

# Pagan Babies and Processions, Palmer Method and Poetry; Memories of Catholic Grade School Years

By Sister Sarah Smedman

When invited to remember together their grade school years, 13 of our current Sisters who had attended elementary schools taught by our Benedictines from St. Scholastica Monastery responded, representing seven schools from the Duluth diocese, three from the St. Paul archdiocese, and one from the Chicago archdiocese. A “What-do-you-remember-from-your-grade-school-years?” conversation revealed much about their Catholic school experiences in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s.

What is shared here emerges from the memories of the following former grade schoolers representing their respective schools. (Their baptismal names, if different from their religious names, follow in parenthesis, as do former religious names.)

S. Jane (Mary Jane) Casey	Sacred Heart School, Duluth
S. Claudia (formerly S. Lizette) Cherro	Sacred Heart School, Duluth
S. Lois (formerly S. Mary Stephen) Eckes	Holy Name School, Wayzata
S. Agnes (formerly S. John Marie) Fleck	Marquette School, Virginia
S. Lois Ann Glaudel	Our Lady of Victory, Minneapolis
S. Melanie (Theresa) Gagne	St. Rose School, Proctor
Ss. Mary Rae and Barbara (Mary & Marjorie) Higgins	St. Clement’s School, Duluth
S. Beverly Horn	St. James School, Duluth
S. Arlene (formerly S. Georgemarie) Kleemann	St. Timothy’s School, Chicago
S. Sarah (Marilyn) Smedman	Assumption Hall, Hibbing
S. Clare Marie (Irene) Trettel	Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Cloquet
S. Jeanne Ann (Jeanne) Weber	St. Bridget’s School, Minneapolis

Tentatively, the first memory emerged: staying after school to clean blackboards, clap erasers, and simply help the teacher. When Sister Jeanne Ann mentioned the end of the school year ritual of mending and covering textbooks for the next year’s class, an explosion of nodding heads indicated the event was a common memory. Then a flood of common memories flowed freely, overrunning each other.

**Ransoming “pagan” babies.** Although little about the practice was explained to us, we did understand that it was sponsored by an organization called the Holy Childhood and that we were in some small way missionaries. We contributed nickels and dimes until class contributions had reached \$5.00, the cost of “ransoming a pagan baby.” Sister Agnes remembers intense competition among the grades and that her father gave her \$5.00 when a new campaign started so that her class could win. Sister Melanie, one of eight children, remembers her father responded to her request for money with “We have a good many pagan babies right here.” (Although we didn’t know it then, The Holy Childhood Association “encourages all children to be aware of the needs of children living in mission dioceses over the world.” Now worldwide with its motto “children helping children,” the Association serves the needs of children everywhere.)



*Sister Jean Patrick Bennett with second graders  
Photo by +Sister Noemi Weygant*

**Classroom celebrations.** Most remembered May altars in the classrooms, often with processions and the crowning of Mary as Queen of Heaven. Children would take their turns in crowning the Virgin, usually with flowers brought from home gardens. Ordinarily a statue was the center of the shrine, but Sister Jane remembers that when her fifth grade recreated the grotto of Lourdes, she was the Virgin Mary and stood on the ledge of a cupboard, with opened doors flanking her. Sister Sarah, still blushing, vividly recalls her chagrin that when, in the seventh grade it was her turn to light the candle in front of the Virgin, she set the crepe paper shrine on fire. End of the ceremony for that day!

The Mary Queen of Heaven celebration memories evoked memories of other traditional classroom celebrations. Valentine Boxes. School plays. Christmas pageants. Sister

Mary Rae attributes careful planning and artistry to Sister Valeria, and recalls one Christmas pageant when the narrator proclaimed, “A Child is born!” Nothing happened. A second time. Then, in a stentorian voice, a third time: “A CHILD IS BORN!” At that moment a shoebox holding a baby doll skittered from behind the curtain across the stage!



Sister Lois Ann's fourth grade put on a play about the Mass. All the girls, she remembers, liked the handsome boy who played the priest. Sister Barbara remembers an annual Halloween parade where everyone was in costume. In the eighth grade she posed as a *grand dame* and won the coveted prize. For no particular occasion but periodically, the Sisters of most if not all of the schools made wonderful taffy suckers in pastel colors—pink, green, crème—that students could buy. Class picnics to celebrate the end of the school year were also a big hit.

**Recess.** Some schools had large playgrounds which allowed for outdoor exercise. Sacred Heart, in the middle of the city, lacked such a playground, so children jumped rope and played marbles on the sidewalks or narrow grassy spaces lining them. Sister Claudia relates that every noon recess Monsignor Byrnes came to the playground and the children “would all run to hold his hand and follow him like the Pied Piper.”

**Special events** were securely fixed in some memories. Sister Clare Marie's first grade teacher, Sister Benedicta, brought each birthday child a big cookie on that special day. After Mass on First Fridays, Sunrise Bakery in Hibbing delivered to Assumption classrooms cocoa and sugared raised doughnuts for breakfast; the doughnuts according to the number each child had ordered the day before. After school at Marquette, Sister Augusta taught interested students, including Sister Agnes, how to crochet.



*Sister Barbara Higgins dressed at Halloween as the grand dame.*



*Sister Sarah Smedman's 7th grade Class of 1944. Sister Sarah front row, third from right.*

printing to script, arms were in the air, mimicking the miles of slanted line and running oval exercises that haunted us, as well as the sense of being grown up with our first dips of pens into inkwells.

Almost everyone cherishes the memory of her teacher reading aloud to the class. Stories often settled the children after noon hour or rewarded good behavior at the end of the day. Sister Agnes loved Clementia's “Berta and Beth” stories that Sister Lucy read to her second and third grade; later Agnes checked out the whole *Mary Selwyn* series herself from the school library. Sister Clare Marie remembers bi-weekly walks, class by class, the two blocks to the Cloquet public library. Sister Sarah will never forget Isabelle Thouin, children's librarian at the Hibbing public library, who hosted each class during Book Week to display all the new books and magazines. A child could reserve any book, even the newest Laura Ingalls Wilder, to take out but only when Book Week was over.

Sister Arlene recalls that Sister Mary Martin expected her seventh and eighth-graders to memorize poetry, and both Sisters Jeanne Ann and Lois Ann remember Miss Lenz, who visited their classes every two weeks to teach them poetry, to read it with expression, and to memorize it.

Of course, **religion** played a major role in all curricula. Emphasis was on the *Baltimore Catechism*; the questions became more complex as we advanced in grades. We memorized and recited answers, which had to be word perfect. Sister Agnes was keenly interested in the discussions that followed the recitation, a privilege most of us did not enjoy, although we all are grateful for having learned well the basic theology of the Church. Diocesan catechetical contests brought representatives from all the schools to compete in recitation of answers. Sister Clare Marie did Our Lady of the Sacred Heart proud when she took top honors in the diocesan catechetical contest.

Interestingly, academics didn't pop onto the top of school memories. However, when talk turned to “schooling,” the conversation was primarily of language and literature, the *Baltimore Catechism*, and music. Sister Lois recalls excitedly the first time she actually read, and that Sister Mary Martin let her take the book home to read, so proudly, to her parents. Although Sister Arlene does not remember sounding out letters from phonics charts as Sister Jane does, she believes that Sister Hermina must have been the world's greatest teacher of reading because since first grade she has been an avid and voracious book lover.

**Writing, reading,** and visits to the library are cherished memories. Everyone enjoyed diagramming sentences and thereby learned English grammar well. When someone mentioned the Palmer Method, moving from

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## Memories of Catholic Grade School Years, Continued

**Music.** Everyone remembers that music was a major part of school life. Many sang in the children's choir. In those days before Vatican II, daily Mass was usually a Requiem Mass, and we all learned the music for that Mass in Latin, including the *Dies Irae*, which we considered quite an accomplishment. Sister Jeanne Ann remembers that St. Bridget's classes went to the University of Minnesota's Northrup Auditorium for concerts and to participate in music performances. Sister Beverly Horn recalls an event when St. James students, with those from the other Duluth Catholic Schools, performed through recitation and song at the Duluth Armory Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*.



*Sister Petronilla Thomas*



*Sister Agnes Fleck's 8th grade graduation. Sister Agnes front row, 2nd from left.*

We loved and enjoyed our teachers, too many to mention all of them here. However, Sister Petronilla Thomas, who taught five of these Sisters at different schools, emerged as the best teacher of most. A Texan by birth, students thought her broad a's hilarious and loved to mimic them by "aasking" her questions. Not only was she fun and funny, but they agreed that she could convince the slowest learner he or she was a genius. Our elementary school teachers had profound effects on our Benedictine vocations. Sister Barbara, one of the first kindergarteners at the new St. Clement's School, attributes her vocation to Sister Valeria's gentleness and care; Sister Claudia decided in first grade that she wanted to be just like her teacher, Sister Victorine, and told her so; Sister Sarah (then Marilyn) met her first sister-teacher, Sister Marilyn, in the fifth grade and was first drawn by the special bond of their names; and Sister Clare Marie attributes her vocation to the example of her eighth grade teacher, Sister Innocent, as a humble, competent professional, and wise, kindly woman. Most of the group, however, acknowledge that their vocations were nurtured overall by the ambience of their elementary schools and their experiences with their Sister teachers.



*Sister Sarah Smedman (left) with her 5th grade teacher, Sister Marilyn Micke*



*Sister Claudia Cherro (right) with her 1st grade teacher, Sister Victorine Sitter*

Today, only three of the schools we attended continue, all of them with lay administrators and faculty: St. James School in Duluth, Assumption School in Hibbing, and Marquette School in Virginia. All eleven, however, are alive in our memories. Although there were sometimes crabby teachers and unpleasant situations, what lingers are the happy memories. Perhaps Sister Claudia and Sister Arlene sum up our conversations well: "So many lovely memories. I will always treasure my Catholic school years with the Sisters and Priests. . . . My generation really learned their faith" (Claudia). "My grade school experience was one of fun and caring and learning. The Sisters seemed . . . joyful and filled with love for what they did" (Arlene). Sister Mary Rae is but one who attributed all that she did in her classroom as a new teacher to what her teacher, Sister Jean Patrick, had done. Obviously, we were happy kids who learned from our teachers and loved school!

*Photos from Sisters, Monastery Archives, and Sister Therese Carson*