

Sister Elena Francis Arminio, SC

Entered eternal life on July 6, 2022

Last week, I was deeply saddened to hear mi profesora de Español had died but gladdened to believe she went home to the Divine Embrace of the Lord she so willingly and faithfully served for 70 years.

I knew this day would come but selfishly always hoped for a few more. So does Seton Associate Brenda Vicioso, who lives now in Spain, who emailed: “I know she was getting on in age, but I felt she was always going to be there to visit. She really believed in me at a time when I didn’t. I’m going to miss her so much!” So many of us hoped for more of her. But who could keep her from the Holy Welcome?

Sister Elena Francis was the quintessential Sister of Charity of Saint Elizabeth. She was loving, happy, humble, generous with her time, talents and grace. She exuded an *alegria de vivir* – a zest for life – that reflected Gospel message as Jesus taught it. Her dedication to her students was unparalleled.

Seton Associate Joan Schildwachter said a quote from Ray Charles reminded her of Sister Elena. “What is a soul?” asked the famous singer. “It’s like electricity – we don’t really know what it is, but it’s a force that can light up a room.”

Sister Elena knew just how to light up a class! One bleak, raining, cold November day those of us in her first class dragged ourselves from the warmth of our beds to trek across campus to Santa Maria Hall. The wind was ferocious, and it blew sleet and rain into the tiniest crevices of our rain wear. Dripping puddles, we climbed the well-worn stairs to Sister’s room on the second floor. Like sun appearing on a rainy shore day, Sister Elena greeted us with smiles and joy.

Once we got settled, she told us to move our desks to the walls, leaving a large space in the center of the room. Then she placed a tired old record player on her desk. She then pulled a 78 out of a yellowed paper sleeve, placed it carefully on the turntable, gently rested the needle on the edge, and turned the player on. It was the Mexican Hat Dance! She produced a large sombrero and tossed it in the middle of the open floor space. Then hand on hip, she showed us how to execute the perfect swirl to the right, then swirl to the left as we circled the hat. In no time we were ready to don serapes and join a mariachi band!

Seton Associate Marie Noel wrote: “Sister Elena made my life as a student a dream experience. It was the way she modeled the love of God and love of neighbor that made a difference in me. I will miss her laugh, her various accents, her stories and her songs. Heaven is a bit nicer and happier for having this special flower.”

Two college classmates share their admiration. Lois Pontillo Mignone, who earned her doctorate in Spanish literature, emailed: “Our beloved Hermana was an incredible educator who has remained my favorite even comparing her to all of my graduate school professors.” Patricia Bigley Thelander, a Spanish major, said “I truly admired her. She had so much energy! I was very fortunate to have known her.”

To say I loved her is an understatement. She embodied the essence of my college years and much of my days as Director of Seton Associates. She was determined to reach a goal of sponsoring one dozen Seton Associates and, last time I counted, she had sponsored the most members of our lay affiliate. She was so proud when her brother Joseph became an Associate.



Every month, Sister Elena Francis assembled a scrap book of poems, prayers, short articles, photographs, stories of saints, all spiritual in nature, and asked Ana Navarro to make about 20 photocopies and mail one to each of her sponsorees and a few others – still in recruitment stage. Those who received the mailing cherished it. It was an occasion to sit down for the 10 or 15 minutes it took to read, ponder and assimilate some of the spiritual messages. Most of all, it was a gift from Sister Elena that we all treasured. She never forgot us.

There was more to Sister Elena than being a remarkable Sister of Charity. She was Italian! Sister grew up in a loving, faith-filled family where prayer was commonplace and Divine Presence was cherished as much as parents and siblings. Sister often talked about her family; she adored her father. Her many nieces and nephews walked on water. If anyone took Sister out to lunch, she always knew just the place to go. Arminio's in Chatham – her nephew's restaurant. And arriving we all were greeted as family! It was easy to see how Sister's Italian family life informed her relationships with Sisters, students, Seton Associates and others.

True to her roots, Sister loved to cook and often baked goodies to distribute to anyone who looked hungry. She truly "served" on the Seton Associate Advisory Board. She arrived at each meeting with her walker basket filled with cheese balls and crackers, stuffed dates, and two banana breads. One with nuts, one without. After the meeting she wrapped up goodies and sent us home with them.

Still, a part of me died with Sister Elena. It's difficult to lose that "electricity." Fortunately, a wonderful part of her lives on! Her modeling of charity was and remains the standard I try to attain.

In reflection, we can all ponder what we model, what we may leave behind.

Muchas gracias, Hermana Elena Francis, para todo su amor, amabilidad, y la risa. The Spanish have an expression in parting: Hasta luego – until we meet again. Hasta luego, Sister Elena Francis Arminio. We will meet again.

Su estudiante y amiga,
Rosamaría Lalevé Carroll