Sister Mary Declan Foss, OP
1920-2016

Baptized Geraldine Alice Foss, Sister Mary Declan was born on September 4, 1920, in Toledo, Ohio. She was the second of three children born to Carl and Eleanor (Casey) Foss. Her father was born into a Methodist family who lived in Boston. Her mother, born in Scartaglen, County Kerry, Ireland, came to the United States at an early age and was working as a telephone operator for the New York Central Railroad Depot in Toledo when she met her future husband, who worked in the same building as a telegrapher for the railroad.

In her autobiography, Sister Declan wrote:

_Theirs was a mixed marriage with my father being always faithful to his promises to send the three of us to Catholic schools. A few years after I entered, my father became a Catholic. My grade school education was from the Notre Dame Sisters who were originally from Cleveland. I graduated from Ursuline Academy in Toledo and received a B.A. degree from Ursuline Mary Manse College in 1943._

Geraldine taught in a public school for four years before beginning her graduate studies at the University of Detroit in the 1947 spring semester. For many years, she had wanted to become a Sister, but hesitated because she thought her father would object. While at the University she met and studied with Sisters “in all sorts of habits from so many places, even from my aunt’s community in Emmitsburg, Maryland.”

Believing that the Holy Spirit was at work and many unusual things were happening that said “Adrian” to her, Geraldine entered the postulate on August 6, 1947, and a year later received her religious name Sister Mary Declan. During that first year, she was assigned to teach at St. Joseph Academy. But it was after profession in August 1949 that she officially began her teaching ministry in elementary schools.

Her first two assignments were in Chicago: St. Rita Grade School and Aquinas High School. Then she was assigned to St. Mary School in New Baltimore, Michigan, where she taught for seven years. As she wrote in her autobiography, this was one of her favorite missions.

_I like New Baltimore very much. These nuns certainly work hard and pray faithfully. I feel that I never worked like this before. The people are simple, poor and good. They have the spirit of poverty and it doesn’t scare me because I see how happy they are. Their children like ordinary things. Some seem so untouched by worldly standards. The strange thing is that they don’t realize what a great blessing this is. They just live from day to day in what God sends._

Also during her last years at St. Mary, Sister Declan finished her summer studies at DePaul University and passed her orals in 1956. It was during this time that her father was baptized and her mother had surgery.
In 1959, Sister Declan returned to Illinois to teach for three years at St Bridget School in Loves Park. In 1962, she was assigned to teach at St. Louis Bertrand School in Oakland, California. Her mother suffered a stroke the following year and Sister Declan requested that she be assigned someplace close to Toledo for the summer and her fall appointment. As a result she returned to Adrian in 1963 for the summer and in the fall was assigned to teach at Blessed Sacrament School in Toledo. Her mother’s health continued to decline and she died a few days before Christmas in 1964.

In the fall of 1965, Sister Declan returned to her favorite mission: St. Mary School in New Baltimore. St. Mary was one of several schools in Michigan that had lost state funding and so at the end of the school year St. Mary Parish had to consolidate its School with Immaculate Conception Parish School in Anchorville. During this interim period the consolidated school was named Anchor Bay Catholic. Sister Declan taught at Anchor Bay Catholic from 1966 to 1967.

From 1967 to 1970, Sister Declan was missioned in Ohio at St. Mary School in Defiance for two years and then at Blessed Sacrament School in Toledo. During this period, her father’s health declined steadily and her sister Norine continued to struggle with health issues. Both assignments gave her support during this time when her family was in need. Her father died in February 1970.

From 1970 to 1973, Sister Declan was assigned to St. Theresa Home as a recreational therapist. She wrote:

> In the fall I shall be at St. Theresa Home for the Aged in Cincinnati. This will be quite different from teaching school. However, I look forward to being of assistance to those dear souls who are in heaven’s waiting room.

While missioned at St. Theresa Home, Sister Declan began exploring the possibility of transferring to a cloistered community. The 60s and 70s were periods of great change in religious congregations and in the Church. The benchmarks of the Adrian Dominican Congregation seemed to be shifting and she was concerned about changes in the horarium or typical daily schedule of prayer, such as silence.

With the permission of Sister Rosemary Ferguson, the Prioress, Sister Declan began writing to several monasteries during her years at St. Theresa’s Home and continued during her three year ministry as housekeeper at Weber Center. By 1973, she had been accepted at the Monastery in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, but when the time came to go to LaCrosse, Sister Declan decided to continue her life as an Adrian Dominican.

After one year at Queen of Angels School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, she returned to Anchorville, Michigan, where she taught and served as coordinator of religious education for the parish for the next nine years. She wrote the following about her ministry.

> I am preparing forty 8th graders for confirmation these days. Bishop Patrick R. Cooney will confirm them on Sunday, March 15. Sister Marie Celestine is preparing second graders for the First Confession. This will take place next week. Sister and I are happy in our work here. Although there are some frustrating moments working with the young, yet, they really keep us on target.
Sister Declan retired from teaching in June 1988 and for the next five years served as assistant for the elderly sisters who lived at St. Lawrence Convent in Utica, Michigan. In July 1993, she returned to Adrian and lived in Regina for the next twelve years. True to Dominican tradition, she continued to study during these years and shared her opinion on a broad range of Congregation issues with clarity and respect.

When declining health limited her strength, she moved into the Dominican Life Center/Maria where she died on May 21, 2016, at the age of ninety-five.

During the wake service, Sister Maria Goretti Browne, Vicaress of the Adrian Dominican Vicariate, said:

To all who came to know her, Sister Declan was a woman of prayer, a loyal and faithful friend – a sister, sister-in-law and aunt who loved her family and tried to be a help to them in whatever ways she could. Her niece Lois told of Sister Declan spending time with them often. She would make a list of chores for each of them to do – this list of chores assigned with the clear impression that she expected them to complete them, earned her the name, “Sarge.” They never called her this within her hearing! They were quick to add that while they did not appreciate the Sarge’s orders as young teens, they came to appreciate what she taught them and their love for her deepened through the years.

She left memories of a very prayerful woman who walked or stood while praying as she did not want to fall asleep while at prayer. She kept busy – she was a seamstress and also crocheted. A lovely crocheted afghan covered Sister Declan on her death bed – the work of her hands there to comfort her to the end!

The readings¹ for the funeral provided the setting for the homily by Father Roland Calvert, OSFS, -- a reflection on his conversations with Sister Declan. In summary, he described Sister Declan as:

- A reverent, spirited pray-er with a love for the Eucharist and Rosary
- Proud of the new Dominican habit in which she would be buried
- Tireless in study and questioning to understand life in and with God
- Gifted with compassionate care for the people in her life
- Warm, genuine and always with a smile rising from the deep joy of her heart.

¹ Corinthians 5: 1-10; John 11:21-27
Left: Sister Mary Declan Foss, left, and Sister Marie Celestine Guttman enjoy the flowers at the Dominican Life Center, July 1987. Right: Kneeling, Sister Margaret Reardon, and standing, from left, Sisters Marie Celestine Guttman, Margaret Karam, Mary Declan Foss, Phyllis Smith, Mary Coulter, Margaret Younglove, and Barbara Carroll.

Left: With her aunt, Mrs. Dorothy Carlton. Right: Enjoying the 1989 Rosary Altar Society Christmas party at St. Lawrence, Utica, Michigan are, from left: Sister Mary Decla, Sister Marie Celestine Guttman, and Stella Witulski.
Left: With her family, from left: Carl Foss, her father; Eleanor, her mother; Norine, her sister; and Frank, her brother. Right: At St. Theresa Home, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1972.

Left: Ringing the bell for Angeles, Holy Rosary Chapel, Adrian, 1997.