes. I give my weakness along with my strength to God. I have seen myself grow in these years. . . . I want to use the present moment to the fullest.*

She lived to the fullest on the last day or her life, September 13, 1979. She visited the children in each classroom and prayed with them; she spent time with parents and teachers; she received the Eucharist with her community and other friends in the late afternoon. After the liturgy she had an unexpected drop-in visit with her brother Roger. Then she asked Sister Helen Clare to go on an errand with her. They stopped for a hamburger and milk shake, and were back in the convent a little after seven o'clock. She was in a teasing mood when she was stricken suddenly with pain. An ambulance brought her to the hospital, where two cardiac specialists awaited her. Death, however, was at hand. She was taken in a massive heart attack.

As happens in post-mortem conversations, friends remembered her thoughts on death. A sister from another Congregation wrote, "We spoke of death frequently. She said that she was ready and wanted to go quickly."

To others she had said that she was afraid of some things like speaking in public and hurting people by being too blunt, but she was not afraid of death, for she trusted completely in the Lord. Though not quite in line with that of the Colossians, it can be assumed that Sister Rita Celeste would have liked this prayer given by Sister Jeanine on the day of burial:

> *Lord Jesus, we commend to You one of our best. Remember, Lord, that Sister Rita Celeste likes Shedd's Old English Sauce and red, white and blue shoes. She has a warm heart, and she will be missed.*

