Sister Marianne O’Neill, OP
1936-2017

Sister Marianne O’Neill was born on May 28, 1936, in Chicago, the youngest of three children born to David and Frances (Whitty) O’Neill. Her two older brothers were Whitney and David. The family lived on the South side of Chicago, just one block from St. Laurence Church.

In her autobiography, Sister Marianne wrote the following about her family and her early life.

My mom and dad were both born in Chicago. My oldest brother Whitney was born in 1927 and David, my other brother, was born in 1932. My dad worked at Carnegie Steel in South Chicago for thirty years. My mother did not work but when all of us were grown, she worked for Children’s Activities in downtown Chicago at Christmas time.

I loved all my teachers at St Laurence School. I went to Aquinas High School and graduated from there in 1954. Again, I had just wonderful teachers. At that time we had all nuns except for the drama and gym teachers. As you can see the only influence I had were the Dominican Sisters. I did have cousins who were BVMs and I saw them every summer but I never had the idea to enter their congregation.

At the age of eighteen, Sister Marianne entered the postulate on June 27, 1954, and the following December received her religious name, Sister David Frances. She made first profession on December 31, 1955, and spent the next eight months studying at Siena Heights College.

From August 1956 to June 1966, Sister Marianne was assigned to teach in two elementary schools: Queen of the Miraculous Medal in Jackson, Michigan, and Presentation in Detroit. These would be her only two classroom teaching assignments.

In her autobiography, she shared the following stories about her experience.

When my parents came to visit me at Queen of the Miraculous Medal in Jackson, they didn’t realize that the convent was a former mansion. The library was our chapel. Then I was sent to Presentation where I taught fourth grade and I was also the school librarian.

Summers during this ten-year period were spent studying at Siena Heights College and by 1960 Marianne completed her undergraduate studies and received her bachelor’s degree in 1960. She began her graduate studies in library science at the University of Michigan in 1967.

In 1966, Sister Marianne was assigned to Bishop Foley High School in Madison Heights, Michigan. The school had just opened the year before and was built by Guardian Angels Parish in Clawson and
St. Dennis Parish in Royal Oak. Bishop Foley is where Marianne began her ministry as school librarian.

During her seven years in Madison Heights, Sister Marianne completed her graduate studies and received her master’s degree in library science from the University of Michigan.

In 1973, she was hired at Boylan Central Catholic High School in Rockford, Illinois, to serve as school librarian. This school had also undergone some changes. Muldoon High School for girls had closed in 1970 and Boylan Central was now a central co-ed high school staffed by School Sisters of St. Francis, Adrian Dominicans, Sinsinawa Dominicans, diocesan priests and lay teachers. Sister Marianne ministered at Boylan until 1979.

In a ministry assessment for 1975-76, Sister Marianne wrote the following about her ministry at Boylan Central Catholic High School:

> In the self-evaluation studies, as part of the preparation for North Central Visitation of Boylan this year, I served on three committees, chairing one of these. As a member of the Philosophy Committee, I helped formulate a working Christian basis for policy-making and for all activities which flow from the school. In this process I tried to raise questions of honesty and fairness so that the resulting conditions of Boylan would reflect a school even more firmly committed to Christian values, with the hope of growing in these fundamental convictions which validate our existence as a Catholic high school.

In 1971, Sister Marianne was invited to serve at the Penafort House located in the convent at Our Lady Star of the Sea Parish. For two years she served as driver for the Sisters who lived there and, for a short time, she even was the coordinator.

In 1981, she accepted a position at Regina Dominican High School in Wilmette, Illinois. Here she served as a student academic advisor until June 1986. In August 1986, Sister Marianne accepted a librarian position at St. Viator, a boy’s high school in Arlington Heights, Illinois. The 1986-87 academic year turned out to be one of transition for St. Viator because by the fall of 1987 the neighboring girls’ high school, Sacred Heart of Mary, closed and merged with St. Viator, converting it into a co-ed high school. During the process of merging staff from both schools, Sister Marianne lost her position.

She returned to Adrian in the summer of 1987 and served there for the next nine years. The first three years she served as a driver for the Sisters. In 1990 she was elected to serve a six-year term as Chapter Prioress of the Motherhouse Chapter. In her autobiography, Sister Marianne wrote about her ministry in Adrian.

> I was blessed being a Chapter Prioress. I was a driver and had no idea this would happen. I know we all have our gifts, but I am a quiet person, and I did not feel myself a strong leader. But Sr. Ruth Steiner, who was in charge, said to me, “You’d better be careful because they are going to elect someone that they know.” The sisters loved me and I loved them too.
When her term ended, Sister Marianne had a sabbatical year and lived with Sister Romona Nowak in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Because of her experience ministering to the Sisters in Maria she accepted a pastoral care position at Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters in Huntington, Indiana. After four years she retired and volunteered in several parishes in the Indianapolis area until 2009 when she returned to Adrian.

Sister Marianne O’Neill died on January 13, 2017, at the age of eighty.

During the wake service, Sister Maria Goretti Browne, Vicaress of the Adrian Vicariate, shared the following.

Realizing that she was afflicted with the same disease that took her mother thirty years ago, and also her brother, Dave, Marianne chose to come to live in the DLC in 2009.

When we met to remember Marianne, words such as kind, gentle, gracious, were used by the sisters to describe her. Her cousin and Godchild, Mary Lou O’Grady, spoke of her as having the “O’Neill integrity.” Marianne was described as what she had called another: “a real friend.”

In her homily, Sister Marcine Klemm said,

Here are words attributed to Peter Maurin, who helped Dorothy Day found the Catholic Worker movement. His advice was when you don’t know what to do keep going to meetings because it is when we meet and share new concepts that the Holy Spirit is fruitful.

In today’s reading from Jeremiah\(^1\) we see the potter at the wheel in control of the clay. As the potter begins to spin the wheel, with gentle caressing, changes in the shape of the clay are being formed. When the clay takes a shape not intended, the potter scraps it. Every one of us has been the malleable clay molded by the Spirit.

The Gospel of John\(^2\) reminds us that as the Holy Spirit becomes more and more present to us and we are brought closer and closer to God. We become more and more aware of what our life is all about.

As we shared our experiences of Marianne’s life, I felt a certain pang of sorrow that many of us did not know her in her younger years: her generosity in ministry, her sensitivity in presence. Some of us did know her in her younger years and we celebrate her life. We rejoice with her because she has completed her contribution of making God’s presence real to the many she served.

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\(^1\) Jeremiah 18:1-6  
\(^2\) John 15: 9-17
LEFT: Members of the 1994 Leadership Team are: on the stairs, from the top to the bottom, Sisters Marianne O’Neill, Molly Nicholson, Marcine Klemm, Arlene Seckel, Patricia Brady, Mary Kathryn Cliatt, Virginia Kleckner, and Patricia Siemen; and on ground, from left, Sisters Mary Patricia Dewey, Molly Giller, Grace Flowers, Patricia Walter, Christine Matthews, Anne Guinan, Rose Celeste O’Connell, and Nancyann Turner. RIGHT: Enjoying Lands of Dominic, 1994

LEFT: Sisters Romona Nowak (left) and Marianne at the Belvedere Hotel during Lands of Dominic, 1994
LEFT: Celebrating Sister Marianne O’Neill’s birthday, May 11, 2011 at the Spotted Cow are, from left: Sisters Marilyn Francoeur, Marianne, Beverly Bobola, and Ann Patrice Remkus.

RIGHT: Sister Marianne grills bacon for breakfast for the Penafort Sisters, summer of 1975.