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Dear Friend,



Learning another language can be a daunting task, requiring a lot of perseverance and determination. But for Sr. Serena Halfmann, who was born and lived near Fond du lac, Wisconsin, it might seem that her ability to speak several languages was an easy accomplishment. As the youngest of nine children, she grew up speaking a German dialect while learning English from her older siblings who had learned English when they started school. By the time Sister Serena started first grade, she was bi-lingual.

Her educational journey was not a smooth one. After graduating from 8th grade, Sister Serena spent the next five years helping out older siblings and then taking care of four children of a cousin who died in childbirth. At age 19, she began her high school studies at St. Mary's of the Springs in Fond du lac and graduated in just three years. Latin was her favorite subject!



Serena Halfmann, OSF

Sister Serena won a scholarship to St. Teresa College in Winona, Minnesota, but stayed only one semester. A call to religious life intervened.

One of Sister Serena's good friends in high school had been Sister Sheila Haskett (+2001). She entered the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, and then encouraged Sister Serena to come after her first semester at college so they could be together in their formation.

At St. Teresa College, Sister Serena had begun a major in French and a minor in Spanish. She finished her college degree at Cardinal Stritch College (now University) with a Latin major and a minor in French. The congregation recognized her language abilities and sent her to Case Western Reserve University to study French and Spanish. There she earned a master's degree and doctorate in French. One year of her doctoral studies was spent in Rennes, France, on a Fulbright scholarship. During that year she had the opportunity to do research for her dissertation: *The Christian Thought of Pierre Corneille*.

As a college teacher at Cardinal Stritch College, Sister returned to France a couple of times for workshops and met teachers from all over the world. On one visit, at a time when she was researching poet Charles Péguy, Sister Serena was able to consult with the poet's daughter, Germaine Péguy, who was living in Paris at the time. Later Sister Serena lectured on the poet in French to a group of French teachers in Milwaukee.

In her teaching, Sister Serena always tried to share her experiences so that students could connect with the language from a more personal perspective. Imagine what it was like to hear about Charles Péguy based on a conversation with his daughter! In turn, she asked students to share their experiences and learned from them.

When Sister Serena transitioned out of college teaching into pastoral work, she attended the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, for a program entitled *Personal Renewal through Pastoral Education*. The program began with living with a family for two weeks in Mexico. After the classes in Texas ended, she took part in three guided internships to acquire practical experience.

In her autobiography, Sister Serena writes: "The first six weeks I spent in Miami, Florida, in the Cathedral Parish, visiting the elderly Hispanic people to see what their needs were. I'll never forget one lady who had received her religious education from her parents in Mexico but never

had the opportunity to make her First Communion. She saw to it that her children and grandchildren all received the sacraments, but always felt she had missed her opportunity and was now too old. I instructed her privately and found her to be very knowledgeable. On Holy Thursday, the week after I left Miami, she made her First Communion."



Sister Serena listens to John Bannen, a former student of Spanish who went on to get his bachelor's degree in Spanish and now has just two courses to take before he will complete a master's degree. He is a lawyer by profession.

Sister Serena found a niche to use her pastoral skills and her ability to speak Spanish in the Office for Religious Education in Chicago, Illinois. During her time there, she was involved in a number of tasks, from training Hispanic leaders for the RENEW program and catechists, to being in charge of Religious Education in three deaneries of the Archdiocese. Often she did simultaneous translation as well as written translations, and taught in the Hispanic Instituto.

After a very full ministerial life, Sister Serena retired in 1994. But her retirement was not a sedentary venture. In amazement, a professor friend outlined her "retirement" schedule as follows: "Sr. Serena Halfmann's schedule for this semester includes teaching a class or tutoring a student, six days a week! She has Spanish classes (Continuing Education) at Cardinal Stritch College on Mondays and Tuesdays, a Spanish class on Wednesdays, German class on Thursdays, and a Spanish class on Fridays, all at Clare Hall, and a French student on Saturdays."

What was not mentioned was that, finally, Sister Serena was also studying German, the first language she had learned as a child, but which she recognized was a dialect. She was very interested in exploring the formal aspects of the language and audited classes for several years at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee.

The adults she tutors speak with great fondness of Sister Serena. Being with her reminds one student of the times he sat with his grandmother at the dining room table telling stories. Class for him is like an oasis in time, and Sister Serena brings a very healing presence.

Tutoring sessions are followed by a meal during which conversation is free flowing, and if you look at the flag on the table, you will know the language being spoken. Her personal interest in each student is evident and her standards are high. For example, she is very concerned that students learn good pronunciation and works hard with them to speak as well as they can without an American accent. After all, it doesn't pay to know the vocabulary if no one understands what you are saying. A student said that this really paid off when he was able to negotiate, in Spanish, a "room with a view" at a hotel in Mexico!



The list of translations that Sister Serena has done since she retired is much too long to recount here. In addition she has often done simultaneous translation in German and Spanish. She eagerly embraces any opportunity that calls for her to share her language knowledge. Her last name, Halfmann, in German, means "helping man or helping one." In an unpretentious way, Sister Serena is truly a helping person.

In the last few years, Sister's health has seen some decline. Her lifelong habits of exercise, particularly swimming, which she still does several times a week, prove, however, that decline can be slowed down with physical activity. The generosity of other retired sisters to drive her to the YMCA for swimming is a beautiful example of how caring for each other takes place in our community. And the results of this generosity are evident in Sister Serena's continuing ability to reach out to others.

The needs of our retired sisters, and the resources to provide for those needs, is always a priority for the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi. If you are able to help us with this, we would be most grateful. Sister Serena's life is touching the lives of others in profound ways, and your support can help her stay active, share her knowledge of language, and most of all, bring her loving presence to all those she encounters.

In St. Francis and St. Clare,

Marcia Lunz, OSF

Sister Marcia Lunz, OSF

P. S. We truly appreciate any donation that you are able to give. We remember you in our prayers, asking God to provide for your needs and thanking God for your generosity. May you know the blessing of God each day.

(At left) These are the flags that are placed on a table in the dining room to indicate what language is being spoken. Germany, France and Mexico are represented.

Votive Candles Commemorate “Day of Gifts” and Generosity of Donors and Benefactors

On February 2, the Catholic Church celebrates the Presentation of the Lord, a day of gifts. According to Hebrew regulations, Mary and Joseph offered simple gifts in the temple when they presented their new born son.

We chose this day to begin a tradition to honor you, our generous and caring benefactors. On February 2, 2009, two votive candles were lit during the Prayer of the Faithful at Mass and carried into our Adoration Chapel. These candles will remain burning continuously as a symbol of the goodness and generosity of so many to the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, and as a symbol of the prayers we offer daily for your generous gifts.

May the light of Christ shine in your hearts and dispel all darkness. Thank you for the ways you light up the lives of our retired sisters with your generosity.

Sister Jane Denning adjusts the votive candle in its holder in the Adoration Chapel



Sisters Jane Denning and Marcia Lunz (right) carry the votive candles from the lighting ceremony in St. Francis Chapel to the Adoration Chapel

From Clare Court

Thank You

May our God, who is never outdone in generosity, bless you for your goodness to our retired sisters at Clare Court Convent in Baltimore, Maryland! In the November 2007 newsletter, we asked your help in raising \$250,000 to meet a Weinberg Foundation challenge. You generously contributed \$150,000 toward this total!

We were fortunate to raise the additional funds, and in December 2008, we received a check for \$500,000 from the Harry and Jeannette Weinberg Foundation. The combined amount of \$750,000 was used to establish an endowment for our sisters who live at Clare Court Convent. Without you this would not have been possible. Please know of our deep gratitude and be assured of our continued prayers.

Sister Ellen Carr, OSF

Director
Clare Court

As Franciscan women who have a commitment to caring for all of creation, the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi use environmentally friendly or post-consumer paper and soy ink whenever possible.

