

In Loving Memory of Sister Joseph Therese (Patricia Anne Fuller) Her personal journey with Christ to Calvary

One thing I ask of the Lord; this I seek: To dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the Lord's beauty, to visit his temple. (Psalm 27:4)

July 16 marks the sixth anniversary of the death of Sister Joseph Therese, aka Patricia Anne Fuller, the last of the Contemplative Sisters of the Our Lady of Nativity Convent in New Riegel, Ohio. She was described by someone who knew her as ***one in whom there is no guile***. How true! Patricia was an only child, born August 2, 1941, Feast of Our Lady of the Angels (Assisi), to the late Jesse and Bernice Fuller in Chicago, Illinois. Sister entered her eternal home on July 16, 2016, feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, at the Regina Health Center, a faith-based facility operated by the Sisters of Charity Health System in Richfield, Ohio, where she was cared for with a respect so long overdue her.

Growing up in Chicago, Patricia often went into the streets to do works of mercy, something very natural to her. Although she had no college education, she was fearless in pursuing what she understood was her mission in life. As a young adult, she had entered the Poor Clares in Greenville, North Carolina. She spent six years there. Shortly before making final vows, her Superior exhorted Patricia to return to the world; the superior felt God had something else in mind for her. Indeed, He did! To meet and work with Sister Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil for the cause of Our Lady of America. After a return trip home to Chicago, Patricia went to work at the convent in Maria Stein, Ohio, which had been the motherhouse of the Sisters of the Precious Blood from 1887 until it moved to Dayton, Ohio in 1923. Over time, the convent, having been enlarged several times, became two separate entities, a retreat center and the Shrine, called The House of Relics, as its houses 1,200 relics of the Apostles, the True Cross, early martyrs and more than 800 saints, the second largest collection in the United States.

Sister Mary Florecita Bidart, a member of the active order of the Sisters of the Precious Blood, sought to start a contemplative branch within the active order for twenty-five years. Archbishop John T. McNicholas, Archbishop Karl J. Alter, Bishop Joseph Mary Marling, C.P.P.S., Bishop Paul F. Leibold, and Bishop George J. Rehring all encouraged Sister Florecita to pursue her dream. Finally, in 1954, Rome approved the cloister and Bishop Rehring welcomed it into the Toledo diocese. In 1957 Sister Mary Florecita and Sister Mary Leo left the active order and entered the Benedictine style cloister in the lower level of the Our Lady of Nativity Convent in New Riegel, Ohio. In 1958, Sister Mary Ephrem Neuzil realized her own dream for a contemplative life and entered the cloister. In 1965, Bishop Rehring, who had jurisdiction over the convent, personally went to Rome to set the cloister up as a papal enclosure directly under Rome's Congregation for Religious, with its own rule and its own novitiate to ensure its

continued growth. Bishop Joseph Mary Marling, C.Pp.S. (Precious Blood), who officiated at the enclosure ceremony, cautioned the cloistered sisters that the active order was **too active** to appreciate a contemplative way of life. He hinted at trouble down the road.

The cloistered sisters supported themselves with rug weaving and a printing business. In 1965, Patricia Anne Fuller was accepted as a postulant in the cloister, the first entrant directly from the world, not from the active order. She took the name Sister Joseph Therese upon her profession of vows. After Vatican II, the active order took on a modernization program that conflicted with the contemplative sisters desire to retain a strict Benedictine monastic life style: habit, grill, seclusion and all. Irreconcilable differences grew. When the active order took away their novitiate, any real chance for survival or growth ended. Sister Mildred wrote her spiritual director how one superior was determined to turn them into just another active house in the community. That could not be, Sister said. If so, they would have to leave. A group of priests and religious sisters who had studied the history of the cloister, advised the cloistered sisters to separate from the active order if they wished to retain their contemplative way of life.



On February 9, 1978, just twenty-one years after they had begun, the seven contemplative sisters informed their superiors in the active order of their intent to separate. They then wrote to Pope Paul VI, asking for that separation while retaining their vows. They submitted a new rule of life as The Contemplative Sisters of the Indwelling Trinity, formulated by Sister Florecita and Sister Mildred. With no word from Rome and the tensions with the active order increasing, four of the seven abandoned the group (3 in bottom row and second from left on top row), reducing its number to three. Shortly thereafter Sister Florecita's weak heart gave out and she passed away, leaving only Sister Mildred (far right top row) and Sister Joseph Therese (far left top row) remaining. Eventually Rome did respond and said, with only two sisters left, it could not grant canonical status to the new group. The cloister would simply cease to exist. Sadly, these two joined a plethora of others throughout the history of the Church, alienated and exiled because of their fidelity to a higher call--total abandonment to God's holy Will, no matter what!

The Our Lady of Nativity convent was soon sold by the active order, leaving the two sisters to fend for themselves. The printing press and loom the cloister had procured with donations to make a living were taken from them, as was a piece of property gifted to the cloister by a priest from Michigan. A rescript from Rome gave the two remaining sisters two choices: return to the active order, or sign final exclaustation papers which would completely separate them from the Sisters of the Precious Blood. Sister Mildred said there was no way they could ever return to an order that had so

misunderstood and opposed their contemplative way of life; they chose separation. Under the direction of the humble and holy priest, Fr. Edmund Mormon, they made private vows and continued to live a quiet contemplative life as an association of the faithful with a religious purpose in a secluded place in Fostoria, Ohio, which became the Our Lady of America Center from which they continued to promote Our Lady of America's cause. Fr. Mormon served as their spiritual director until his untimely death from an auto accident in February of 1986. Thereafter Father Walter Abbott, S.J. would guide them through their struggles until the time of Sister Mildred's death.

When Sister Mildred died on January 10, 2000, she died in exile, a solitary, surrendered soul. She entrusted her mission to Sister Joseph Therese, urging her to protect the integrity of the messages at all costs and warning her that "they" would be coming after her. With her parents deceased, Sister Mildred gone, now separated from the active order, Sister Joseph Therese, aka Patricia Anne Fuller, was alone in the world, easy prey for enterprising people who wanted to take over the devotion. Several volunteers gained her absolute trust, and then betrayed her. Sister Joseph Therese, Patricia Anne, was steadfast in protecting the integrity of the messages of Our Lady of America, but her efforts were no match against the power of big money and the favor it can buy in high places within the Church. Sixteen years after Mildred Neuzil's death, Patricia's health began to fail, understandably so, and friends took her into their own home and cared for her until she had to be placed in hospice in the Regina Health Center where she died, her dignity restored. Some may judge these sisters as renegades, unholy, fakes because of all the irregular things that happened to them, but those who knew them sensed the extraordinary victimhood and configuration to the Passion of Jesus in the alienation and abandonment they were called to endure. The lives of Sister Florecita, Sister Mildred and Sister Joseph Therese are utter testimony to the truth of Christ's words:

If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you. ... If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. (Jn 15:18021)

This little trinity of sisters, faithful to their contemplative call, spent their lives as an act of oblation for the cause of Our Lady of America and for the salvation of souls. Our Lady has entrusted the final part of the sisters' mission to all the US Bishops, calling on them to be faithful to her request for our Patronal Church, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. Everything about this message focuses on our Patronal Church as its center. Our Lady of America must be enthroned there where the seat of her authority and influence over our land resides. She is our Patroness as Our Lady of America, the Immaculate Virgin. She herself said she wishes to be honored there under that title. Furthermore, it is up to all of us to

make the sufferings of these sisters bear fruit for America, for our Church, and for all the world with our own holy lives and deeper union with the Indwelling Trinity, ready to pick up our own crosses, no matter what the cost, to follow Jesus to Calvary as they did. Father Walter Abbott, editor of the Vatican II documents who directed the sisters after the deaths of Archbishop Leibold and Fr. Mormon, told them that the more a person's life is configured to the Passion of Jesus, the more one can trust in the holiness of that person. We trust in the holiness of these three sisters because their lives were indeed deeply configured to the crucified Christ, dearly beloved Son of the living God.

Following is "The Act of Oblation" prayer the cloistered sisters composed, prayed and lived ever so deeply. May they rest in peace.

Act of Oblation

O my God, I surrender myself entirely and unconditionally to Thee, my Sovereign Master, my Redeemer, and my Sanctifier. Dispose of me as Thou wilt. I cast myself into the arms of thy loving Providence, abandoning myself unreservedly to Thy Sacred Action.

From Thy Hands, O my God, I accept all that Thou mayest send me, whether agreeable or painful.

O my God, help me to acquire that essential disposition of soul so necessary to a surrendered soul, that in all my cares and needs I may manifest a boundless confidence in Thee and that at every moment of my life I may be ready to sacrifice to thee whatever Thou wilt ask of me, no matter how much it may cost.

Mary, my Mother, help me to love God with my whole heart and soul, to do in all things His holy and adorable Will, and to accept everything from His Hands with the simplicity and trust of a child. (With ecclesiastical approval)

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"So that your fruit may grow and be perfect, I prune you by means of trials: disgrace, insults, mockery, abuse, and reproach ... and with words and actions, as it pleases my goodness to grant to each of you as you are able to endure. For trial is a sign that shows whether the soul's charity is perfect or imperfect." (God to St. Catherine of Siena)