SSSF Sister Sisters!

Motto Is to Make Everyone Happy

by Sister Ruth Hoerig, SSSF

Sisters Haroldine and Elmerine Acker were born in Cross Plains, Wis., and grew up in a family of six boys and five girls. After graduating from eighth grade, three of the girls joined the School Sisters of St. Francis: Sister Haroldine, the oldest of the three, entered the congregation in 1940; Sister John Rose, who died in July 2012, entered in 1948; and Sister Elmerine, the youngest of the three, in 1951.

The values of faith, family prayer, and hard work were the cornerstones of the Ackers’ upbringing. “We always said our meal prayers together and prayed the family rosary at special times,” said Sister Elmerine. “When retiring in the evening, we even had the custom of saying ‘Gelobt sei Jesus Christus,’ and Dad would answer in German, ‘Jetzt und für immer, Amen.’ (Translation: Praised be Jesus Christ; now and forever. Amen.) Our evening prayers included the prayer to the 14 angels to watch over us while we slept.

“Our parents held sisters in high regard,” Sister Elmerine continued. “Dad had a sister who joined the Franciscans in Manitowoc, and whenever she came for a visit, mother always took out the white tablecloth reserved for special occasions.”

“This special treatment for sisters and priests made quite an impression on us,” said Sister Haroldine.

Sister Elmerine credits her decision to serve God in a special way to her religious upbringing. “In those days, there were many vocations from Cross Plains,” she said. “Many of us grew up in large families and it was not unusual for several young girls from the same family to enter the convent. The Zander family had eight girls in the convent at one time.”

When Sister Haroldine (pictured at the left) entered the convent, she had her heart set on becoming a teacher. In fact, because of the great demand for teachers in parish schools at that time, Sister Haroldine began her teaching career in 1946 before she even had a chance to receive teacher training.

However, Sister Elmerine (right) had a different goal. She felt a call to care for young orphans, but Mother Corona told her that teachers were needed. This meant that Sister Elmerine would need to complete high school and earn a college degree—a decision that was not to her liking!

In the end, the two sisters spent the next 50-plus years teaching first through eighth grades in various schools throughout Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Illinois.

In 1967, Sister Haroldine became principal of St. John School in Rubicon while teaching seventh and eighth grade. In 1969, she again served as a teaching principal at St. Boniface School in Germantown.

“I found this arrangement to be quite demanding,” she said. “In those days, the sisters had to do the janitorial work in the school because the parishes could not afford to hire a janitor. With all the extra responsibilities we had, like taking care of the sacristy, training altar servers, or counting the money from the church collections on Sundays, we had very little time to prepare for our classes.”

Sister Elmerine, too, began teaching before finishing her bachelor’s degree. Her first teaching assignment came in 1957 at St.
Gregory the Great School in St. Nazianz, Wisconsin. From there, she moved on to other Catholic schools in Roselle, Illinois; Hubbell, Michigan; River Grove, Illinois; and Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin.

In 1972, the two sisters were given the opportunity to live and work together in ministry. “The Consolidated Parish Elementary School in Johnsburg, Wisconsin, was a good fit for me because I found out how much I enjoyed teaching mathematics to middle school and junior high students,” said Sister Elmerine.

Sister Haroldine agreed, “Being together was a blessing, because we work well together and know how to support each other. We have been together ever since.” Finally in 1980, they settled in the Milwaukee area, working in parish schools in both the city and the suburbs, until their retirement.

“We’re enjoying our retirement because we have more time for prayer, can help each other out when needed, and can go home together to visit our family,” Sister Elmerine said. “This (current) phase of our lives has been most rewarding. Now that we don’t have to make the school bell anymore, we can go to Mass every day and have breakfast together afterward.”

Sister Haroldine said, “We enjoy walking over to St. Francis Hospital on occasion and praying in their chapel, or we might go to the Motherhouse chapel to pray a rosary.” She added that they feel fortunate to live in Milwaukee because they can be present to celebrate the lives of sisters by attending Resurrection Masses here.

“Our motto in retirement should be, ‘Make everybody happy,’ she said. “We look forward to visiting some of our neighbors. If we have a cake or a pie, we like to share it with them.”

Sister Elmerine explained, “When we had a neighbor who lived by himself, once in a while, we would make a little extra spaghetti and take some over to him.”

When their middle sibling, Sister John Rose, was alive, she lived in the convent at Cross Plains and did a lot of outreach for the parish. But when the convent was torn down, she moved into their home on the family farm. Since that time, her sisters have accepted a standing invitation to come back for a homemade-cooked dinner every weekend. “We go to Cross Plains every Friday and come back on Sunday,” said Sister Elmerine. “There are usually about eight to nine family members who share in our dinner every Saturday.”

Their outreach efforts on behalf of the School Sisters are part of life in Cross Plains. “During these last two years, we’ve helped Associate Mary Foskett with her fundraising projects,” said Sister Elmerine. “Each Sunday in spring, we sell her lovely Easter baskets after all the Masses.” These sales bring in extra income to the community retirement fund.

“The people of Cross Plains are very generous,” said Sister Haroldine. “Some of the parishioners offer an extra-generous contribution.”

The Ackers agreed that the most cherished part of being consecrated is the lifestyle. “It frees us to be available for others and attentive to the needs of the world through daily prayer,” said Sister Haroldine.

“During her years of ministry, Sister John Rose responded to the needs of people at any time because she had no ties to anyone or anything. She would even go during the night, if needed,” said Sister Elmerine.

This past year, Sister Haroldine celebrated her 70th jubilee, and 2015 will be the 60th jubilee for Sister Elmerine. Deeply rooted in prayer, tradition, and family, the Acker sisters’ lives are testimony to the words of Nehemiah 8:10: “The joy of the Lord is your strength.”

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