Sister Mary D. O’Connor, OP
1931-2016

Sister Mary D. O’Connor, baptized Gertrude Dorothea, was born on February 22, 1931, in Paterson, New Jersey. She was the youngest of three girls born to George and Gertrude (Patten) O’Connor. Ann and Katherine were her two sisters. Her father, who was born in Chaumont, New York, was employed as a mechanical engineer. Her mother was born in Lorain, Ohio.

During the remembrance service, Sister Pat Dulka, Chapter Prioress of Holy Rosary Mission Chapter, shared the following story about Mary’s baptismal name.

Her parents couldn’t come together on what to name her; her dad wanted Gertrude, which was Mary’s mom’s name, and her mom wanted Dorothea; she did not want her to be called Gertrude. But at the time of Mary’s baptism, her mom was in the hospital, so her dad had the privilege to take her to the church for the baptism, and he had the privilege to choose the name. His choice was to name her Gertrude Dorothea. You can imagine how that went over with her mom.

In 1935, when Mary was four years old, a tragedy occurred that had a profound emotional impact on the O’Connor family, especially the three daughters. George O’Connor, their father, was murdered that year in New York City. During the remembrance service, Tom Dillavou, Katherine’s son, spoke about the emotional impact this event had on his mother and on his two aunts. Their mother was now a widow and she had to take on the financial responsibility of providing for her family. To do this she placed her three daughters in foster homes until she had acquired the knowledge and skills needed to earn a living as a librarian.

From 1936 to 1944, Sister Mary attended three elementary schools in Illinois. Her first year of high school (1944-1945) was at Holy Trinity in Bloomington, Illinois, and the next two years (1945-1947) were at Mount St. Mary Academy in St. Charles, Illinois.

During her senior year at St. Augustine High School in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Sister Mary expressed an interest in religious life. She said that it was during her two years at Mount St. Mary Academy that she became attracted to religious life because of the
Sisters who taught her. She entered the postulate at the age of seventeen on June 27, 1948, and six months later received her religious name Sister Mary de Montfort.

Following first profession on December 31, 1949, Sister Mary was assigned to teach music at St. Celestine School in Elmwood Park, Illinois, for the next five years. Her education in music had begun long before she entered. She had taken piano lessons for six years and also had taken violin and cello lessons. After she entered, her undergraduate studies at Siena Heights College continued in this area with a major in applied music. She received her Bachelor in Music degree in 1955.

From 1955 to 1961, Sister Mary was assigned to teach music full-time at St. Laurence in Chicago. It was during this time that she requested to expand her teaching assignments to include other subjects along with music. In response to her request, she also began doing parish visiting during the summers of 1957 to 1962.

Sister Mary continued to teach in elementary schools in Chicago from 1961 to 1970. She was assigned to St. Philip Neri School for five years and four years at St. Columbanus. For three of her years at St. Columbanus, she was principal of the school.

Most summers during this period were spent at Siena Heights College, where she had begun graduate studies in education. In 1970, she received a Master of Education degree in School Administration and Supervision. Sister Mary wrote the following regarding her studies at Siena.

> Since I am a principal, my studies [at Siena] are definitely related to my present work and have been most helpful. I think teaching and assisting in administrative work would make maximum use of my professional competence. I have some talent in music, but my interest is limited to the field of musicology.

Following two years of teaching at Queen of Apostles School in Riverdale, Illinois, Sister Mary was again assigned to be school principal, this time at Visitation School in Elmhurst, Illinois. Her term as principal from 1972 to 1975 was just the beginning of her thirty-seven years of ministry at Visitation.

For the next twelve years, Sister Mary alternated between teaching at the Dominican Life Center in Adrian for two years and then returning to Visitation in Chicago for nine years before returning to Adrian to manage the PAL Program for one year. It was during this period that her mother died of a heart attack on February 3, 1979.
When she returned to Chicago in 1987, she remained at Visitation School in Elmhurst, Illinois, for the next twenty-six years. Sister Mary taught eighth grade religion, math and science and Sister Thomas Leo was the principal. They both lived in Visitation Convent. In addition to her teaching schedule, Sister Mary also served on the parish RCIA team, was a Eucharistic minister and minister of care. In her annals, she wrote the following about her ministries.

*My educational ministry is the most significant influence in my life. Besides the regular teaching hours I am asked to be involved in many extracurricular activities. My ministry of care includes visiting parishioners in the hospital. This helps me to be part of the larger church community in our parish.*

By the year 2000, however, Sister Mary’s focus was her growing concern for Sister Thomas Leo’s health and her own. She said, “I try to accept the limitations physical deterioration have imposed on me.” A few years later she wrote, “The aging process has greatly simplified my life.” Sisters Mary and Thomas Leo retired in June 2013 and a few months later they returned to Adrian.

Sister Mary D. O’Connor died on February 5, 2016, at the age of eighty-four and in the sixty-seventh year of her religious profession.

During the remembrance service Sister Pat Dulka described Sister Mary as an excellent teacher.

*Mary had a brilliant mind; was excellent at anything she set out to do; I think she had a love for learning. If she needed to know something or wanted to do something new, she just set out to learn it and then, most frequently used it to help others. Every year she would put on a Science Fair, and for many, many years her students won significant awards at the State Science Fair.*

*And although a faithful Dominican, her close friends would say that part of her heart was with the Carmelites. She had strong devotion to St. Therese of Lisieux. She and Sister Noreen Burke had the opportunity to travel to France to visit the home of St. Therese, the Carmelite Monastery where she lived and the beautiful Cathedral that was built in her name.*

Sister Noreen Burke spoke about their mission group and how Mary’s clear thinking was so helpful to the group.
In the early days of our government structure we enjoyed meeting and sharing our ideas and opinions on a variety of topics. During these discussions, I was always amazed at Mary’s ability to bring clarity right to the core of the topic we were discussing. Often she did this with one or two sentences. She was blessed by God with a brilliant mind.

Sister Mary’s nephews, Tom and John Dillavou shared the following stories. Tom talked about his grandfather’s murder and how it affected his mother Ann and her two sisters. He said, “Aunt Mary was the one who seemed able to rise above it.” Tom was deeply touched by his aunt’s life of service to others.

John spoke about the extended families coming together for Thanksgiving Day and Christmas. Sometimes during the day, conversations began to take on a negative tone and his aunt would go to the piano and begin to play familiar melodies and soon everyone was relaxed and singing together. She had that kind of effect on the family.

Father Jim Hug, SJ, offered this closing prayer

Our Loving God,
Help us to be, as Mary was among us, wise and attentive teachers: caring and open to discern the sacred in the movements of our lives. Amen.
LEFT: The O’Connor family, walking home from Mass, winter 1935-36 – parents, George and Gertrude O’Connor and, from left, their daughters, Kay, Mary, the future Sister Mary, and Ann. CENTER: Sister Mary in High School. RIGHT: December 31, 1954.

LEFT: Sister Mary (L) with Sister Thomas Leo Monahan (R).
Family reunion in San Diego, California, 1994. Sister Mary is on the large rock in front.

Members of the 1998 Golden Jubilee June Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Judith Mary Singer, Mary Catherine Jordan, Marie Geraldine Brownell, Mary D. O’Connor, John Norton Barrett, Joyce Banks; middle row, from left, Sisters Joan Sopha, Nora Brady, Mary Schmagner, Celestine Dunne, Margaret Urban, Therese DeCanio, Patricia Wiley; and, front row, from left: Sisters Mary E. Quinn, Mary Helen Mack, Dorothy Thielk, Mary Frances Radtke, Patricia Ann Hurley, Marion
O’Connor, and Alice Riegel.