Sister Renee Richie, OP
1934-2016

Love is my calling.

Sister Renee Richie, baptized Lois Janette, was born on June 13, 1934, in Detroit, the fourth of six children born to Alfred and Gladys (McCardy) Richie. Her father was born in Canada, and her mother had lived there since early childhood. They married in 1924 and their first three children – Eleanor, Alfred “Freddy” and Pauline – were born in Canada. Sister Renee and her two younger brothers, David and Owen, were born in Detroit.

In her autobiography, Sister Renee wrote the following about her family:

My father was the decision-maker in our home, always very responsible yet a quiet man who liked routine and order. My mom was the homemaker, cooking basic meat and potatoes and living simply. She was very creative and unafraid to try new ideas. She nursed me through Polio when I was five. I was paralyzed in bed for six months, and because of her healing touch and massage, I feel I was completely cured. There was no medication available. In many ways it was a joyous time as I was the center of attention.

I was close to all my brothers and sisters yet in very different ways. Freddy was always significant in my life. We had a deep understanding of the more serious parts of our lives. For example, he shared with me his desire to enter the monastery before he told anyone else. [My older sister] Pauline and I shared as sisters and I always felt I was her confidant.

Sister Renee described her postulant and novitiate as a time of learning and being busy. She wrote the following about her most difficult challenge.

The really difficult thing was accepting the religious name Sister Januaria. It was the feminine form of Saint Januarius, so it was most unusual and I found it be a problem. Finally, in 1964, I asked Mother Genevieve to change my name. When asked why I was requesting this, I said I was going to live with Sister August Mary (Marianne Supan). After she stopped laughing she granted my request. I became Sister Renee using my brother’s name, Brother Rene. He was delighted and so was I.
Renee made first profession on August 5, 1954, and was immediately sent to Chicago to teach at St. Carthage School. She credits this seven-year experience for making her a good primary teacher. She discovered that she did not know the students by the color of their skins but by the unique gifts and talents of each individual.

During the decade of the 60s, Sister Renee was assigned to teach in five parish schools in Illinois: St. Bridget in Loves Park for four years, Queen of Apostles in Riverdale for one year, St. Denis in Chicago for three years, St. Joseph in Homewood one year, and St. Clare Montefalco in Chicago for five years.

In 1970, experimentation began with open placement, which opened the door for Sister Renee and four of her friends to form an intentional community where they chose to live and minister together at St. Clare Montefalco School in Chicago. Sister Renee served as principal of the school, which was beginning to experience racial divisions. She wrote:

>The black community was moving close to Gage Park High School and people were angry and fearful. I felt the need to be involved, so I contacted all the ministers and priests in the community close by. Together we formed a clergy group to work in this situation that was getting volatile. One day during one of our meetings we received word there was an angry group assembling outside of the high school. I drove over to the school with a black Baptist minister and he said, “Well, Sister, you go to your side and I’ll go to mine.” We prayed that our presence would quiet the groups and it did.

>I knew someday I would choose to minister in a black community.

Sister Rosemary Ferguson’s letter in 1975 calling the Congregation to be with the poor and marginalized motivated Sister Renee to leave St. Clare and go to St. Agatha Parish in the inner city of Chicago, where she and Sister Maurine Barzantni served as co-ministers for five years.

From there, Sisters Renee and Maurine moved to St. James in Maywood to help stabilize the school, which was being considered for closure. The parish was a mixture of African-American, Hispanic and a few white families. Along with the pastor, who supported a diverse worshiping community, they were able to engage families in school and parish activities. It was during their nine years at St. James that Sisters Renee and Maurine began studying Spanish.

Sister Renee’s mother had died in 1988, so when she and Sister Maurine received a letter in 1989 from Sister Pat Johnson inviting them to minister in the Dominican Republic, she accepted. The next 10 years were devoted to ministry in the Dominican Republic. After an intense, three-month study of Spanish in Mexico, they moved to Santo Domingo, where Sister Renee worked with the people, especially the “Acaluvi,” (women united to live).

After two years in Santo Domingo, Sisters Renee and Maurine moved to Villa Fundacion and worked with the people of El Cruce, the poorest people in the diocese. Sister Renee wrote, “We knew we had found our ministry.” They remained there for seven years.

After taking a short sabbatical, Sister Renee resided in Adrian from 2000 to 2010 to, as she wrote, “reconnect with my life in the United States.” She became coordinator of projects to conserve natural resources on the Motherhouse Campus: composting, recycling, and conserving water, which became the priority.
By October 2010, Sister Renee felt called again to minister, this time at St. Clare Girls’ Orphanage in Kenya, East Africa. During her two and a half years in Kenya, her Trappist brother Rene died. Sister Renee wrote, “He said he would accompany me to Africa, but I didn’t realize he meant ‘in spirit.’”

Sister Renee’s last ministry was at Our Lady of Snows Parish in British Columbia. From April 2010 to July 2016, she and Sister Maurine lived on a First Nation Reservation to be part of the Native People’s daily lives.

During the wake service, Sister Carol Jean Kesterke, Chapter Priorress of Great Lakes Mission Chapter, said:

“I believe the greatest gift that Renee gave when she entered each of these communities was the total gift of self. She came as a humble woman with an open, free heart. In great tenderness she embraced the people as sacred, carriers of the holy. She was able to listen, to sit with them, to respond with reverence and to set into action what they desired and needed.

Sister Renee Richie died on Sept. 23, 2016, at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor at the age of eighty-two.

The following remembrances came from:

Centro Espiritu Santo-Fe Y Alegria and the school community:
Thank you for your immense vision, to arrive at the poorest places on the DR, where you sowed seeds of hope, love, respect, and teamwork. Thanks to you and Sister Maurine, today history has been shaped, as we grew from an education center with 127 students that today numbers 1,624 students in preschool, basic education and secondary school.

Jose Feliz, the first teacher from El Cruce:
Sister Renee was a woman with such a high degree of solidarity and humanism, which can be seen in her vision and dreams that motivated us to continue the projects she and Sister Maurine initiated together with us and which today advance among us with sure and firm steps.

Albania Mateo, Renee’s secretary, now principal of the school:

You were my guide, leader and my psychological test. Throughout my life you traced steps and blazed pathways that left footprints on my being. You always told me: “You will be the principal of the Center, you will guide these projects.” You formed and guided me until you achieved this objective.

Sister Helen Sohn, Co-Chapter Priorress of Holy Rosary Chapter, gave the homily during the funeral liturgy. The following is an excerpt of her message.

The Readings1 Renee chose for her Liturgy today bear witness to her deep-seated beliefs. It is evident that a relationship with Jesus was foundational to who she was and how she wanted to be in ministry. She wanted to know the love of Christ deep in her guiding and transforming principles.

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1Micah 6: 6-8; Ephesians 3: 14-19; Matthew 5: 1-10
Through the years how “to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with her God” became clearer as she opened herself to more and more life-enriching experiences, opportunities and challenges. But foremost were the relationships that were formed in these experiences that Renee cherished. From the members of her Crowd, to the sisters she lived and ministered with, to those with whom she formed community, to the students she taught, to the men and women of her CFM Group, to the inner city families of Chicago, to her dear friends from Canada, to the El Cruce community of the Dominican Republic, to the young women of St. Clare’s Girl Orphanage in Kenya, to the Native People of British Columbia, Renee offered herself in friendship. Renee wrote the following while on retreat in 2013:

Love is my calling.
Love is God within, without, all around.
Left: Sister Renee Richie with her brother, Brother Mary René Richie, a Trappist lay brother. Right: Sister Renee works with a student at St. Clare Girls’ Centre, Meru, Kenya.

Left: Posing near their home in Meru, Kenya, are, from left, Sisters Renee Richie, Kathryn Cliatt, Christa Marsik, and Maurine Barzantni.
Left: At the Siena Heights University 2005 Alumni Awards, from left: Sandy and Owen Richie, Renee’s sister-in-law and brother; Sister Maurine Barzantni, Sister Renee, and Pauline, Sister Renee’s sister. Right: In Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, from left: Sisters Renee Richie, Gladys Marie LeVack, Helen Faiver, Anne Liam Lees, and Maurine Barzantni.

Left: At Our Lady of the Snows Parish, Fort St. James, British Columbia, Canada: Sisters Renee Richie and Divinia Pedro, SCJ; Father Frank Salmon, OMI, pastor; and Sister Maurine Barzantni. Right: The Richie family – Sister Renee is in the second row from the bottom, fifth from the left.
Left: Sisters Maurine and Renee stand in front of the lake near their home in Fort St. James, British Columbia. Right: Members of the 2013 Diamond Jubilee class are, back row, from left: Sisters Attracta Kelly (Prioress), Joan Zinn, Renee Richie, Mary Bernard Lynch, and Joanne Screes; and front row, from left: Sisters Mary Tindel, Helen Sohn, Bernadette Therese Vozobule, Patricia Johnson, and Mary I. Assenmacher.