Sister Sally Ann Fergus, OP
1937-2020

A childhood spent on Chicago’s North Side, with a large and loving family and under the tutelage of the Adrian Dominican Sisters at Queen of Angels School, gave Sister Sally Ann Fergus the perfect early grounding in life.

Sarah Ann, as she was baptized although she was always known as Sally, was born on September 21, 1937, to Rosaleen (Stratton) and William Fergus, a Chicago tavern owner. She was the fifth of seven children, with three brothers (William, Patrick and Thomas) and three sisters (Rosemary, Eileen, and Maureen). “We often speak of our family as the first five and the second two,” she wrote in her autobiography, because there was a five-year gap between her arrival and that of Maureen, and then another two years before Patrick came into the family.

“It made a big difference in our lives,” she wrote, because the two younger children “got to do so much more than we did – like travel to Ireland with my parents.”

Sally Ann and her siblings enjoyed a wonderful childhood with plenty of playmates in the neighborhood and activities including roller-skating around the block and trips to the library, the beach, the local park and, as they got older, Riverview Park to enjoy the rides. During the World War II years, her mother not only tended a garden plot in the backyard but also had a Victory Garden in “the prairie” (the Chicago term for an empty lot).

All seven Fergus children attended Queen of Angels Parish, where they got a fine education from their Adrian Dominican teachers. Rosemary, known as “Dodie,” and Sally sang in the parish choir and often sang together at home, Rosemary an alto and Sally a soprano. “Many a night we would sing while doing the dishes for our family of nine,” she wrote. “‘Whispering Hope’ was one of our favorites but we sang all the Christmas songs as we prepared for the Christmas Mass.”

Sally Ann’s secondary-school education came at Immaculata High School, where she was educated by the BVM Sisters. There, she had not only a full academic life but a full social one as well, filled with skating parties, sock hops, dances, and parties. She also sang in the school choir and was in school plays.

Although she felt drawn to religious life, after graduating from high school in 1955 she decided to work for a time first and got a job in downtown Chicago as a secretary. “I thought it was smart to know a bit more of ‘the world’ before making a decision to leave it,” she wrote. “It was a good experience which gave me a sense of responsibility different from any I had until then.”

Then, on June 26, 1956, her oldest brother and mother drove her to Adrian. “I still remember saying good bye to my father as we left Cullom Avenue,” she wrote. “I don’t think I realized how difficult it was for my parents as happy as they were for me. We all had a trust that this was the right thing.”

She was received as a novice that December, given the religious name Sister William Rose, and after her canonical novitiate year was missioned to Holy Name School in Detroit to teach first grade for the second half of the school year. Her next assignment was to St. Mary School in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, where she spent two years (1958-1960) teaching third grade. During this time, she and Sister Mary Alan Stuart taught weekly catechism classes at Eglin Air Force Base. These years were also the first time she saw racially segregated water fountains and washrooms, which she described as “an eye opener.”
This second teaching assignment was also to be her last outside the greater Chicago area. During her second summer in Florida, which she spent studying at Barry College (University), her father became very ill and Sister Genevieve Weber, who was soon to be Mother Genevieve, arranged for her to fly home. William died about a week later, and Sister Sally Ann spent the rest of the summer in Adrian and took classes at Siena Heights College (University). She completed her bachelor's degree work, majoring in English, there in 1964.

Sister Sally Ann’s next ministry was at St. Kilian School in Chicago, where she spent the years 1960-1966. Her next two assignments were to Ascension School in Harvey, Illinois (1966-69), and St. Philip Neri for the 1969-1970 school year.

It was the time of great change in the Congregation brought on by the Chapter of Renewal of 1968-70, and Sister Sally Ann wrote in her autobiography that the year she spent at St. Philip Neri was especially painful for many Sisters. Not only was there a move toward secular dress and away from religious names, but that was also the year Aquinas High School's convent, next door to St. Philip Neri, closed and the Sisters there moved into apartments.

It was also the time when Sisters began to choose and interview for their own ministries, and in 1970 Sister Sally Ann was hired to teach seventh grade at Chicago’s St. Columbanus School. She spent the next ten years there – during which time she got a first-hand look at the racial strife of the 1970s.

I lived for a while in Marquette Park. I remember coming home from a graduation with flowers from the students at Columbanus one June. An African American teacher was driving me home. The police stopped us and advised that she might be wise to go a different route so I walked the last blocks where the KKK was holding a rally in the park. The police tackled a Klansman right under our front window. It was really something to see.

After earning her Master of Education degree from DePaul University in 1980, Sister Sally Ann became principal at St. Hilary School in Chicago and spent eleven years in that position, until 1991. She left St. Hilary to attend school full-time at Loyola University (Illinois), where she earned a Master of Arts degree in pastoral studies in 1993.

This led her into a new ministry as a consultant to the Archdiocese’s Office of Catholic Education, working with the Chicago area’s Catholic schools. It was during her time there, in 1997, that her mother died.

In 1999, Sister Sally Ann was elected Chapter Prioress of the Midwest Dominican Chapter and served in that capacity for four years. When the two Chicago-area chapters – Midwest Dominican and Upper Midwest – merged into the Dominican Midwest Chapter, she was elected Chapter Prioress, serving a six-year term.

It was her final formal ministry, although she continued to be active in many areas, including traveling with her family and other Sisters and volunteering in the business office of Little Company of Mary Hospital. Health issues finally brought her home in September 2019 to live at the Dominican Life Center, and she died there on August 16, 2020, aged eighty-two and in her sixty-third year in the Congregation.

For the wake service, Sister Sally’s sister Maureen provided a number of remembrances from family members, including Maureen’s niece Patricia Sullivan:
One of my first memories in life is of Aunt Sally. I was probably 3 years old. Sally and another sister were visiting my Gramma, who lived in the apartment upstairs from my family. I was fascinated by these women in their long, white habits. They were all sitting at the dining room table and I crawled under the table and lifted the hem of their habits to see if they had feet.

From Maureen’s daughter-in-law Anna McManus:

I lived with Sally at St. Hilary’s Convent for 4.5 months in ’98 when Carol (her cousin’s daughter from Ireland) and I traveled for a year, and Chicago was our first stop. I have so many great memories of Sally but the one that sticks out in my head is how she would laugh, so hard, at Carol and I eating. We tried to sit down once a week to eat together, but by the time Sally would pick up her tools to start, us two were done! Sally would tilt her head back and laugh, and say how it sounded like we were knitting a sweater – our knives and forks being the knitting needles. She would always get such a kick out of that.

Sister Frances Fitzpatrick, with whom Sister Sally Ann ministered in the Chicago Archdiocese, wrote:

She was blunt, had a wonderful sense of humor and was never reluctant to share a “particular idea” that was better than mine! Questions were direct, suggestions emphatic, in some cases, and her direct and friendly manner was wonderful. As a professional educator, Sally was not only helpful, but was direct, humorous, and always helpful.

Sister Joan Delaplane preached the funeral homily:

. . . [O]f all the beautiful characteristics of this graced and gifted woman, one that uniquely stands out for me was that of a woman who could “cut to the chase,” as they say, or would listen well, then get to the heart of the matter. What a gift! I believe that she and Martha of today’s Gospel\(^1\) will resonate well up there!

. . . “Death is only the birth canal to new life,” says Joan Chittister, “the process by which we are expelled from the womb of the world into the womb of God, out of life lived in darkness into Life lived in light.”

What does all this mean for each of us today? If we were to ask Sally with her view from the other side, she would cut to the chase, get to the heart of it all, and remind us: The Light of the Risen Christ is in each of you, and is needed today for the darkness of our times.

\(^1\) Jn 11: 17-27