Sister Ann Seraphim Schenk, OP
1917 – 2018

The feeling I had while preparing this reflection was that of being with a faithful, loving person who knew who she was and what her calling meant – a person of prayer and a solid kind of dependable person you’d want in your life.

— Sister Joanne Peters, Co-Chapter Prioress of Holy Rosary Chapter, in her eulogy at the vigil service for Sister Ann Seraphim Schenk

Out of the thousands of women who have been Adrian Dominican Sisters, only a handful have lived to the age of one hundred or more. Sister Ann Seraphim Schenk was one of those treasured few: when she died on June 24, 2018, she was just four months shy of her 101st birthday and was in her eighty-first year in the Congregation.

Sister Ann Seraphim’s parents, Henry and Linda Hoff Schenk, were both of German descent, with Henry growing up in Quincy, Illinois, and Linda’s family living on a farm in Fayetteville, Illinois, a small town near Belleville. Linda was Henry’s second wife; his first wife died while their son was still an infant. The baby was raised by an aunt and her husband until after Henry remarried, at which point he went to live with Henry and Linda until he was of high school age and went back to the aunt and uncle’s home.

The family moved often in those early years. Henry and Linda went to California on their honeymoon and stayed there for some time; a son, Floyd, was born to them in Santa Cruz and Henry, a carpenter, even built a house there. But at some point soon thereafter, they moved back to Belleville, where four girls were born into the family.

The middle two of those girls – in between Evelyn, the oldest, and Marie, the youngest – were twins: the future Sister Ann Seraphim and her sister, who was older by fifteen minutes. They were born October 25, 1917, and difficulty over names began immediately; their Aunt Eleanore actually named them at birth, giving them the names Eleanore and Leonore, and Leonore is what went onto Sister Ann Seraphim’s birth certificate. Sister Ann Seraphim wrote in her autobiography that she and her sister had no idea about their original names until 1989, when she needed a copy of her birth certificate in order to obtain a passport.

Eleanore and Leonore weren’t the names Linda wanted at all, however, and when the twins were baptized she asked the priest to baptize them according to her wishes: Dorothy and Doris. The priest told her that the girls should have separate saints, and baptized them Rita Dorothy and Zita Doris. Whatever the case with birth and baptismal names, to the family Leonore was known as Doris Rose.

The Schenks moved to Camp Grant, an Army training camp south of Rockford, Illinois, where Henry did carpentry and was a watchman. The family lived in a barracks and got to know many of the soldiers who trained there in the summertime. Sister Ann Seraphim wrote in her autobiography that her mother baked pies and cakes for some of them on Saturdays.
When the camp closed, another move took the family to a home nearby, where the family’s fifth child, Eugene, was born in 1924. The final Schenk sibling, Marguerite, came in 1926 after the family had moved yet again in order to own their own home.

At first, the three older children attended St. James School in Rockford while the twins went to the nearby public school because – according to Sister Ann Seraphim’s autobiography – there was not enough room for all the children in the car. But then the family moved yet again, closer to St. James, and Dorothy and Doris attended that school for third grade, when they were preparing for First Communion, and then again for sixth grade, their confirmation year. Apparently, their mother wanted them to have these crucial two years of preparation from Sisters in a school setting, rather than in CCD classes.

Doris’ teacher at St. James was a Sinsinawa Dominican postulant, and it was through this experience that Doris realized she wanted to be a Sister-teacher herself. High school took all the children except Eugene to Muldoon High, which when Doris first got there was being operated by the Sinsinawa congregation. The next year, 1933, the Adrian Dominican Sisters took over the school.

As it turned out, Dorothy was feeling a similar call as Doris had first experienced in third grade, and in 1934 she entered the Missionary Sisters of the Blessed Trinity, receiving the religious name Sister Francis Henry.

Doris followed her twin into religious life after graduating from Muldoon, entering the Adrian Dominican Sisters on June 28, 1936. She received the habit and her religious name, Sister Ann Seraphim, on January 4, 1937, and made profession on January 6, 1938.

Her first appointment, to teach fourth grade at St. Ambrose in Detroit, was the start of a more than fifty-one-year ministry in education. The list of schools at which she taught is, unsurprisingly, a lengthy one: after St. Ambrose, it includes St. Gabriel, Detroit; St. James, Maywood, Illinois; St. Anthony, Casa Grande, Arizona; St. Theresa, Detroit; St. Alphonsus, Deerfield, Michigan; St. Mary, Chelsea, Michigan; St. Joseph, St. Joseph, Michigan; St. Elizabeth, Tecumseh, Michigan; St. Francis of Assisi, Ann Arbor, Michigan; St. Alphonsus, Dearborn, Michigan; St. Denis, Chicago; and St. Bridget, Loves Park, Illinois.

Over the years, she earned two degrees from Siena Heights College (University): a bachelor’s in mathematics and her Master of Education degree in administration.

In some of her early ministries she was assigned to teach music, something that in one instance did not work out very well. In 1945, she was just getting settled into her sixth year at St. Gabriel when, in the second week of school, she was changed to St. Bridget in Detroit. When she got there, she discovered she was to teach orchestral and choral music in addition to playing the organ for Mass. The problem was that she knew nothing about string instruments and her six weeks of piano lessons one summer did not prepare her in the least for playing the organ. After consulting with Mother Gerald Barry, she immediately was changed back to St. Gabriel’s, where she spent two more years.

She was principal and superior for the first time during her years at St. Mary’s, followed by the principalship of the grade school at St. Joseph’s and then serving as principal and superior at St. Elizabeth’s. Later on, after already being at St. Bridget’s in Loves Park for two years, she became principal, a position where she spent the next fourteen years.
Throughout her lifetime, Sister Ann Seraphim enjoyed traveling, and made many trips with other Sisters throughout the United States, to Canada, and to Europe. Perhaps her favorite trip of all was a visit to France, where she and her companions made a stop at Lourdes.

“I have had opportunities to see this great country of ours and also opportunities to appreciate, strengthen, and broaden my religious experiences on the pilgrimages,” she wrote in her autobiography.

After retiring from teaching, she took up a new ministry in Rockford, where she had returned to live when her mother died, as a volunteer at St. Elizabeth Center, a gathering place for the elderly, and at the clothes closet operated by St. Patrick’s Church. Her twin sister, also retired by this time, ministered with her.

Finally in 2004, at the age of almost eighty-seven, she returned to Adrian to take up residence at the Dominican Life Center. According to Sister Joanne’s story about this at the vigil service, Sister Ann Seraphim made the decision to move to Adrian “once she couldn’t renew her driver’s license due to a law they were trying out which said that you could not drive after eighty-five! Little did they know!”

Her one hundredth birthday was a cause for celebration in Adrian, and she received centenarian best wishes from the White House, U.S. Senator Gary Peters of Michigan, and many friends and family along with her Adrian Dominican Sisters.

Sister Ann Seraphim died eight months after reaching that one-hundred-year milestone. Her funeral homily was preached by Sister Joella Miller, who came to minister in Rockford during Ann Seraphim’s time at St. Bridget’s nearby and lived in the St. Bridget’s convent.

“Ann was a good cook and many times you would find Bishop Dorm, Father Gordon, and Father Mitchell at the convent breakfast table after Mass on Sunday,” Sister Joella remembered. “They liked coming over and we enjoyed having them.”

Sister Ann loved being an Adrian Dominican and living with so many wonderful women over the years. She told me, “God has been so good to me and given me so much.” Ann loved her family and was very interested in what they were doing. She was very proud to have reached 100 years, but the last time I talked to her, she said she was ready to see her God.

Then, evoking the Gospel reading for the Mass – John 14: 1-7, 11 -- Sister Joella concluded her homily with these words: “Sister Ann Seraphim is in the hands of Jesus in death, just as she was every day of her life. And she would say to us, ‘Let not your hearts be troubled.’”
Left: Twin sisters, Dorothy (Sister Frances Henry Schenk, MSBT), left, and Doris (Sister Ann Seraphim Schenk, OP). Right: A member of the marching band for Bishop Muldoon High School, Rockford, Illinois, 1936

Left: Graduation photo, Bishop Muldoon High School, Rockford, Illinois, 1936. Right: Dominican High School, Detroit, 1954
Left: Schenk family reunion – back row, from left: Sister Frances Henry Schenk, MSBT, twin sister; Florence Schenk, sister-in-law; Marie Ellefson, sister; Joann Carlson, niece; and Sister Ann Seraphim; front, from left, Linda Schenk, mother, and Marguerite Meja, sister. Right: Sister Frances Henry Schenk, MSBT, left, and Sister Ann Seraphim Schenk, OP, at Sister Ann Seraphim’s Silver Jubilee in Adrian, August 1963

Left: From left, Sister Frances Henry Schenk, MSBT; Sister Mary Anthony Marelli, OP; and Sister Ann Seraphim Schenk, OP. Right: Sister Ann Seraphim in liturgical ministry at St. Catherine Chapel, Adrian, 2009
Left: Jim Berryman, then Mayor of Adrian, presents the Community Service Award to Sister Ann Seraphim at her 100th birthday party at the Motherhouse, October 25, 2017.

Members of the 1977 Diamond Jubilee Class – front row, from left, Sisters Ann Seraphim Schenk, Rita Noeker, Esther Sitzmann, Margaret Moran, Elizabeth Kreiner, Mary Roche, Jane Edward Schutz, and Marie Elizabeth Doherty; and back row, from left, Sisters Agnes Helen Rabe, Marie Jutte, Rita Anne Moceri, Susanne Hofweber, Merici Valgoi, Cathryn Deutsch, and Michael Mary Madden.