



LOCAL NEWS

SISTER REFLECTS ON A LIFETIME OF MINISTRY

[The Catholic Telegraph](#) / [May 6, 2010](#) / [544](#)

By David Eck

DAYTON DEANERY — As a newly professed Sister of the Precious Blood, one of the last things Sister Helen Theresa Fleischman wanted to do was cook.

But today the 80-year-old nun looks back fondly on a ministry that kept bishops and priests in several dioceses nourished for nearly 60 years. From Toledo to Cincinnati to Marquette, Mich., Sister Helen Theresa worked in the kitchens at bishops' residences and cathedrals.

"I fell in love with it pretty quickly," said Sister Helen Theresa, who entered the Sisters of the Precious Blood in 1946 while still in high school. "I had no teaching [background]. Where else were they going to put me?"

She was first assigned to cook for the late Bishop George J. Rehring of Toledo, a Cincinnati native. A few years later she went to work for then-Cincinnati Archbishop Karl J. Alter, with whom she would spend more than a quarter of a century until his death in 1977.

"He just made you feel right at home," Sister Helen Theresa said. The archbishop wasn't particular about his meals, she said, but did favor Crepes Suzette for special occasions.

Residing at Laurel Court, the archbishops' historic residence in College Hill, Archbishop Alter hosted large dinners. It was a time of tremendous growth in the Cincinnati archdiocese. Nearly 100 churches and schools were built, and more than a dozen new high schools opened under his leadership. Archbishop Alter also oversaw the expansion and renovation of the Cathedral of St. Peter in Chains.

At Laurel Court, however, the archbishop was able to relax and play with Kerry, his Irish wolfhound, Sister Helen Theresa recalled.

After Archbishop Alter died, Sister Helen Theresa continued her ministry at the Cathedral of St. Peter in Chains in Cincinnati. She cooked for the several priests who lived there.

"She was known about town by a good many people," said Father James Bramlage, the current pastor at St. Peter in Chains. "She was an excellent cook and could never do too much. Whatever someone wanted, she was ready to go out of her way to accommodate them."

Deacon David Klingshirn met Sister Helen Theresa in the 1980s; the two have been friends for years.

"Her whole life has been serving the other Christ, the priests," Deacon Klingshirn said. "She is one of many thousands of women who dedicated their lives to the Roman Catholic Church. They built the church."

In 1992, Sister Helen Theresa moved to the Diocese of Marquette, Mich., to cook for former Cincinnati Auxiliary Bishop James Garland when he was named bishop of that see.

"He appreciated everything you did," Sister Helen Theresa said of Bishop Garland. "He'd always have a big smile on his face."

On her off days, Sister Helen Theresa visited jail inmates. It was another ministry she pursued for 27 years.

A native of St. Joseph, Missouri, Sister Helen Theresa knew early on that she wanted one day to join religious life, following the example of the women religious who taught her in grade school.

"I couldn't wait to come," she said. "When you have that calling from God, you want to nurture it."

Her older sister, Genevieve, entered religious life with the Sisters of the Precious Blood several years earlier.

On the only vacation she ever took, Sister Helen Theresa met Pope John Paul II while traveling in Europe with a close friend.

Still, she has no regrets because she truly enjoyed working for bishops and priests.

"They were all holy men of God," she said. "I looked at them as another Christ. I was always happy. I knew that's what God wanted me to do."



Top, **Sister Helen Theresa**. Photo by David Eck. Bottom, **Sister Helen Theresa with Kerry, Archbishop Karl J. Alter's Irish wolfhound, in a photo she believes was taken in the 1950s.** (Courtesy photo)