

Sister Rita Neyens

March 7, 1924 – May 6, 2020

Sister Rita was born March 27, 1924 to Ben and Mary (Dohmen) Neyens. She was given the name Mary Helen when baptized April 6, 1924 at the Church of St. Isidore in Colome, South Dakota. She was also confirmed at the Church of St. Isidore.

Sr. Rita was the youngest of four children--she had two sisters, Adeline and Anna, and a brother. Jerome *Her brother Jim died at a very young age.* Sister Rita grew up near Colome, South Dakota. After graduating from Lynch High School, she moved to Alliance, Nebraska and attended St. Joseph Hospital School of Nursing. Interested in religious life, she left the nursing program to enter religious order of the Sisters of St Francis of Penance and Christian Charity in Denver, Colorado. At her first Profession she received the name of Sr Rita. After her first Profession, August 16, 1944, Sr. Rita returned to complete the nursing program at St. Joseph Hospital in Alliance, Nebraska. Sister Rita received her RN, Registered Nurse, degree from St. Joseph Hospital.

Sister had a full life of fidelity to prayer which sustained her through her 96 years. Sr. Rita was a humble, kind-gentle soul, and a spiritual woman. She was nurse, first and foremost. She had both the mind and heart to care for those in need. Her unspoken mission was always “to serve the sick in truth as Christ served.”

She worked at St. Joseph Hospital in Alliance, Nebraska, at St Mary’s Hospital in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, and Mission Community Health Center located in Mission, SD on the Rosebud Lakota Indian Reservation. Sr Rita moved to Minot, North Dakota to nurse in St. Joseph’s Hospital. She worked at Southern Hills Hospital in Hot Springs, South Dakota and nearly twenty-five years nursed at the VA, Veterans Affairs, Hospital in Hot Springs, South Dakota. Moving to O’Neill, Nebraska Sr. Rita worked part-time at the O’Neill Nursing Center and later nursed part-time at the Assisted Living facility there. While in O’Neill Nebraska she was a co-founder of the Regional Community, Mary, Our Lady of the Prairie.

Sr. Rita’s blood sister, Adeline Gosser, became quite ill. From that time until her death Sr. Rita was devoted to her care, moving to Gregory, South Dakota. She lived with Adeline. When Adeline went to a nursing home for skilled care, Sr. Rita continued to be near her until her death.

In 2009 Sister Rita retired and moved to Marian Residence to deepen her prayer life and move into a deeper union with God. She loved to be of service to others: she was a volunteer at the Collection Basket, a secondhand store operated by Holy Rosary Catholic Church. She volunteered in many ways at Marian Residence. It was a great gift and joy for her to be a part-time Eucharistic Minister for the Sisters when they could not attend Mass or Communion Services.

On Monday, May 4, 2020, Sr. Rita was admitted to Box Butte General Hospital, having great difficulty breathing; she was diagnosed with double pneumonia. She was placed on a very high level of oxygen. She asked to have the oxygen mask removed knowing it meant imminent death. Because of the new coronavirus protocols, she was tested for COVID 19. Because of COVID 19 no one could be with Sr. Rita’s when she went to Emergency Room at Box Butte General Hospital or when she was admitted to ICU. Sr. Rita did not want to die alone. Her prayers were answered when the test came back negative. On Wednesday, May 6, 2020, the Marian Residence Community Minister was with her when the oxygen mask was removed. Sr. Rita died peacefully.

Due to the COVID-19 restrictions and guidelines from Bishop Hannefeldt of the Grand Island Diocese, the wake and Mass were limited to 10 to 15 people. Father Tim Stoner officiated at the wake and Mass for Sr. Rita. Just the Sisters attended the wake at Marian Residence on Sunday, May 10, 2020. The sisters and staff attended Mass celebrating her life at Marian Residence on Monday, May 11. She was buried at Calvary Cemetery in Alliance, Nebraska. A larger memorial service will be held to honor Sr. Rita later.