

Sisters of St. Francis

o f M a r y I m m a c u l a t e

When Sister Rita Mandella was asked how she wanted to be remembered, she said, "I loved God, my family, my Franciscan Sisters, and friends." Indeed, the theme she chose for her funeral was from 1 Corinthians 16:14: "Your every act should be done with love." Rita will also be remembered for being easy to tease and play tricks on, a good sense of humor, a beautiful voice, very detailed and organized, a good worker, and loved babies! She died on September 2, 2023, at Ascension Villa Franciscan Place in Joliet.

Rita Ann was born on December 14, 1937, to Sylvester and Anna Mandella and was the fifth of six children. As a small child, she saw her two older brothers join the armed services during World War II. Bernard, at first missing in action, was then a prisoner of war in Germany until the war ended. Gene traveled on an expedition to Antarctica with Admiral Byrd where their Navy ship was punctured by an iceberg. When a documentary was made about the incident, Gene was cast in the movie and Rita went to the theater over and over again just to see him.

Rita grew up in St. Bernard's parish in Joliet. When she was in the sixth grade, while vacuuming a carpet, she suddenly knew she wanted to be a nun. As a high school student she entered St. Francis Preparatory, and by her senior year she was accepted as a postulant. One year later, as a novice, she took the name Sister Mary Carmel in honor of the Carmelite pastor of her home parish.

In 1957, with only one year of college and having just finished the novitiate, Rita, like so many Sisters at that time, was immediately sent out to teach. It was the beginning of an impressive education ministry that would continue through several college degrees, years of teaching in elementary schools followed by thirty-nine years as a school principal, service on numerous diocesan and community committees and tireless and dedicated outreach that not only earned her many awards but, upon retirement, even a Joliet street named after her: Sister Rita Mandella O.S.F. Drive.

After teaching in grades one to six in Chicago, Romeoville, and Joliet schools (even being part of opening the new St. Andrew's School in Romeoville), Sister Rita began her long affiliation with St. Jude's in Joliet as their principal from 1970 to 2009. In 1987, while filling out a ministry ratification form for her Franciscan community, Rita responded to the question: "What quote from the Ministry section of our Constitutions is reflective of your thoughts on your ministry?" She wrote, "In ministering to others, we ourselves are enriched: in standing by those who suffer, we learn compassion." She was also

Alleluia!



Sister Rita Mandella, OSF

asked to choose a personally meaningful quote from the Constitutions related to Community and she chose, "We treasure one another as we share our possessions and talents, our joys, sorrows, ideals—our very selves. We recognize that diversity among us marks the action of the Spirit and serves both to enrich us and expand our ministry to others."

At the time Rita responded to that question, she had been living for one year with Barbara Bennett, a teacher at St. Jude's, a former member of the Joliet Franciscans, and an eventual Franciscan Associate. They continued to live together, sharing ministry and life, until Barbara died one year ago. Her hope had been to care for Rita during her final years with memory loss, but Barb's sudden and devastating diagnosis of advanced cancer meant that God had other plans.

Looking back on Sister Rita's life one can see why, in 2010, Lewis University presented her with the De La Salle Award for Service and Leadership in the Community "for her unconquerable spirit, extraordinary concern for others, and highly effective achievements as a religious educator and a community leader." She had served for thirty years on the Diocesan School Evaluation Team and also on numerous other committees and boards. She set up an alliance between the University of St. Francis and St. Jude School with a theme of partnership and reciprocal services in the spirit of St. Francis. She served on the Joliet Junior College Child Development Committee and the Joliet Catholic Academy Board of Directors and was on the Family Counseling Agency Board of Directors.

When Sister Rita retired at age 72 from her role as principal at St. Jude's, she was the last Joliet Franciscan serving as principal or teacher at Catholic grade schools in the Joliet area. Her ministry did not stop however. She continued to do outreach for the parish, ministering to the sick in hospitals, nursing homes, and the homebound.

Sister Rita Mandella, OSF

December 14, 1937—September 2, 2023

Celebrating her 50th Jubilee in 2007, Rita said she was intrigued by the song *Standing on the Shoulders* of the ones who came before her. She said, "May the ones who follow me be able to stand on my shoulders and spread the love of Jesus." That's a tall order, Rita. We thank you for all you have been

and all you have done and for your three passions in life: loving God and your Franciscan Sisters, loving your family, and loving, caring for and guiding children. May Jesus, whose love you spread, receive you warmly. Alleluia! Alleluia!

<i>Born:</i>	December 14, 1937
<i>Parents:</i>	Sylvester J. Mandella and Anna Legan
<i>Postulancy:</i>	September 6, 1954
<i>Novitiate:</i>	August 13, 1955
<i>First Profession:</i>	August 12, 1957
<i>Final Profession:</i>	August 13, 1960
<i>Entered New Life:</i>	September 2, 2023

Ministry History

1957-1959	Teacher: Grade 2, Sacred Heart, Englewood, Chicago, Illinois
1959-1964	Teacher: Grades 1, 2 and 3, St. Andrew, Romeoville, Illinois
1964-1966	Teacher: Grades 1 and 2, Guardian Angel Home, Joliet, Illinois
1966-1968	Teacher: Grade 1, St. Raymond, Joliet
1968-1970	Teacher: Grades 5 and 6, Holy Family, Joliet
1970-1973	Principal: St. Jude, Joliet
1973-1975	Principal/Aide: St. Jude, Joliet
1975-2005	Principal: St. Jude, Joliet
2005-2007	Principal/Director of Religious Education
2007-2009	Principal: St. Jude, Joliet
2009-2010	Pastoral Care: St. Jude Parish, Joliet
2010-2015	Parish Outreach: St. Jude Parish, Joliet
2015-2020	JCA Board of Directors, Education Curriculum Committee
2020-2023	Prayer and Presence, Our Lady of Angels Retirement Home and Ascension Villa Franciscan, Joliet

<i>Interment:</i>	Section 8, Lot 341, Grave 5, Resurrection Cemetery, Romeoville, Illinois
<i>Predeceased by:</i>	Her parents, Sylvester J. Mandella and Anna Legan, her brothers Bernard, Eugene, and her sister Elizabeth Ruettiger
<i>Survived by:</i>	Her sister Linda O'Leary and her sister -in-law, Norma (Marizza) Mandella, many nieces and nephews

Rest in Peace, Sister Rita!