

Sister Elisa Ryan, OSU, Provincial



If you were to ask Ursuline Provincial Sister Elisa Ryan about the most profound faith sharing she has ever experienced, she would describe her time at a St. Louis, Missouri county jail.

Once a month for eight years, Sr. Elisa met with a group of twelve to fifteen women prisoners. These women were “the poorest of poor,” and naturally anxious as they were awaiting the news of their sentencing. Locked in a room together, Sister Elisa would read Scripture, usually from the Gospel of that Sunday, and the women would reflect on its meaning. The sessions were voluntary, and open to everyone regardless of their faith backgrounds.

Sr. Elisa was allowed to bring two things with her during her trips to the county jail: resource fliers and greeting cards. The resource fliers were intended to help the women once they were released from jail and needed to transition back into the world. The greeting cards allowed the prisoners to stay connected to their families.

“You would have thought the greeting cards were gold,” remembers Sr. Elisa. “Some women would take cards even if they had no one to send them to, using the cards as inspiration to be better.”

Sr. Elisa credits prison ministry for grounding her in what truly matters: relationships that are supportive and meaningful. When describing the conversations shared in the jail, Sr. Elisa states: “We lost all sense of division and we were just a group of women supporting one another. I would come home from the jail so buoyed by a sense of hope and gratitude. I would pray for them and they would assure me they would pray for me.”

In addition to the St. Louis county jail, Sr. Elisa has engaged in service and prayer around the world. During her twelve years of service as a member of the Roman Union Ursulines’ leadership team in Rome, Sr. Elisa traveled to more than thirty different countries; she met the poor in many countries inhabited by the Roman Union Ursulines, including locations such as Mexico, Guyana, Peru, and Barbados. While visiting Africa, Sr. Elisa entered a grass hut and recalls sitting on the ground and speaking to the local women there. While visiting in the Australian desert, she met Aboriginal women who taught her how to hunt for sandfrogs, roast them on sticks, and eat them. “I still can’t believe I did that!” says Sr. Elisa, giddily, upon seeing my shocked face on the Zoom screen.

Sr. Elisa vividly remembers that every place she visited had its own beauty — its own distinctive culture, people, and land. Despite these obvious differences, everywhere Sr. Elisa traveled, she saw the same Ursuline *Serviam* shield. The recurring and constant symbol of the shield was a reminder of the unity and sisterhood of the Ursulines; the charism of St. Angela Merici travels beyond country and continent borders, beyond province lines, beyond language barriers.



There are Ursuline sisters on every single continent with the exception of Antarctica. In Rome, Sister Sue Flood (who hails from Australia) serves as the Roman Union of Ursulines' Superior General. She oversees a leadership team of sisters of varying nationalities. "Even though we do not all look alike," says Sr. Elisa, "we share the same charism and spirit that St. Angela gave us almost five hundred years ago. How special is that!"

Though it was my first time meeting Sr. Elisa, I felt as though we had been close friends for years due to Sr. Elisa's incredibly warm, welcoming, and radiant personality. She is witty, humorous, and absolutely delightful to meet. Her sincerity, kindness, and ability to make a person feel truly seen and known is reminiscent of St. Angela.

Sr. Elisa joined the Ursuline Order following her graduation from an Ursuline high school. As an Ursuline, she has served as both a teacher (teaching theology, mathematics, and French) and a principal at two different schools in Illinois. She served on the leadership team of the Central Province Ursulines in the United States and later the international leadership team in Rome. She served as a Vocation Director, a position which allowed her to collaborate with all of the Roman Union Ursuline schools in the United States to lead lessons in discernment and how to utilize innate gifts and talents to better the world. Sr. Elisa currently works in leadership, serving as Provincial of the Roman Union Ursulines' Central Province. It is important to note that Dedham is a part of the Central Province!

When asked if she would like to share a message with the students of Ursuline Academy, Dedham, Sr. Elisa chose the following: "The gifts that St. Angela has given to us are just as meaningful and relevant today as they were five hundred years ago. Her courage, her kindness, her reverence, her ability to listen carefully to others and hear the spirit of God in their hearts... these gifts are so important. We are blessed to have a woman saint to emulate. Get to know Saint Angela while you are in school and keep her with you for the rest of your lives."

During Women's History Month, we celebrate Sr. Elisa for her generous and selfless contributions to the Ursuline Order. There is no doubt that she has made the world a more loving, selfless, and beautiful place while embodying and sharing St. Angela's legacy.