Sister Maureen Therese Masuga, OP
1923-2018

Helen Ann Masuga was born on July 13, 1923, into the cultural melting pot that was Michigan’s Upper Peninsula in that era. Both sets of grandparents were born in the part of Austria that became part of Poland, and her father, Paul, came to the United States at the age of 17 and made his way first to Cleveland and then to the iron mines of the Upper Peninsula, while her mother, Frances Rucinski, arrived in New York at age 16 and became a seamstress.

In time, Frances moved to the U.P., met Paul, and after a brief courtship the two were married in Iron River, Michigan. The two bought a home in the nearby village of Caspian (population 2,000) and started their family. Ten children in all – six boys and four girls – were born to the couple, with Helen Ann the seventh. One of the boys, Edward, died suddenly at the age of 14.

Of her parents, Sister Maureen Therese, as she became known in religious life, wrote in her autobiography: “How I marvel at their courage and determination!” Besides the fact that they were just teenagers when they emigrated, “it had to be very difficult to journey to an unknown country, uncertain of the future, relying only on relatives and friends to help them adjust to a new culture and a new language.”

Sister Maureen Therese remembered her father as an outgoing man who was friends with immigrants of many nationalities who called the U.P. home: Finns, Italians, Croats, and Swedes. “Though none of them spoke English, Dad never seemed to have trouble communicating with them,” she wrote.

She also described her father as a great storyteller and a gifted musician who could hear a tune once and play it right away on his violin. He and two close friends, one of whom played the cello and the other of whom played the clarinet, teamed up to form a musical trio that was often called upon to play weddings and other festive occasions.

Paul left mining when he developed the sort of respiratory problems common to miners, and opened a small grocery store. During the Depression, however, when so many people could not afford to pay their grocery bills, he was forced to close his store. Sister Maureen Therese’s application for admission to the Congregation refers to his occupation as “WPA work,” an indication that he was part of the jobs program operated by the government’s Works Progress Administration in those years.

As for Frances, Sister Maureen Therese described her as “a marvelous cook and an excellent homemaker … always there for us, caring and supportive.” Her skill as a seamstress kept the family well clothed even during the Depression, while the fruits and vegetables she grew graced the family table all year long thanks to the amounts she canned every fall for the long winter to come. Her flower garden was her great joy, and
Sister Maureen Therese wrote of the many evenings the family spent sitting outdoors enjoying “the beauty of her handiwork.”

Much of the family’s life centered on their Catholic faith and on the Polish traditions handed down from generation to generation, such as the Christmas Eve “Velleo,” which involved a table, with a white tablecloth, under which a few wisps of straw were placed to recall the manger. After the blessing, the family shared a wafer of unleavened bread as a symbol of their life of sharing, unity, and love and as a prayer that these qualities would continue in the year to come. Then would come the festive meal Frances had prepared, using her favorite Polish recipes.

Sister Maureen Therese attended the public school in Caspian until eighth grade, at which point she went to St. Ignace, on the other side of the U.P., to be taught by the Ursuline Sisters at their academy for that year. She already knew the Ursulines of St. Ignace from the three weeks each summer that the pastor would bring some of them in to provide sacramental preparation, and even at the early age of seven she had dreamed of joining their community some day.

Her year at the Ursuline Academy went even further toward planting the seeds of religious vocation in her, and in her senior year of high school in Stambaugh, Michigan, as she began to consider life after graduation, her memories of that time led her to decide she wanted to become a Sister. She consulted her pastor, who suggested that she contact Mother Gerald Barry about entering the Adrian Dominicans.

She graduated in June 1941 and arrived in Adrian in July, ready to begin her postulancy. She received the habit and her religious name in August 1942. In August 1943, after making first profession, she was immediately sent to teach a class of fifty-seven second graders at Precious Blood in Detroit – an experience which, she wrote, was the greatest challenge in her life to that point.

In 1945, Sister Maureen Therese began six years of teaching at Visitation, also in Detroit, and it was while she was there that she completed her bachelor’s degree in English from Siena Heights College (University). Her father died during this time as well, in November 1949. Next came a year at St. Mary, Star of the Sea in Chicago, followed by five years at St. John’s in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

In 1955, her mother became quite ill, and Mother Gerald changed Maureen Therese’s ministry to St. Agnes School in Iron River with the 1956-57 school year so that she could be close to her family. Frances died in October 1957. Sister Maureen Therese, who completed her master’s degree work at Loyola University, Chicago, that year, remained at St. Agnes until 1958 and then was sent to St. Patrick’s in Escanaba, Michigan, for two years.

From there, it was on to St. Elizabeth’s in Tecumseh, Michigan, where she was principal and superior for six years, and then she headed West. From 1966 to 1980, she taught at Holy Cross, Santa Cruz, California; All Saints, Hayward, California; and Queen of
Heaven and Assumption, both in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She wrote that she was changed to New Mexico because she needed a drier climate, but missed California greatly. On the other hand, she also came to love the multiculturalism of New Mexico, with its blend of Anglo, Native American, and Hispanic cultures.

In 1980, Sister Maureen Therese returned to Adrian to minister on the activities staff at Maria Health Care Center. After eight years there, she moved to the Rocky Creek Retirement Village in Tampa, Florida, where several other Sisters lived, and for the next 13 years, she taught ceramics to residents as well as teaching reading (her first love from the time she was very young) to schoolchildren in both the public and Catholic schools. She also ministered in other ways to residents of the Village, including serving as a Hospice volunteer.

Sister Maureen Therese came back to Adrian in 2001, living at Maria for 11 years and then at Regina from 2012 until her death, which came on May 25, 2018. She was 94 years old and had been an Adrian Dominican Sister for 75 of those years.

She was remembered at the Vigil service on May 29 by a number of nieces and a nephew. Two of the nieces, Kathie Dalessandri and Landa Rosebraugh, sent emails to Sister Pat Dulka, Co-Chapter Prioress of the Holy Rosary Mission Chapter, remembering their aunt, while her niece Theresa and her nephew Tom spoke in person.

Theresa recalled the friendship her mother had developed with “Aunt Helen” and how encouraging Sister Maureen Therese always was to the children in the family. “Aunt Helen was always with us in so many ways, through her gifts, her prayers, and her actions,” she said.

“She never ever told a lie,” Tom said, and followed up that statement with, “Every time you talked to her, you were always the special nephew.” Of course, he continued, each of the children was always the “special” one whenever she talked to him or her, and “we knew in our hearts that every one of us was special to her.”

Tom told the assembled Sisters that his aunt “loved all of you,” never ending a conversation without saying that and often talking about the joy she found in religious life and in the Congregation. And, he said, his aunt was “the pinnacle of positive attitude,” with a real sense of humor and a way of never letting any personal issues change her outward disposition, and was always there for the family whenever she was needed.

“There will likely never be another lady like her,” he said, “and we’re all the better for her.”

Sister Anne Liam Lees preached the homily at the next day’s funeral Mass. She noted that the readings Sister Maureen Therese had selected included these passages from 1 John (4:16: “God is love and anyone who lives in love lives in God and God in him”) and
the Gospel of John (13:34: “Do not let your hearts be troubled; trust in God and trust in me”).

“Maureen Therese’s love for God reflects her lived faith within her family. … As we heard last evening, Maureen had a great love for her family and has maintained that loving relationship over the years,” she said.

… Maureen’s choice of both readings reflects her deep faith. Nourished by prayer and supported by her love of the Eucharist and spiritual reading, Maureen’s life was guided and sustained especially during these last years of her life.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled” became a lived reality for Maureen because she was confident of God’s abiding love. … We give thanks for Maureen’s life lived in the presence of God. May she now enjoy the fullness of God’s love and presence.
Left: Sister Maureen Therese, front row, far left, at her graduation from Stambaugh High School, June 1941. Right: Sister Maureen Therese’s parents, Paul and Frances Masuga, on their wedding day.

Right: Sister Maureen Therese, center, with Sisters Dorothy Johnson, left, and Joseph Clare, Porcupine Mountains, Michigan, 1958
Left: Sister Maureen Therese, right, with occupational therapy staff members, from left: Barbara Ouelette and Sisters Marie Bonney, Lorraine Mackin, and Ann Kathleen Fisher, circa 1980. Right: Sister Maureen Therese in the classroom.

Left: Sister Maureen Therese celebrates her Diamond Jubilee with her family, 2000. Right: Sister Maureen Therese with Sister Barbara Wall in Occupational Therapy at Maria, May 1984
Left: Members of the 2012 Double Diamond August Crowd are, from left: Sisters Maureen Therese Masuga, Agnes Louise Stechschulte, Carol Louise Hiller, and Attracta Kelly.