

Sister Ruth Elsbernd – Sister Mary Bernette

Born March 19, 1927, at home on the family farm near Festina, Iowa

Joined Convent of Mount St. Francis, Dubuque, Iowa August 25, 1945

August 12, 1948 Took vows to serve the Catholic Church as a Franciscan Sister

Her parents, John Leo and Martha Mary Kuennen Elsbernd, believed in Catholic Education and sacrificed to have Ruth attend all four years of high school at Immaculate Conception Academy, Dubuque, Iowa as a resident student. (This school has been changed into a spirituality center, and renamed Shalom.) Since Ruth had made first grade at age 5 staying with her Kuennen grandparents to attend the little country school near the Smallest Church before attending St. Mary's in Festina. Ruth stayed home a year after grade school to help on the farm.

After high school, Ruth entered the convent at Mount St. Francis, Dubuque, on August 25, 1945, wanting to be a teacher and be like her vivacious fun-loving aunt Sister Cecelia Kuennen. She received the religious name Sister Mary Bernette, but later changed back to her Baptismal name. After professing vows of Gospel poverty, celibate love, and obedience, on August 12, 1948, Ruth taught at Remsen, Iowa and various schools in Illinois and Minnesota. She also served as parish organist at Mapleton, Iowa while teaching 7th and 8th grades five years, and at Larchwood while teaching English I, II, III, IV, Latin, Glee Club, and Choir. Doing church work and teaching religion to those not attending a Catholic school were often other assignments along with teaching.

Having taught all grades, when the need arose, Sister Ruth was assigned to high schools in Iowa; Larchwood, Granville and Ossian. She taught all science and math and English as needed. Then courageously she took on the need for a college chemistry department at Northeast Iowa Community College in Peosta, Iowa. It was not too far to drive there from Mount St. Francis daily. Sister Ruth left a fine department and well equipped lab built during her five years there.

She lived at home in Festina when her mother needed assistance with dad's advanced Parkinson's disease. During her time back home in Festina, Sister Ruth taught part time at St. Lucas, Iowa. Other services included later serving as live-in caregiver for a diabetic couple where the wife had had a stroke and bringing them daily Communion. Previously, Clinical Pastoral Education enabled serving as chaplain at Xavier Hospital and St. Francis Home for a time, and being a librarian for Holy Trinity School in Dubuque.

After retiring at age 70, Sister Ruth served as an organist for the Carmelites in Eldridge, Iowa. She served as their musician for nearly seven years, and then helped play the organ back at Mount St. Francis. She is grateful for the piano lessons her parents provided as a child, and for the Master of Science degree her community enabled. Painting and reading are hobbies in her contemplative life at Clare House.

Our Lady of Seven Dolors in Festina was her home parish and is where Sister Ruth received and grew in her faith. Her third grade teacher, Sister Rita, prepared the children so well for First Communion; that Ruth forever remembered the deep experience when Jesus came to her. Sister had said, "When Father holds up the host on a little gold plate, pretend you are a little host aside of it, and offer yourself to God too. And when Father pours wine into the chalice, and then a few drops of water into the wine, you could never separate them again. That's how close you'll be to Jesus."

St. Mary School in Festina provided an excellent education with two grades in one room, taught by the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, and inspired Sr. Ruth during her many years of continued learning and teaching. The Pastor, Father Rubly, faithfully came to school weekly to teach religion all during Sr. Ruth's eight grades at Festina. God, religion, prayer were the center of life in her family and in the parish. Fasting was required from midnight on and, the early first Mass enabled people to receive Communion, which was not offered in the later second Mass. Since there was no bulletin at that time, the second Mass had the announcements. Because her Dad, wanted both, the whole family went to both Masses each Sunday, and often also to Vespers and Benediction in the afternoon. Her family held great respect for Sister Cecilia Kuennen, her mother's sister, and for SVD Father Alphonse Elsbernd, her Dad's brother, a pioneer missionary in Ghana, Africa, for 32 years, also influenced Ruth's decision to give her life to God as a religious.

In 2016, at Our Lady of Seven Dolors, Ruth with her sister Colette Kuhn and all her nieces and nephews from many states, celebrated with the parish at Mass and in the social Parish Center in Festina, her seventy years as a Franciscan Sister of Dubuque.

Attached St. Ruth's Mother Story

Parish History by Martha Kuennen Elsbernd

(written in 1987)

My name is Martha Elsbernd. Although my address is Calmar, I live in the small town of Festina. I am a member of Our Lady of Seven Dolors parish in Festina, Iowa. My age is 85. From childhood on, Sunday, the Lord's Day, was always special in our family. There were no gravel or blacktop roads in those horse and buggy days. There were no Saturday evening Masses, but instead on Sundays we had an 8 o'clock and a 10 o'clock Mass. When I was young, no work was done on Sundays. There was much visiting, and we kept the Lord's Day as a day of rest. Because we had no cars in those days, we had to allow more time to get to church. All the women had to have some type of head covering, and no matter how hot it was, men dressed in suitcoats for church. Sermons were given in German and only at the second Mass. There were no announcements in the first Mass and no Communion in the second Mass, so if we wanted to receive Holy Communion and also hear the announcements since there was no parish bulletin, we'd go to both Masses on Sundays. The Mass and all singing was in Latin. I belonged to the choir of young ladies, and we practiced almost weekly. We sang the Gloria and Credo. Today it is recited most of the time rather than sung. There was no congregational singing as there is now. In the afternoon on Sundays, we'd go back to church for vespers, also prayed and sung in Latin. Later on, Benediction often followed the second Mass.

An important annual event, which I looked forward to, was our celebration of Corpus Christi. Girls all dressed in white, and they were privileged to spread flowers for our Eucharistic King. We wore wreaths on our heads. All the people prayed the rosary as a long procession wended its way around the whole large school playground. At three permanent small chapels spaced on the way, the congregation stopped for Benediction at each. It was really a festive community celebration of our faith in the real presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. The young men were in a group, the young ladies in another group, and the children, too, had their special place in the long procession. Married couples did not go as a group but went either with the men's group or the women's group. Each segment of the procession had its own special banner. Four men carried a beautiful canopy under the center of which Father walked carrying the Lord in a golden monstrance. Preceding Father was a long procession of altar boys dressed in black cassocks and white surplices. The last ones were dressed in red cassocks and were swinging censers of incense in adoration of our Lord. I loved to carry my basket of flowers and scatter the petals to show Jesus my love and to make a beautiful path for him. Whatever flowers were in season were used. Sometimes it was the petals of peonies and sometimes it was some other seasonal flower. One of my memories is of watching Father Andrew Rubly, our pastor for 40 years, ascend the elevated pulpit each time he gave a sermon. One side of the pulpit fit against the wall and on each of the other sides were statues of the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The pulpit extended somewhat into the nave of our church to enable us to hear better since in those days loudspeakers or microphones were unheard of.

Now, I'd like to tell you about going to school my first day. I will never forget it. Since everyone was Catholic in our neighborhood, we all went to the Catholic school, an old wooden building between the sisters' convent and the church. The day before my first day in first grade (no kindergarten then) which was a Sunday, my dad showed me which road to take and asked me if I'd know the way tomorrow. When dad was with me, it seemed easy to know but the next morning, as I was walking the two miles all alone, when I got to the crossroads, I wasn't sure which way to go. I felt afraid and unsure. Had I chosen the road to my left, it would have taken me to Fort Atkinson rather than to Festina. But eventually, guided by my guardian angel, I chose the right direction. Imagine going the first day of school all alone and walking! There were no school buses in those days. When I got as far as where Ron Buchheit now lives, I could see the tall church steeple of our Festina church, and I was so glad because then I knew I was going the right road. There were no school lunches at that time so each child carried his own little lunch pail, bringing lunch packed in the morning or the evening before. Walking to school was the usual way. Everybody walked, some as far as four miles. Everybody went to the

Catholic school which was a wooden framed building having two rooms on the first floor and two on the second floor. Each room had two classes or grades and the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration from La Crosse staffed our school with four teachers. There were six sisters in all. One was the music teacher and the other was the housekeeper for the other sisters. I liked school, and I really treasured the holy pictures the sisters gave me. To this day, I have saved them.

Because we had only horses for transportation to go to school in winter, many children were boarded at the sisters' house. We'd go there on Monday and go home on Friday. We only had two big bedrooms, one for the boys and one for the girls. We had one long counter where each of us lined up with a wash basin. Sometimes in the winter, there was ice in the water in our basins. At one time, there were 40 children staying and the housekeeping sister fed us all. People would bring things like meat and potatoes that would help provide for us. There were no snowplows so farmers helped each other shovel snow and make the road passable with sled and horses. Sometimes they cut fences and the sleds went through the fields. Children boarded also with other residents in Festina during the school days of winter.

Customs surrounding weddings also have changed. Before I was married, there was only one instruction from our pastor, Father Rubly, rather than a series or a Pre-Cana conference or weekend, as is now the custom. On October 15, 1924, I, Martha Kuennen, was married to John Elsbernd, also from Our Lady of Seven Dolors parish at Festina. We were married at an early 8:30 am Nuptial Mass. A noon or later Mass was unheard of, probably because of the Eucharistic fast from midnight on and it being a real hardship. Instead of three couples of attendants often found now at weddings, John and I had two attendants, my sister and John's brother. The reception was held at my parent's family farm home. I sewed my own wedding dress, made the wedding cake, and arranged the bridal bouquet. The machine shed was extended and the floor laid for our wedding dance that evening. Last October we observed our 62nd wedding anniversary. Two months later, John died on December 10, 1986. Born March 4, 1897, my husband was almost 90 years old, and both of us have been lifetime members of this parish. We are grateful for our Catholic heritage and have tried to pass on the treasure of our Catholic faith to our five living children and our grandchildren and great grandchildren.

In 1932, our old school's lack of any conveniences and its antiquated heating stove in each room, plus wanting to provide for a future high school, motivated the parish to build the present brick building. In our old school we sat two in a desk, boys on one side of the room and girls on the other side. Now, only single desks are used and they are mobile rather than screwed down to runners to keep them stationary. There were no indoor facilities, and we had a pail of water from which we could get a drink from a common dipper. Solemn Communion was received at age 13. My First Communion was made in third grade. All children who had made their First Communion went to Confession once a month on a Friday, and the only time we could receive Communion was on Saturday, the following day. It was hard not to have a drink of water or eat from midnight on. The children all sat in church together in the front pews ahead of the sisters, boys on St. Joseph's side and girls on the Blessed Virgin's side. There was no looking around in church, no whispering, and everybody read from his or her prayer book or prayed a rosary. Anyone who received Communion always stayed after Mass and prayed five or ten minutes in thanksgiving. The faith of parishioners was deep and even though our new school was built during depression years, people cooperated and sacrificed when money was scarce in order to pay our parish expenses.

Regarding entertainment, times have really changed too. We got much enjoyment in our home playing records on the phonograph. Neighbors and friends would get together in our home and have a good time singing and dancing. We played piano and violin and sometimes accordion. There was more home entertainment in those days. We had good records and enjoyed them. This was long before radio or TV invaded homes or changed entertainment into oftentimes passive receptivity rather than active initiative. I fondly recall the friendships of our home entertainment days, and I still love music and I love to sing.

Another custom that has changed is the old custom of paying pew rent in our parish church. Years ago, each family actually appropriated a particular pew as theirs in church, and each family occupied its own pew for Mass or vespers. Pew rent was paid twice a year. There was no box of envelopes for Sunday collections, and we put in loose money for Sunday offertory offerings. Pew rent continued until 1957 when envelopes were introduced for our contribution for the parish budget. Years ago, we received Communion less frequently; however, there were long lines for Confessions and especially before big feast days. Parish expenses were met through the help of card parties sponsored by the Rosary Society. Raffles were held on quilts and needlework and for other donated articles. The parish put on dinners. Now the parish festival is held every other year on the first Sunday in September. Expenses are met with income from breakfasts, fish fries, dinners, or other fundraising project at various times.

The faith of parishioners was immersed with periodic Missions and annual Forty Hours Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. School children prayed during the noon hours, and families were scheduled for hours of adoration according to their names alphabetically. At one time, our family, children and all, kept a monthly 2-3:00 am Adoration Hour in our home in honor of the Sacred Heart. First Fridays, in honor of the Sacred Heart, and First Saturdays in honor of Mary, were kept special with Mass, Holy Communion, and special prayer as the years went on. Lent was kept with strict fasting. In church, statues were all covered during Holy Week with purple until Easter. Fasting ended at 12 noon on Holy Saturday. Lenten devotions gathered the parish community together every Wednesday evening. On Friday afternoons, we prayed the Stations of the Cross in church. Our Lady of Seven Dolours parish was the first parish in the Archdiocese, with the exception of the Dubuque cathedral, to have a resident pastor. A beautiful custom observed for many years but no longer continued was the ringing of the bells in church for the Angelus each morning, noon, and evening. People would stop whatever they were doing and pray the Angelus commemorating the Words becoming Flesh. Our church bells still ring when a parishioner dies. The bells toll the age of the person.

Reverend William Kunsch was installed as pastor of our Lady of Seven Dolours parish in August 1960. Father Kunsch worked hard to improve our parish buildings. Changes that happened during his pastorate included the high school being transferred to Ossian De Sales and the renovation of the church, school, rectory, and convent. The kitchens in the school and rectory were modernized. The church sanctuary was opened and a new lower ceiling was installed. A new side altar was installed in the west wing as part of the shrine to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Statues, stations, and mission cross were all redone. After re-plastering, the entire church was carpeted. A beautiful symbol of the seven swords piercing the heart of Mary is on the ceiling of the entrance of our church of Our Lady of Seven Dolours. During the renovations, church services were held in the school chapel. When our parish church was remodeled, both men and women worked in helping refinishing of the pews, painting, cleaning, electrical wiring, and carpeting. Many donations were given towards the improvements. The altar, a beautiful mahogany one, is very special to me because that was the special donation my husband John and I gave. On the mahogany altar, which is our gift and now facing the people for Mass, the Last Supper sculpture which had been on the old altar, is now also incorporated.

John and I have lived in this parish all our lives and have been lifetime members of our Lady of Seven Dolours parish at Festina. All of our six children have been baptized in our parish church either the same day they were born (all at home) or the day after. The baptismal sponsors have been special guests as each child made his or her First Communion and have been specially honored at each one's Confirmation and wedding. There have been only Catholics living in our neighborhood. Catholic schooling was so important to John and me that in spite of it being in the midst of the depression, we saved and lived as frugally as we could so that each of our children could be sent to a boarding Catholic high school. One of our daughters is a Dubuque Franciscan Sister, Sister Ruth Elsbernd, OSF. Her annual retreats in a Catholic high school assisted her in responding to the call to religious life. Priests and sisters were highly esteemed in our family, and John has a brother priest and I have a sister who is a Franciscan nun. Always our faith was the heart and center of our lives and of every decision. Our social life also centered about our parish community, and on Sundays we looked forward to worshipping

with and socializing and visiting our parish friends. Festina people still stop to visit with each other after they leave church both on weekdays and on Sundays.

Wholehearted congregational singing continues to characterize our parish. One of our organists is a self-trained parishioner, Mrs. Eleanor Hackman. Probably our parish, like many other parishes, was touched a bit by gentilism in the past, because for years people felt they were too unworthy to receive Holy Communion unless they had just gone to Confession a day or two before. There was no face-to-face reception of this sacrament until these last years. Having lay ministers allowed to touch the Blessed Sacrament and being able to receive Communion in our hands are changes that point to the holiness of God's living temples as well as the holiness of God. Lay people have become more involved in the ministry of the church, but religious vocations have become almost null. There have been twelve priests, three brothers, and sixty sisters from our parish who have responded to God's special call to leave all to follow the Master. However, the last priestly vocation from our parish celebrated his First Mass in 1965 and the last sister was received into her community in 1965. Now our parish school system has all lay teachers and no sisters teaching in our Catholic school. Consolidation is now in Calmar, Festina, and Spillville with two or three grades at each center. Many changes have been made, as you have heard, since my childhood days.

Another change has been in our Masses. We used to have High Masses with singing and Low Masses without singing. Many of our weekday Masses were Requiem Masses and Father vested in black. Always we'd sing the Dies Irae with prayers over the coffin-like catafalque surrounded by six tall lighted candles. Now there are no Requiems, and a joyous note of resurrection brings out our faith that death calls to the fullness of life forever with our loving God.

The emphasis of marriage being for life in our parish is expressed by celebrations of marriages and anniversaries. Many residents of our parish have celebrated their 50th wedding anniversaries. John's and my celebrations in our parish church with dinner and reception in our parish hall in school for our 50th and 60th anniversaries, will always be a treasured memory. Our 62nd anniversary was a quiet one with immediate family since John's severe Parkinson's disease necessitated his being as Ossian Senior Hospice.

Having shared with you my listeners some of my memories of all that God has done for his people, the parish of Our Lady of Seven Dolors in Festina, I ask you to join me in thanking and praising our loving God the same yesterday, today, and forever. There have been many changes in customs and the way we do things, but our faith firmly built on Jesus is the same as that which was handed down even from the time of the Apostles. In living out our faith, day by day, our parish community finds that the Lord is our Shepherd and there is nothing we shall want. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever.