Sister Barbara Bieker, OP
1932 – 2016

Love God All You Nations

Sister Barbara Bieker was born in her grandmother’s house in Chehalis, Washington, on October 2, 1932. She was the second of three children born to Thomas Andrew and Ruby Alice (Handy) Bieker. In an article entitled, “I Need to be Ready for Anything,” Sister Barbara shared the following information about her family and childhood.

I have an older brother Jim and a younger sister Rosemary. When I was a young child, my family moved to Onalaska, Washington, where my public school education began. My family attended Mass sometimes at St. Joseph’s in Chehalis where I first met the Dominican Sisters [Congregation of Holy Cross]...I was impressed by their kindness. It was at this time that I first wanted to be a teacher.

When I was a junior in high school, the Sisters came from [their Motherhouse in] Everett to teach summer vacation school. Sister Mary Jean Dorcy and Sister Agnella Graf invited and encouraged me to finish my senior year at Holy Angels High School in Seattle, which I did.

After graduating from Holy Angels High School, Sister Barbara entered the Everett postulate on September 7, 1950, at the age of seventeen. During reception, she received her religious name, Sister Philip Mary. She made first profession on June 14, 1952.

Her first seventeen years of ministry were spent teaching in four elementary schools. The first was St. Peter Martyr, a parish school located in the East Bay region of the San Francisco Bay in California. The school had opened two years earlier and was staffed by the Sisters. Sister Barbara’s assignment there lasted only a few months because in February 1953 she was assigned to teach at St. Alphonsus School in Seattle. Her third assignment was St. Benedict School in Seattle, where she taught from 1955 to 1962.

Sister Barbara spent many summers studying at Seattle University where, she received her bachelor’s degree in 1961. In addition to studying, the Sisters were also assigned to teach in summer vacation schools. In 1957, Sister Barbara taught at the summer vacation school in Tulalip, Washington. This experience initiated a change in her ministry. Sister Barbara wrote:

My first attempt at teaching Summer Vacation School was at St. Anne’s Mission in Tulalip, Washington. This was the summer after final profession  [1957]. I was

1 Psalm 117
trying to teach St. Thomas Aquinas to the Native children while they were jumping up and down over the Communion Rail. I think this was when I received a call to work with Native Americans which I have been doing since 1967.

After that summer, Sister Barbara continued teaching in elementary schools for another twelve years. She taught at Blessed Sacrament School in Seattle for four years and then returned to St. Benedict School, where she taught until June 1969.

Sister Barbara began her apostolate to Native Americans in La Conner, Washington, in 1969. She had the opportunity to spend a year with the Swinomish Tribal Community before returning in 1970 to classroom teaching at St. Alphonsus School in Seattle for the next two years. This marked the end of her nineteen years of classroom teaching in parish schools.

For the next thirty-two years (1972 to 2004) Sister Barbara ministered principally to the Swinomish and Tulalip Communities in Washington. Her first six years were with the Tulalip Tribes in Marysville, Washington, where she served as pastoral minister and director of religious education at St. Anne Church. In 1979, she moved to La Connor, where she served for six years as Swinomish Senior Citizen Program Coordinator and part-time pastoral associate at St. Paul Church.

Sister Barbara also began serving on various boards and participated in the Kateri Tekakwitha Conference and regional group meetings. The Tekakwitha Conference provided catechetical resources and the opportunity for ministers to share their stories and concerns. She also took water color art courses through Skagit Valley College that were offered in the area.

From 1986 to 1988, Sister Barbara served as a member of the North Puget Sound Indian Ministry Team while she continued her ministry with the Swinomish and Tulalip Reservations. After a brief sabbatical, she returned to serve as pastoral minister for the Swinomish and Tulalip Reservations in La Connor and Marysville for her final thirteen years of ministry.

Sister Barbara suffered a heart attack in 2004 that resulted in coronary by-pass surgery. She was no longer able to live alone on the reservation, so she moved to Assumption Convent in Seattle to recuperate. During the wake service Sister Maria Goretti Browne, Vicaress of the Adrian Vicariate, shared the following about Barbara during this period:

*Although she lived alone on the reservation during some of those years, she moved to Assumption in Seattle to recuperate, and really enjoyed living there and caring for the garden. Since she left the reservation in a hurry when she had the heart attack, the people brought her back for a beautiful ceremony when she was clothed in the blanket of the tribe. Before they wrapped her in that blanket, each person held it and put his or her own special blessing on it. We saw pictures of that lovely ceremony on the table in the Rose room. You will notice that Petey was at her feet during that ceremony. Barbara loved that little dog.*
Barbara moved into the DLC in the spring of 2010. She was an artist and a member of the Dominican Institute of the Arts. When she became ill and her memory failed, even that part of her mind was gone. She could no longer draw, sketch, and paint, but she never lost her loveliness, her patience and her peacefulness. So, who was Barbara Bieker? She was a lovely, patient, peaceful woman who spent her life serving others. As she wrote, she lived “in two cultures.”

Sister Barbara Bieker died at the Dominican Life Center/Maria on August 4, 2016, at the age of eighty-three.

Sister Iva Gregory emailed a message that was read during the wake service by Sister Mina Riggs. Here are excerpts from her message.

I lived with Barbara during my sabbatical in 2008. She was a delight to live with. Such a gentle, generous, and talented person! I was fortunate enough to be her driver the day Barbara was invited to the Tulalip Reservation for a farewell celebration. Barbara had ministered on the reservation for many years, but had to leave suddenly due to a heart attack, and the people never had a chance to say good-bye to her. When she was well enough for her celebration she was invited back, and I was the lucky person to go with her!

Such words of affection, gratitude and love poured forth for Barbara! Her dog Petey, who had been adopted by a friend of Barbara’s, was also at the celebration, and sat lovingly at the feet of Barbara during the whole ceremony. After the ceremony there was a "large feed" put on by the tribe. It was during this time that people individually had a chance to tell Barbara of their gratitude and love. What a day to remember for her and how inspired I was of Barbara and her faithful and loving ministry!

Sister Ann Fallon recalled meeting Barbara’s brother Jim when she ministered in Alaska. The diocese had asked her to coordinate a process between two parishes to explore the possibility of building a new school that would serve both parishes. Jim served on the committee and it was during this contact that he told Ann about his sister who belonged to a small Dominican Congregation in the Northwest that recently joined a larger congregation. Sister Ann soon realized that Adrian was Congregation. Later, Sister Ann was able to send Jim one of his sister’s paintings.

Sister Mina Riggs delivered the homily, written by Sister Mary White, who entered the Congregation with Barbara. Here is an excerpt of her message.

The readings² this morning speak much of how Barbara Bieker lived her life. “As the Father has loved me so I have loved you. Remain in my love.”

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² Isaiah 25: 6-9; John 12: 9-17
Sometimes I wonder how we did the things we have done in our lives. Barbara was sent to teach 4th grade in one of our schools. She taught for many years and finished her education during 14 years at Summer School. I believe that it was this love of God and her reliance on it that enabled Barbara to do the astounding things she did. This was Barbara’s way of laying down her life for her friends.

It was later in her life that Barbara found the love of her life and came to work among her native people, those with whom she felt totally at home. It was among the Swinomish and Tulalip people that she felt she could truly “go and bear fruit that would last.” She loved them and they loved her.

Barbara has now reached that mountain of which Isaiah speaks where she and her Swinomish brothers and sisters who have gone before her can celebrate as only they know how and sing with the Psalmist:

‘Praise God all you nations! Extol God all you people! For God’s love is strong and God’s faithfulness is everlasting!’
Right: Members of the 2012 Diamond Jubilarians August Crowd are, back row, from left: Sisters Marion O’Loughlin, Diane Odette, Diana Bader, Norma Dell, Mary Ann Zakrajsek, and Attracta Kelly (Prioress) and front row, from left: Sisters Marie Quenneville, Mary Nugent, Jean Horger, Philomena Perreault, Barbara Bieker, and Mary Giacopelli.

Left: Sister Barbara (left) with her sister, Rose.
Right: Gathered at Assumption Convent in Seattle are, seated, from left: Sisters Ann Patrick Deegan, Maureen Rose, and Adella Diedrich; middle row, from left: Sisters Judy Byron, Barbara Bieker, and Philomena Perreault; Marguerita, the cook; and Sisters Virginia Pearson and Dorothy Berg; and back row, from left: Sisters Sharon Park and Denise Walsh; and Associates, Ruth Shipp-Dart and Margaret Lichter.