

## Sister Elise Gittrich



*I will lead the blind on their journey  
By paths unknown I will guide them  
I will turn darkness into light for them  
And make crooked ways straight.  
– Isaiah 42:10*

Sister Elise Gittrich chose this passage from Isaiah when reflecting on her life's journey. It is singularly appropriate, for Sister Elise's life has changed course in ways that make her story a unique testament to faith in God's providence. Throughout trials and times of change, God has always been with Sister Elise, gently guiding her and turning darkness into light.

Sister Elise says that "the Sisters of Charity were always with me from the time I was born." Elise was the third and youngest child in her family as she grew up in Chillicothe, Ohio. Her parents were both devout Catholics who modeled a life of faith. Elise attended St. Mary's Church and School. Both her parish and her school were staffed by the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati.

Although Elise developed close relationships with Sisters of Charity, she did not envision a religious vocation for herself. "When I was graduating from high school, Sister Isabelle said to me, 'I think you have a vocation.' I said, 'You're all wrong. I want to go to college, join the Peace Corps, get married, and have at least eight children!'"

Elise started down the path she had declared to Sister Isabelle by enrolling at Ohio State University and earning a B.A. in Spanish and a B.S. in elementary education. After graduation, she pursued her desire to help the poor by teaching at an inner city school in Columbus.

Elise continued to follow what she saw as her life plan by getting married in 1972. She and her husband had three sons in quick succession. Her husband's job change then brought the family to New Jersey, where their fourth child, a daughter, was born in 1977.

Elise and her family became very actively involved with Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Mountainside, where Elise became acquainted with Sister Maureen Mylott, who directed the RCIA program. Elise taught CCD at the church and also volunteered in an outreach program to serve people with AIDS in Newark.

In 1995, Elise's marriage dissolved. Though Elise remained friends with her former husband and vowed to provide stability for her children, she was devastated. "I kept thinking, 'What am I going to do? What am I going to do?'"

As Elise continued to struggle with the ending of her marriage, tragedy struck in April 1996. Elise's 18 year old daughter was killed in a car accident as the car was approaching the Holland Tunnel in Jersey City. At the time of the accident, Sister Mary Anne Rattigan, a Sister of Charity, happened to be walking in the neighborhood and felt compelled to go to the accident scene. Sister Mary Anne was with Elise's daughter as the young woman drew her last breath.

Sister Mary Anne and Sister Barbara Nesbihal went to the wake for Elise's daughter and offered comfort to Elise and her family. The whole family was impressed by these compassionate women and Elise was thankful once again that the Sisters of Charity were present in her life.

In the weeks that followed, the Sisters of Charity continued to offer Elise support. Elise started going to mass at St. Bridget's Church in Jersey City, and her bond with the Sisters of Charity grew. Elise moved to Jersey City to become the director of St. Bridget's preschool, and she also became a Seton Associate.

Elise became aware that God was calling her to the religious vocation that Sister Isabelle had recognized back in Ohio. "I went to my children and told them I was getting the marriage annulled. They said all at once, 'We can think of only one reason you're doing that. You're going to become a nun!' They supported me 100%."

Elise entered the Sisters of Charity in 1998. She worked as an assistant chaplain at St. Vincent's Hospital in Staten Island, and then in 2001, moved to Camden, NJ, where she was employed by Catholic Charities to help resettle Liberian refugees.

During this time, Sister Elise was discerning whether to go ahead and make her final vows. While on retreat, she realized, "God got me! God said, 'You should do it, Elise!' I finally let go of the trapeze, to be flung into the arms of the Sisters of Charity." She professed her final vows in December, 2003. She was 60 years old at the time, a mother and a grandmother.

Sister Elise's ministry continued. In 2004, she went to Suchitoto, El Salvador. She joined Sister Peggy O'Neill, "another on fire, compassionate Sister of Charity who nourished my love for the poor."

Sister Elise returned from El Salvador with a longing to work with people in the Hispanic community and the poor and underprivileged. At the invitation of Sister Barbara Jenkins, Sister Elise moved to El Paso, Texas to work at the Opportunity Center for the Homeless. With no outside funding and no paid staff, Sister Elise helped to open a shelter for women, providing a safe environment for women with nowhere else to turn. "We had addicts, ex-convicts, prostitutes, women who were severely mentally ill. They took care of each other, and they tell it like it is!"

Although Sister Elise's responsibilities were "24/7," she says that the ministry "filled her." She cooked, cleaned, counseled, and prayed with the women, and also managed their medications and their appointments. Perhaps the most satisfying part of the work was enabling the women to grow and take on more and more responsibilities at the shelter and to leave the shelter ready to move forward with their lives.

After 7 1/2 years in El Paso, Sister Elise came to believe that it was time to pass the baton on to others. She was especially delighted that the new leaders would be some of the same women who had previously resided at the shelter. When she left El Paso on May 17, 2014, “we had five women who were once homeless now in charge of the shelter. They are doing everything. Churches of all denominations, the young and old, rich and poor, are working to keep the shelter open. God provides!”

Though it was not easy to leave El Paso, Sister Elise believes that “endings are beginnings.” She was delighted to return to New Jersey to live among her sisters in the Motherhouse. “Since I entered the doors of the Motherhouse, it’s been nothing but affirmation, blessings, and peace.” She loves sharing meals and stories with the sisters. She adds, “The Sisters of Charity are full of love, realism, and laughter . . . much, much laughter! They are always on the front line, always there to help.”

Sister Elise is now in the process of discerning what will be next in her life. She hungers to be with AIDS patients or the homeless or the mentally ill. “God’s always been there to provide a new beginning for me. If you ask what I am going to be or do, well God hasn’t given me the message yet.” She adds with a laugh, “That page has not been opened in the book yet. It could be a big surprise!”

Just as it has been throughout her journey, prayer is the essence of Sister’s Elise life as she now slows down, “letting my soul catch up and waiting for another beginning.” Sister Elise affirms, “All for God, for God alone. With a heart full of gratitude, I pray:

‘How blessed I am – Mother, Granny, Sister of Charity!’”