Sister Aileen McClain, OP
1930-2016

How self-controlled the dawn! ¹

Sister Aileen McClain, baptized Elizabeth (Betty) Rae, and born April 24, 1930, in Chicago, was the fifth daughter born to Vincent and Helen (Rache) McClain. Five years later, the McClain girls – Helen, Patricia, Aileen, Jeanne, and Betty – welcomed the birth of Vincent Thomas, their only brother.

Betty’s parents were both born in Illinois. After their marriage they settled in St. Kilian Parish, where all their children began their elementary education. In her biography, Betty wrote, “My father was a property manager at a bank and provided a good life for his family.”

Betty was still in grade school at St. Kilian when two of her sisters entered the Congregation: Helen, known as Sister Ellen Vincent, entered at the end of her first semester at St. Joseph College in 1936. Patricia, known as Sister Helen Thomas, entered the postulate in January 1939. In her biography Betty wrote, “I always dreamed of becoming a sister someday.” The fact that she now had two sisters who were Adrian Dominicans only intensified her desire.

After graduating from Aquinas in 1948, Betty decided to delay entering because she wanted to be home when Sister Ellen Vincent and Sister Helen Thomas had their home visit. She entered the postulate in February 1949 at the age of eighteen. In August of that year she received her religious name, Sister Aileen, and one year later made first profession.

With the exception of her six years teaching at Aquinas High School, Sister Aileen’s ministry was primarily in elementary education in parish schools located in the Midwest and Florida. Of her forty-four years of ministry, twenty-seven years were in Florida.

Sister Aileen’s first assignment after profession was at St. Brigid School in Detroit, where she taught seventh grade and lived with a large group of Sisters, one of whom was Sister Nora Richards. St. Brigid was good place to begin her teaching ministry, but the appointment two years later in 1952 was even more exciting. She and Sister Nora Richards were both assigned to teach at Blessed Sacrament School in Tallahassee, Florida, where Sister Rose Germaine, was superior-principal. Together, they had the responsibility of opening this new school. Even more important to Sister Aileen, Sister Helen Thomas was now close by at St. Matthew School in Jacksonville, Florida. That school had only been opened for one year. Sister Aileen’s six years at Blessed Sacrament kept her busy teaching first grade during the school year and studying at Barry College during the summer. In 1957, Sister Aileen received her bachelor’s degree, with a major in English.

¹ On the Strings of Time: Canticle Of Patience, Sister Ellen Vincent McClain, p.4, 1942
From 1958 to 1964, Sister Aileen was assigned to teach at St. Nicholas of Tolentine School in Chicago. With her bachelor's in English, she was now assigned to teach English to students in the middle grades. But this also was a sad time for the McClain family because their mother died in January 1961. Their father had died seven years earlier.

From St. Nicholas, Sister Aileen was sent to Oak Park, Illinois, to teach at St. Edmund School. She continued to teach English and other courses to students in the middle grades for the next three years.

In 1967, Sister Aileen was missioned to her alma mater, Aquinas High School. Again, this was a special assignment, because during four of her six years at Aquinas, she lived and taught with Sister Helen Thomas. Summers during this period were spent studying at DePaul University, where she received her master’s degree in 1970.

By the time Sister Aileen finished her six years at Aquinas, the Congregation had adopted an open placement policy, so when she learned the pastor of St Helen Parish in Vero Beach, Florida, was looking for Sisters to teach in the parish school, she responded. She taught middle grades at St. Helen for seven years and then served as principal when Sister Rose Germaine, who had been principal, decided to tutor.

In 1985, she and Sister Rose Germaine left Vero Beach and moved to West Palm Beach, Florida, because Sister Aileen had accepted a teaching position that included serving as assistant principal at St. Ann School. During her three years at St. Ann, she also attended the extension program in administration/supervision that was offered by Florida Atlantic University in Fort Pierce. She completed the program and received an ABD in administration/supervision.

Sister Aileen’s next move was to Tallahassee in 1988 because the principal of Trinity Catholic Middle School (formerly known as Blessed Sacrament School) had retired. During her fifteen years at Trinity her four sisters died: Sister Ellen Vincent in 1992, Aileen Anderer in January 2000, Sister Helen Thomas in May 2000, and Jeanne Boyce in August 2003.

Sister Aileen decided to resign her position at Trinity at the end of the school year in 2003 because Sister Rose Germaine’s health was failing and she knew it would be a short time before they would return to Adrian. During that transition period from 2003 to 2004, Sister Aileen served as pastoral minister for the sick and elderly at Blessed Sacrament Parish.

In October 2004, Sister Aileen and Sister Rose Germaine returned to Adrian and shared an apartment in Regina for a few years before residing in Maria. In her remembrance at the wake service, Sister Helen Sohn, Co-Chapter Prioress of Holy Rosary Chapel, said:

*The move to Maria did not stop Aileen from looking to the needs of others. She could be seen filling glasses with orange juice in the morning and if she noted a sister having a hard time*
getting her cup of coffee she graciously offered to carry it. She also continued to tutor at the Adrian Rea Literacy Center.

Just a little more than three weeks ago, she joined her family for a reunion in the Chicago area. She came home thrilled to have seen many in the McClain clan; she spoke of all the little ones who were present. Family was always important to Aileen and I am sure the memories she brought home continued to deepen her joy and love of the family that she was quick to say was so good to her.

Sister Aileen McClain died on September 24, 2016, at the age of eighty-six.

Maria Elena Martinez, Sister Aileen’s student at the Adrian Rea Literacy Center, gave the following remembrance.

I want to speak a little about my dear teacher Aileen. I have spent every Monday with her for six years. I thank God for putting her in my life as a teacher and as a friend. I could talk to her and she would always listen and have patience with my learning. One of the memories I will never forget was when I was about to leave class, I would always give her a hug and a kiss and tell her in her ear that she was the best teacher ever. She would be happy and had a big smile on her face.

I feel very sad and will miss her a lot because she was a part of my life. Thank you for my lovely teacher, Aileen. She gave me her time, care and love.

Sister Carleen Maly, Director of Adrian Rea Literacy Center, gave the homily at the funeral liturgy.

Sister Aileen chose the same readings that were selected for Sister Rose Germaine’s funeral.

The first reading from Isaiah contains words of deep, abiding love and call – God’s love for the remnant people of Israel. In John’s Gospel, we read of Jesus’ loving embrace of all who would hear his voice and follow him. What constant, consistent love Aileen modeled for us, rooted in her being from a home which was filled with the love of God. She saw it; she believed it and she lived it.

In John’s Gospel Jesus, speaking of himself as the gate for the sheepfold, welcomes with free and open entry those who hear and recognize his voice and want to follow. He will protect them, he says, from those who would cause them harm. I’m sure Aileen would dismiss even thinking of herself as the determining gate for the sheepfold, but she clearly, wholeheartedly responded to the call of the Shepherd to live her life totally in Jesus’ love.

Aileen could do nothing less than love those whose lives she touched.

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2 Isaiah 46: 4-0; John 10: 7-10
Left: From left, Sisters Aileen McClain, Rose Germaine Guettler, and Nora Leahy, with Starlet Kalfas, Tallahassee, Florida. Right: From left, Sisters Aileen McClain, Ellen Vincent McClain, and Helen Thomas McClain celebrate the 1984 Adrian Centennial.
Right: Helen Rache McClain, mother of Sisters Ellen Vincent, Helen Thomas, and Aileen, at the family home in Chicago, 1956