

# We of Nojoshing

Nojoshing – Indian word for the area where our pioneer members settled in 1849; it means "piece of land stretching into the water."  
The name was changed later to Saint Francis, Wisconsin.



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## **We celebrate the memory of our beloved Sister Mary Leonette (Esther) Gertner July 27, 1929 – November 30, 2024**

Sister Leonette was born at home in Iliff, Colo., to John and Anna (Ertle) Gertner, the seventh of 13 children. At her baptism she was given the name Esther. Both of her parents, with their families, had emigrated from Volmer, Russia, to the United States one year apart (1911/12) and both settled in northeastern Colorado. John and Anna reconnected and were married in 1920. They rented a farm and this is where Esther lived for 21 years.

The children attended the country public school for grades one through 12. It was located five miles from the family farm and a school bus transported the students. The Gertner children participated in religious-education classes on Sundays at St. Anthony Parish in Sterling, Colo. This was Esther's only contact with Sisters as she was growing up. We know from her autobiography that the children in the family spent a good share of the warm weather months working in the fields of sugar beets, grain and hay. Sister Leonette said that this work gave her a lot of time to think and pray.

When Esther decided that she wanted to enter the convent, and not knowing that there were many communities of Sisters, she did no "shopping" as she put it, but went straight to Sister Bede Brielmaier, whom she knew from her religious-education classes. And Sister Bede "took it from there!" She waited until after the beet harvest to leave home. On Christmas Day in 1950, after Benediction in the convent at St. Anthony Parish, Esther was dressed in the postulant garb, complete with a veil, and boarded the train with Sister Mark Barbian. They traveled overnight to Milwaukee, and Esther entered The Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi on December 26, 1950.

On August 11, 1951, Esther was received as a novice and given the name Sister Mary Leonette. As a second-year novice, she taught grades 5 and 6 at St. Mary in South Milwaukee, Wis. On August 12, 1953, Sister Leonette professed first vows and in 1956, professed her perpetual vows.

Growing up, Sister Leonette loved school and study. For 49 years, she taught children in grades 5 – 8. In the classroom she found teaching both challenging and rewarding. Sister loved her students and they loved her.

Most of her teaching was in smaller cities and rural areas in Wisconsin: South Milwaukee, Brighton, Mauston, Jericho, Sheboygan, Union Grove, and Lancaster. In 1967, after many years of summer-school classes, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in

education from Cardinal Stritch University. Sometime later, she received an advanced certificate in religious education. For 15 of her teaching years, she also served as principal.

Sister Leonette wrote years later that in her early years in the convent, she “spent some time in the garden picking berries, peas, currants, raspberries and grapes – still a farm girl at heart.”

Sister Leonette’s sense of humor was revealed in the words she wrote:

Aren’t things more humorous when they happen during solemn occasions or in sacred places like the chapel? One of the prize-winning episodes took place during installation into the League of the Sacred Heart. Imagine having a scapular dangling in front of one’s nose! You know what a little bit of moving air can do. Needless to say, the entire community present tried hard to muffle the laughter.

Opportunities for spiritual growth were treasured by Sister Leonette. “In 1967 I was privileged to participate in the Tertianship Program – a time of spiritual renewal – a real gift! One of the greatest highlights of my life was a pilgrimage to Italy, where we experienced the renowned places of St. Francis and St. Clare.”

In 2001, Sister Leonette retired and moved to Clare Hall. She engaged in a variety of volunteer opportunities which included fulfilling mail orders for greeting cards for the card shop and baking at St. Ann Center for Intergenerational Care.

When Sister Leonette moved to the new St. Francis Convent in 2019, prayer and presence became her full-time ministry. Her reflection at the time of her 60<sup>th</sup> Jubilee of Profession in 2013 echoes what she had written 10 years earlier for her Golden Jubilee:

As I look back on my days lived in community, I am grateful for God’s loving care for me. God’s faithfulness has been my strength and my perseverance. I am grateful, too, for the loving care and concern of my community. Each succeeding day, each succeeding year, brings its own joys, its own sorrows, its changes, and its challenges. As a pilgrim in community, I continue on my journey to the Father, knowing that I do not have here a lasting home. I look to my community, I look to my Father, for ways and means to continue to reach out in faith and love to all whom I meet on my journey. In hope, I look to the Father for the eternal joy of an everlasting home.

Sister Leonette’s health began to change noticeably a few months ago. On Friday, November 29, she was at the noon meal but declined rapidly by Saturday morning and died Saturday evening, November 30, 2024. Sisters had kept vigil with her during the day. Sister Jane Denning was with her when God called her into eternal life. She embarked on her last pilgrim journey very peacefully.

“You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” (St. Augustine)

~†Marie Colette Roy, OSF, and Marcia Lunz, OSF