Sister Viviana Custo, OP
1938-2016

Baptized Rosa Custo, Sister Viviana was born on June 23, 1938, in the Village of Għarb on Gozo Island which is part of the island-nation of Malta in the Mediterranean Sea. She was the second of nine children born to Joseph and Anna (Mercieca) Custo. The Constitution of Malta establishes Catholicism as the state religion and it is also reflected in various elements of Maltese culture.

In her autobiography, Sister Viviana wrote the following about her childhood.

I had a happy and in most ways, a normal childhood. Looking back I realize that I grew up with a very safe and belonging feeling as compared to the lives of many that I touch in my ministry [today in 1993]. My mother never worked out of the house and was always present to us when we were home. I also spent quite some time with my father; evenings for him were family times: he took us fishing, to the beach, etc. Religion was part of our lives.

She attended St. Mary School in Victoria, the capital city of Gozo. It was a girls’ school that included junior through senior high grades. Two years after graduating from high school in 1955 she graduated from college with a teachers’ certificate that qualified her to teach in Malta’s public school system. In her autobiography she wrote about the importance of her college years.

My college years were significant in that it was the first time that I was away from home for long periods of time. I made new friends and accepted responsibilities, helped organize parish functions and was very active. It was during this time that I sensed the call to religious life. It was during times of private prayer that my call to religious life became clearer.

I mentioned this to my parents who, though practicing and devout Catholics, were very upset. My mother was determined that I was not going to join the sisterhood [Dominican Sisters of Malta.] My father did not say much but I did not sense much support from him. I realized that I owed my parents and my family some remuneration for the good education they had given me, so I decided to stay and teach for five years. I told my parents the date I had intended to leave. By the time of my departure I still did not have my parents’ consent, but I also realized that I did not need it to leave home, though it would have been much easier if I did.

Sister Viviana entered the postulate and novitiate of the Dominican Sisters of Malta on July 14, 1962, and in 1965 made first profession. Her first assignment was to be part of the founding group of Sisters who opened Our Lady Queen of Peace School in
Greystanes, a newly developed residential suburb of Sidney, Australia. Sister Viviana taught math the first four years and served as principal during the last three years. She wrote:

My years in Australia were good on the whole. It was a time when I got involved more on the parish level and more in the lives of parents whose children attended our school. There were many people settling from Italy and Malta and I went on many home visitations and talked to people. I felt I could empathize with them in their experience of being away from home, as I had gone through this myself earlier.

From January 1974 to June 1975, Sister Viviana was assigned to the Congregation’s Convent Guest House located in La Storta, an area northwest of Rome, Italy. In collaboration with the Vatican authorities, the Congregation provided accommodations and organized sightseeing tours for their guests. In her autobiography she wrote about a sense of not being fulfilled in this ministry. “Supposedly there was a lot of prestige attached to this position but I still felt the desire to be involved in education. I was growing unhappier as time went on.”

In 1975, Sister Viviana was assigned to teach at Holy Name School and serve as coordinator of their convent in West Palm Beach, Florida. She was pleased to be back in education but soon realized that her teaching credentials did not meet Florida’s standards for elementary teachers. She began taking evening and summer courses at Florida Atlantic University and, by 1978, received a bachelor’s degree in elementary education. Three years later, she received a master’s degree in education.

During this same post-Vatican II period, Sister Viviana also was becoming aware of “growing out of the Maltese religious mold.” In her autobiography, she wrote:

[I] could not find sense in the many restrictions that we had, and while still wanting to continue in religious life, felt that I was not really happy. I went for spiritual direction where, for the first time, I realized the difference between authority vested in a superior and the inner authority which empowers us to act freely and responsibly. Religious life and the commitment I made the day I took first vows were still important to me.

Sister Viviana began by asking her Superiors for permission to transfer to a local community. When her request was denied she then requested secularization, stipulating that she planned to join another religious community. Her conversation with the Adrian Dominicans began in 1978 and, after five years of counseling, dialogue sessions with Sisters in the transfer process, along with many "soul-searching and affirming moments," Sister Viviana’s transfer to the Adrian Dominican Congregation was finalized on June 11, 1983. One of her consolations during this transfer period was the support for her decision to transfer to another Congregation that she received from her family, including her mother’s.
During the transfer process, Sister Viviana taught at St. Ann School in West Palm Beach for two years and then at the Dominican Learning Center in Adrian for two years. In 1984, she served as principal and teacher at Sacred Heart School in Hudson, Michigan, for two years before moving to Southgate, Michigan, to teach at Aquinas High School. She spent summers studying pastoral ministry and spirituality at St. Michael College in Winooski, Vermont, and received her master’s degree in 1990. A component of her program included Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at the Medical Center in Burlington. Sister Viviana wrote the following about this experience.

I was very much affirmed as a person and as a minister and [was] encouraged by my supervisor to go into full time chaplaincy. I started considering this option and came to the conclusion that chaplaincy is more of an expression of who and what I desire to be with others than teaching mathematics. I applied to our Studies’ Board and received permission to pursue a CPE residency year at University Hospitals of Chicago. During my third quarter I started applying for chaplaincy position and experienced the fears of unemployment and the uncertainty of getting a job even though well educated. [Eventually] I was offered a full time position as chaplain at St. Catherine Hospital in East Chicago, Indiana.

Sister Viviana ministered at St. Catherine Hospital from 1993 to 2008 and became the director of the Pastoral Care Department. In an article in the Post Tribune¹ she described Circles of Hope, the monthly support group that she and her associate, Rev. Orlando Toledo, led for people affected by acts of violence.

Sister Viviana retired in 2008 because of illness and returned to Adrian, where she lived at the Dominican Life Center until she died on April 17, 2016, at the age of seventy-seven and in the fifty-second year of her religious profession.

Reverend Orlando Toledo, Chaplain at St. Catherine Hospital in East Chicago, Indiana, sent the following message that was read during the wake service:

As I look back and reflect on the years Sister Viviana and I worked together at St. Catherine Hospital I realized her role [was] an important part in my own formation and journey as a staff chaplain. Sister Viviana served with a heart of compassion and love for ministry and Christ. She would see the best in people and help them to have the assurance that God’s love, mercy, and presence was with them at all times, especially in the most difficult of times. She will continue to be very much missed as part of our lives and ministry in the department as well as at St. Catherine Hospital.

Sister Maria Goretti Browne, Vicaress of the Adrian Dominican Vicariate, shared the following reflection.

As we gathered this morning to remember Viviana, we heard tributes over and over from Sisters she lived with, taught with, those who knew her before she

became ill and needed to come home. The hymn, “I’ll Fly Away” has gone through my mind so often these days since Viviana’s death. No longer trapped in that body, Viviana has flown away to that home.

Her close friend, Sister Theresa Mayrand, described Sister Viviana’s interest in and enthusiasm for theatre, concerts, nature and travel. She loved to travel and, being a “seasoned traveler” herself, she knew how to search and find free passenger tickets even on international flights. Viviana was fun to be with; she was a blessing and gift in so many ways to all her friends.

The readings\(^2\) provided the focus for Sister Mary Ellen Plummer’s homily during the funeral liturgy. She said:

*If anyone had told that pretty little girl with the big brown eyes from the island in the Mediterranean Sea that she would grow up to be a brave strong preacher of God’s Word in a far-away place of ice and snow called Chicago or Michigan, she probably would have laughed. But the unlikely destinations of Viviana’s ministry were threaded together by a clear call to bring the Good News of Mercy to the People of God. Viviana found herself in hospital chaplaincy and if there was ever a match for Isaiah’s call this would be it: meeting people at every life crisis from birth to death to addictions to life support decisions.*

*Listen [also] to Viviana’s witness including her [final] seven years of silence. Seven years of sitting on the doorstep of heaven.*

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\(^2\) Isaiah 61:1-3, Mark 16:14-15
Right: Sisters Emiliana and Viviana with their mother.


Left: Sister Viviana, center, with her brother-in-law, George Portelli, and her sister, Elizabeth Portelli, in Malta, 2008. Right: Sister Viviana, second from right, with members of her first community, the Dominican Sisters of Malta.
With the Silver Jubilarian Crowd. Sister Viviana is second from the left in the front row.