



Sister Margaret Karam, OP 1924-2018

“Adrian was certainly not in my original plans but very much in His.”

This line from a St. Catherine letter¹ written by Sister Margaret Karam on June 9, 1980 sums up her explanation of how she came to be an Adrian Dominican Sister. After all, as a young woman, thoughts of religious life had been quite far from her mind.

Sister Margaret was born July 30, 1924, in Nogales, Arizona, to Joseph and Ramona (Carreno) Karam. Her paternal grandparents were Lebanese Christians, while her grandparents on her mother’s side came from Spain to Mexico City and migrated to Nogales when a revolution broke out in Mexico. The Karams and the Carrenos ended up living next door to each other in Nogales, and Joseph and Ramona met and eventually married. Margaret was their eldest child, followed by Joe, Eleanor, and Ray.

Some of Margaret’s earliest memories are of her mother’s frequent visits to a very poor orphanage across the Mexican border. “Later I was to learn that she more than once overdrew her \$200 petty cash fund my father provided her for the orphanage,” Sister Margaret wrote in her autobiography in 1989. In that June 1980 St. Catherine letter, she wrote that she did not know to what extent her mother’s love of the poor had influenced her. But whatever the reason for it, “my decisions were and are inclined in that direction.”

Ramona died of pneumonia at the age of twenty-nine, when Sister Margaret was just six years old. “At her funeral, the orphans walked barefoot behind her coffin,” Sister Margaret wrote in her autobiography.

Her paternal aunt Janet stepped in to help care for the children until Joseph remarried ten years later. “We lived in my grandfather’s large home which Janet ran like a well-oiled clock,” Sister Margaret wrote. “We ate my grandmother’s apricots before they were ripe, made mud pies too close to the house, and knew we were loved. For my happy childhood I am grateful to God.”

Sister Margaret attended public school in Nogales for the first six years and grades seven and eight at St. Mary’s in Phoenix. Her first two years of high school were spent at Nogales High School.

When Joseph married his second wife, Victoria, the family moved to Los Angeles, where a fifth child, Virginia, came into the family. Sister Margaret completed her high school education at Immaculate Heart High School in Los Angeles.

She went on to Immaculate Heart College and then the University of California-Berkeley, from which she earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology. Feeling “restless,” as she put it, after college, she went to work as a flight attendant for United Airlines for six months before becoming a social worker for Catholic Social Welfare.

An experience with a troubled teen led her to the Good Shepherd Sisters, and she began to discern a vocation for herself. “Everyone discouraged me as being ‘not the type,’ – spiritual director, Dad,

¹ In 1980, to mark the 600th anniversary of St. Catherine of Siena, members of the Congregation exchanged with each other a series of letters about their lives that were called “St. Catherine letters.”

everyone,” she wrote in her St. Catherine letter. “Finally I found a priest who heard what the Spirit was saying to me. I had other choices but deep inside knew there was something else for me.”

She was all set to leave for the Good Shepherd Sisters when her Adrian Dominican aunt, Sister Marcelline Karam, and a companion, Sister Rita Haas, came to visit. The joy Sister Margaret saw in the two women made her decide to change her plans and come to Adrian instead. According to her autobiography, before even leaving for the home visit, Sister Marcelline had actually asked Mother Gerald Barry if she could bring her niece back with her, and Mother Gerald had given her assent.

Sister Margaret entered the Congregation in August 1947 and was received as a novice in August 1948, with the religious name Sister Raymond Joseph. After completing her canonical novitiate year, she was sent out to teach at St. Brigid’s in Detroit. Later assignments were to St. Lawrence O’Toole, Oakland, California; St. Mary Star of the Sea, Oceanside, California; St. Paschal Baylon, Oakland, California; St. Peter, Henderson, Nevada; St. Patrick, Bisbee, Arizona; Rosary High School, Detroit; and Gerard High School, Phoenix, Arizona.

Gerard High School proved to be her last teaching position. She had been on the faculty for two years when, in 1972, the teachings of a colleague in her department led her to leave the school – and to come to a ministerial turning point in her life.

She spent the next four years working at the Navajo Alcohol and Drug Center in Winslow, Arizona, followed by pastoral or parish ministry work at the Parroquia Santa Lucia in Las Matas, Dominican Republic; at the Maria Health Care Center in Adrian; and at three parishes in Los Angeles: Queen of Angels, St. Lucy, and Ascension.

It was while she was at Ascension, in 1980, that a letter from a friend in South Africa changed the course of her life.

The letter spoke of the Focolare movement, an organization begun in 1944 in Italy by an elementary school teacher, Chiara Lubich. As Sister Margaret learned more about the organization, she discovered that its ideals spoke to her.

“That was the beginning of a new phase in my spiritual adventure, one of concretely living out the truth of the Gospel with others rather than by myself,” she wrote in 1998.

“She seemed to have had a vocation within a vocation – the Focolare movement deepening her Dominican vocation, keeping her always faithful to her Adrian Dominican community,” said Sister Nadine Sheehan, Vicarress of the Motherhouse Vicariate, at Sister Margaret’s wake service. “She said that the unity she saw in this movement sent her back to Dominic’s teaching of unity.”

Sister Margaret left Ascension in 1983, after five years there, to become director of religious education at St. Mary of the Nativity in Salinas, California. For two years after that, she worked for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles as its coordinator for family planning.

In 1992, she moved to Hyde Park, New York, to live at Focolare’s “little city” in North America, Mariapolis Luminosa. She worked in pastoral ministry at St. Mary Parish in Fishkill, New York, for four years before taking on a similar role at Mariapolis Luminosa itself. She lived in and managed the “Sisters’ House,” where women religious from different congregations came to spend time and share life together.

Sister Margaret spent twenty-five years at Mariapolis Luminosa before the need finally came in 2017 for her to return to Adrian to live at the Dominican Life Center. At a farewell party, the following was said about her:

There are so many characteristics that would describe Sister Margaret: opinionated and strong, yet obedient, faithful and humble, with a great sense of humor and wit, committed to love of God and neighbor. She drew people in, and her wisdom and sharing of a full life has them turned friends.

... Over the almost exactly twenty-five years, you did so much out of love, and when one is no longer able to “do” love, one can always “be” love, and that is what we have seen especially during this last period here.

Sister Margaret lived the final eight months of her life quietly at the DLC, until going to meet her God face to face on March 9, 2018.

Many of her fellow Focolare members either traveled to Adrian for the wake and funeral or watched the services via livestream. One who came to Adrian, named Philomena, spoke at the wake about Sister Margaret’s impact on everyone around her and called her “such a gift to so many.”

Sister Mary Priniski delivered the eulogy at the next day’s funeral Mass.

Each of us in our journey goes through stages... One of the first stages is individuation. We need to learn who the “I” is ... Margaret certainly did that. She entered as an older woman. I think she was about 24. In that day, that was old. She was probably one of the oldest people in her crowd. She had established herself as an educated woman. She had her own individuality. We say in our Congregation that when you go through formation, you move from being an “I” to being a “We.” By the end of the formation process, we should have taken on the identity of the Adrian Dominican Sisters. ... But back in the day, when Margaret entered, and probably when most of us entered ... we became part of the “We” that was separated from the rest of the world.

But when Sister Margaret discovered Focolare, Sister Mary continued,

she expanded the “We.” ... She learned that the Dominican charism of searching for truth complemented and merged with the Focolare charism of searching for unity.

... If anyone ever got a note from Margaret, she never signed it “Love, Margaret, she never signed it “Peace, Margaret,” she never signed it “Sincerely, Margaret.” She always signed it, “All my unity, Margaret.’ So, Margaret, today as we celebrate your life, we celebrate the unity that is already there, and we look to your journey as you are united in a new way with your Beloved.



Center: Sister Margaret, left, with her aunt, Sister Marcelline Karam.



Left: Sister Margaret at her father's house, 1976. Center: Sister Margaret in the Dominican Republic.



From left, Sisters Margaret Karam, Margaret Ryan, Isabel Marie Jordan, and Marcelline Fouchey.



Members of the 2008 Diamond Jubilee August Crowd are, back row, from left, Sisters Patricia DeMay, Theresa Sinnamon, Angelica McGuire, Dorothy Worthy, Barbara J. Carroll, and Audrey Hull, and front row, from left, Sisters Ann Marie Meagher, Mary Declan Foss, Margaret Ann Reardon, Margaret Karam, Theresia Scheuer, and Ann Benedict Williams.