Sister Virginia O’Reilly, OP
1927-2018

This gentle, quiet Dominican Preacher of Adrian did not need the pulpit any more to preach the word of God. She preached it by the way she lived. She knew about the Sower and the seed. She carefully tilled her soil and taught others to do the same.

These words, spoken by Sister Maria Goretti Browne in her funeral homily for Sister Virginia O’Reilly, centered on the parable of the sower and the seed that was the Mass’s Gospel reading.¹ It described a woman whose ministries moved from teacher to clinical psychologist to Director of Studies for the Congregation – and much more.

Sister Virginia was born in Detroit to George and Alice (Hall) O’Reilly on April 28, 1927. Both George and Alice were the descendants of Irish immigrants, and George was born in Montana while Alice was born in Quebec. Both the O’Reilly and Hall families eventually made their way to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, where George and Alice met as high school classmates.

George followed his father into the railroad business; he moved to Detroit in the early 1920s to join his older brother Bill, who was working for the Wabash Railroad there, and a year or so later, in 1926, Alice left her bookkeeping job with the Quaker Oats Company in Saskatoon and took the three-day train ride to Detroit to marry him. Three girls joined the family over time. Sister Virginia was the oldest, followed by Joan and later Patricia, when Virginia was in seventh grade.

When Sister Virginia and Joan were little, the family attended St. Mary Magdalene Church in Melvindale, and hearing the parable of the sower and seed became one of Virginia’s earliest memories. “I had been helping my father plant vegetables, and he had told me that seeds only grew in rich ground, and needed to be watered carefully,” she wrote in her life story. “Since what the priest told us in church agreed with what my father said, I saw church as part of the family.”

As the Great Depression took hold, George was laid off from his job, but Sister Virginia in her life story recalled the day – likely Thanksgiving – that someone from their parish brought a large food basket to their home, only to have George tell the deliverer that other people needed it more. George then accompanied the man back to the parish and helped him deliver baskets to others in need who were not on the parish’s list of recipients.

When the Depression deepened, Alice and the girls went to live with Alice’s parents in Saskatchewan while George went where he needed to in order to work, eventually ending up back at his family’s ranch in Montana. Sister Virginia was four years old when they made the move, and it lasted for four years. Alice and her daughters regularly traveled to Montana to see George, giving Sister Virginia wonderful memories of her doting grandmother O’Reilly, and George was able to come to Saskatchewan every month or so.

Finally, things improved and the family reunited, moving to a home in Dearborn, Michigan. One school year was spent with the IHM Sisters at Sacred Heart School, but when the O’Reillys moved into St. Alphonsus Parish, Sister Virginia was enrolled in that school for third grade. A week later, she was moved up to fourth grade. It was at St. Alphonsus that Sister Virginia came to know the Adrian Dominican Sisters.

As eighth grade was coming to an end, her teacher brought some of the girls to Adrian, most likely to encourage enrollment at St. Joseph Academy for high school. No one in the group actually ended up at the Academy, but the trip gave them the opportunity to talk to postulants and novices who had come from St. Alphonsus.

It also strengthened what had already been a desire in Virginia’s heart to enter the Congregation, and in June 1941 – having just completed her freshman year of high school – she and her mother met with Mother Gerald Barry to discuss her wish. Mother Gerald advised her to wait a year, and in June 1942, at the age of fifteen and with the reluctant permission of her parents, Sister Virginia arrived in Adrian to begin her postulancy. When she received the habit that December, she also received the religious name Sister Joan Patricia, after her sisters.

After her canonical novitiate year, she was kept in Adrian to study until the next school year began and then was sent on her first mission: to St. Rita’s in Chicago. She spent two years (1944-46) there, followed by three years (1946-49) at St. Patrick’s, Miami Beach, Florida, and a year at St. Mary’s, Rome, Georgia (1949-50). While in Florida, she completed her bachelor’s degree in mathematics from Barry College (University).

In 1950, Sister Virginia was sent to the Catholic University of America, where she spent a year working toward her master’s degree in mathematics. She completed her degree in 1952.

From 1951 to 1964, she taught at the secondary school level: Dominican High School, Detroit (1951-57); St. Mary High School, Royal Oak, Michigan (1957-60); and Aquinas High School, Chicago (1960-64). She was then sent to St. Dominic College in St. Charles, Illinois, where she chaired the Math Department from 1964 to 1967.

A year of graduate study at the Illinois Institute of Technology from 1967-68 left her only needing to complete her dissertation in order to receive her doctoral degree, but she decided not to pursue that. The Congregation was heading into its pivotal Chapter of Renewal at that time, and when the Chapter voted to establish the position of Director of Studies, she was asked by Sister Rosemary Ferguson to take the job.

In that capacity, Sister Virginia was responsible for seeing to it that all Sisters completed at least their undergraduate degrees, and that necessary positions be filled by sending some Sisters to graduate school. "It was an awesome task," she wrote in her life story.

It also gave her, unexpectedly, an entry point into what became much of the rest of her life in ministry. Sister Rosemary suggested she take a course in counseling at Siena Heights in order to better assist the Sisters with whom she was dealing, and she discovered she enjoyed counseling and seemed to be good at it.

She left the position in 1970 and worked for a year with the Nelson Group, which had undertaken the Congregation’s self-study – and related to that, with the Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate (CARA) in Washington, D.C. – and chaired the Math Department at Siena Heights for a year.

In 1972, Sister Virginia began graduate studies at the University of Detroit, leading to a master’s in counseling from Siena Heights. And, after a year as a guidance counselor at Bishop Foley High School in Madison Heights, Michigan, she went to the California School of Professional Psychology to earn her doctorate in clinical psychology, achieving this distinction in 1977.
For the next twenty years, Sister Virginia worked as a psychologist in clinical settings in several cities in California and New York and, last of all, in Port Huron, Michigan, from 1994 to 1996. Additionally, in 1985 she was asked by an Oakford Sister to go to South Africa, to work with the Sisters there, and she spent a year helping the Oakford women through a time of personal and communal renewal centered around their General Chapter. “The activity program laid out for me involved traveling the length and breadth of South Africa and dealing with both communities and individuals in crisis,” she wrote in her life story.

Sister Virginia retired from practice in 1996 and returned to Adrian late that year, where she assisted in the archives for about two years and then asked to teach some psychology courses at Siena Heights, which she did part-time for several years. She later worked in the Catherine of Siena Library for three years.

Sister Virginia died on September 24, 2018, at the age of ninety-one, in her seventy-fifth year as an Adrian Dominican Sister. She was remembered by the Sisters who knew her best as, among other things, grateful, present to others, smart, always learning, and a listener.

“Let us continue to sow the seed of God’s word wherever and whenever possible – haphazardly or orderly – and then be patient,” said Sister Maria Goretti at her homily’s conclusion.

_Results may not come for years, probably not in our lifetime, but there WILL be a harvest. Virginia, thank you for teaching us how to sow the seed of God’s word; thank you for your example of gentleness and patience, even patient suffering, and thank you for even showing us how to die with a smile on our faces. May you have peace and joy eternally._
Right: Sister Virginia in the arms of her grandmother, Detroit, August 1927

Left: Sister Virginia poses with her nieces, Virginia and Kathleen McNamara.
Left: Sister Mary Frances Coleman, left, Director of Education, and Sister Virginia O’Reilly, Regent of Studies, during General Chapter 1968.

From left: From left, Sisters Nelda Klein, Patricia Spangler, Frances Lombaer, and Virginia O’Reilly, probably celebrating Sister Virginia’s PhD. Sister Virginia teaches Sisters Jane Frances and Justina, delegates for their General Chapter, about the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator through the use of tinker toys, Bedfordview, South Africa, December 1985.
From left: From left, Sisters Mary Louise Gass, Kathy Erard, and Virginia O’Reilly. Sisters Celeste Bourke, left, and Virginia O’Reilly in California, 2002

Left: Members of the 2002 Diamond Jubilee Class are, back row, from left, Sisters Mary Willard Reagan, Eileen Hussey, and Virginia O’Reilly, and, front row, from left, Sisters Marcella LaKoske, Miriam Joseph Lekan, and Cecilia Marie Brown.