Sister Ana Feliz, OP
1932-2019

“I can truthfully say that through my whole life I have seen clear manifestations of the love of God and of what He can do in and for His little ones.”

These words appear near the beginning of Sister Ana Feliz’s first St Catherine letter, written August 29, 1980. “In fashioning me He took poor clay and transformed it into a small and simple vessel,” the letter continued. “And guess what, by His power and grace it turned out right.”

Sister Ana was born April 27, 1932, in a poor and isolated mountainous area near San Jose de Ocoa in the Dominican Republic. It was “a place not much touched by man or machinery,” she wrote. She was the second child of Camino Feliz and Juana Encarnacion, but their first child died at age two. Ana wrote that her mother also suffered a number of miscarriages, probably from hard work and lack of medical care. Five other children besides Sister Ana survived: Mireya, Fran, Mirlita, Altagracia and Fatima.

Both parents were extremely hard workers who struggled to make a living on their small piece of farmland. Sister Ana wrote that her father’s coffee crop was barely enough to cover their expenses, and when emergencies occurred he had to sell coffee that had not even been picked yet. It pained Sister Ana to remember, even four decades later in writing her St. Catherine letter, that when she was six or seven years old, while playing in a box of beans, she accidentally got a bean stuck in her ear and her father had to sell his horse so he could take her to the town doctor.

Sister Ana was actually raised by an aunt, for when she was a year old her father took her to visit his oldest sister, Fabiola, who was raising two daughters alone after her husband left her, and Fabiola begged Camino to leave Ana with her for a month. That month turned into the rest of Ana’s childhood and adolescence, although Ana visited her parents often (it was during one of those visits that the incident with the stuck bean occurred). She wrote about Camino and Juana with great love and admiration in her St. Catherine letter, adding that while she had been distanced from her parents as a child, after she entered the convent she had become closer to them and tried to help them as a daughter would.

Ana and her “adoptive” family – which consisted of Fabiola and her children, Titina and Mirla; Fabiola’s two sisters; and Camino’s mother – worked very hard themselves. Fabiola knitted and ran a store, her sisters made candy to sell, and Titina became a talented seamstress. Sister Ana herself began to work at sewing at age twelve so she could pay for her own things.

It was a difficult life; not only did the home have no running water, electricity, or gas stove, but the family’s poverty meant there were times that Sister Ana would come home from school and there would be nothing to eat. But, she wrote, she loved dancing and picnics and “I liked to be happy and make people happy.”

1 St. Catherine letters were begun in 1980 to mark the 600th anniversary of the death of St. Catherine of Siena. Sisters were invited to pair up to write a series of letters to each other, telling about their lives.
She also grew up surrounded by her family’s deep faith. “I cannot figure out how it was so alive when they had no means of making it grow,” she wrote. Until the Scarboro Fathers came to the parish when Sister Ana was older, the town only had a priest who came once a month. But Fabiola had a deep and regular prayer life that she passed on to her niece-daughter, and when Sister Ana was in fourth grade she began to have a deep desire to give her life to God.

She wrote about her First Communion experience, which came when she was about ten, in her first St. Catherine letter: Titina made her a short white dress and loaned her a beautiful white veil – and on the way into the church on that rainy day, she fell in the mud and got the veil dirty. “I did not like that,” she wrote. “But Jesus was coming to me and that was what was important.”

Sister Ana loved school, to the point that she would cry if she was ill and Fabiola made her stay home. When she finished eighth grade she was told it was too expensive for her to continue but, determined to find a way, she paid her own way with her sewing. After high school, thanks to a scholarship, she was able to go to the Colegio Santo Domingo and reside there as a university student, studying medicine.

She had known for some time that she wanted to enter religious life, and had even spoken with a particular congregation after making a retreat with their Sisters after finishing high school, but was told they could not accept her. She was heartbroken, but just as it seemed that this door had closed, another one opened. When she went to the Colegio she saw the Adrian Dominican Sisters’ prayerfulness, their sincerity, and the way that even though they were teaching mainly well-to-do girls at the Colegio, they went out to minister to the poor as well. And so, in September 1953, she entered the Congregation, remaining in Santo Domingo for a year as a postulant and then coming to Adrian for her novitiate.

Her time in the novitiate was challenging; the culture and food were very different than what she had known and she did not speak English, and she admitted in her St. Catherine letter of April 21, 1981, that the structure of religious life at the time she entered was difficult for her. She also was frustrated at having to be a teacher, for she wanted to continue her medical studies, but she soon discovered she had a talent for teaching.

After her canonical novitiate year, Sister Maria Josefina, as she then became known, was missioned to Puerto Rico for four years; the first few months of the 1955-56 school year at Sacred Heart School in Santurce, and then at St. Anthony School in Guayama until June 1959. She spent the 1959-60 school year at the Colegio, teaching kindergarten, and then was sent to study at Barry College (University) in Miami Shores, Florida, for the fall 1960 semester. Assignments to St. Ann’s School in West Palm Beach, Florida (January 1960-June 1962) and then to Aquinas College in the Bahamas, where she taught high school Spanish (August 1962-January 1963) followed.

While there, she was astonished to be one of the first Adrian Dominican Sisters, along with Sisters Nancy Hanna and Teresita Pellerano, to be missioned to Peru. The three went to Callao, Peru, to teach at Our Lady of Guadalupe School there.

The school was in a run-down building and it required no little effort to get things up and running, never mind the challenges of living in Callao itself. But Sister Ana embraced the situation. “This was an adventure, a sweet adventure,” she wrote. “It was here where I experienced the interior freedom I valued so much. It was here where my desire for a deeper prayer life was intensified. It was here where I awakened to new avenues of the apostolic life.”

Sister Ana found herself hearing a new call into pastoral ministry, intersecting with the changes being wrought by Vatican II especially as they resonated in Latin America, and she learned everything she
could about liberation theology and how she could help meet the needs of the poor who were all around the Sisters in Peru. But a fuller expression of her call would have to wait, for in 1970 she was elected a council member to the ADLAM (Adrian Dominican Latin American Missions) Vicariate. She wrote that she “cried for a long time” at having to leave Peru for the Dominican Republic, where she would be based, but she also knew that serving the vicariate was the right thing to do, and ultimately it became a great growth opportunity for her.

After a year with ADLAM, Sister Ana was able to realize her dream of doing pastoral ministry. She studied at the Aquinas Institute of Theology in Dubuque, Iowa (1972-73), and at the Center for Religious Development in Detroit (1985-86), where she earned her certification as a spiritual director. She also spent a sabbatical year at the Siena Spirituality Center in Water Mill, New York.

Over the course of almost forty years, Sister Ana served in pastoral ministry and spiritual direction in several places in the Dominican Republic. She also served the Congregation for five years (1988-93) as its Dominican Republic formation director.

She was often asked by priests and bishops to speak and give retreats. She also was called upon by her own Adrian Dominican Sisters to speak at Transformations ’89.

Sister Rosario Martin, who first met Ana in Puerto Rico in 1955 and was her friend ever since, recalled in her homily at Sister Ana’s funeral that people would stop at their house in the Dominican Republic at all hours to talk with Sister Ana about their problems – including one distraught woman who made a three-hour trip from the capital city, arriving at 11 p.m., to talk with her about a tragedy that had just occurred. Sister Ana’s time with her calmed her and, “she walked out and went home with her family. I will never forget that night,” Sister Rosario said.

Sister Ana ministered in a number of capacities, all connected to pastoral ministry and spiritual direction, in the Dominican Republic until 2010. At that point, she returned to Adrian to reside first at Weber Center and then in the Dominican Life Center, where she died on August 23, 2019. She was eighty-seven.

In her homily for Sister Ana, Sister Rosario remembered her friend as intelligent, capable, highly organized, talented at everything from cooking to sewing to embroidery, and someone who knew how to live simply and who had a talent for connecting with people no matter their age, their education level, or their station in life. She loved to decorate for parish celebrations and enjoyed playing cards, swimming, and singing. What’s more, “there was no ministry call too big, too demanding, too difficult,” Sister Rosario said.

“Ana, thank you for being my friend, a teacher by example, a model in ministry, and a faithful follower of Jesus and Dominic. … Your devotion to the Holy Spirit and your willingness to share that with the people of God enriched the Church! You helped in developing the spirituality of the people. Your availability was remarkable. Your love for the young, your joyfulness and respect for others and your love for the Word of God inspired those around you.”
Center: Mother Mary Gerald Barry, seated on left, with Sister María Teresa Ruiz and Postulant Ana Félix (standing) in 1954.

Right: From left, Sisters Nery Sori and Ana Félix in April of 2003 at the Central House Santo Domingo, DR
From left: Sister Ana with two of her siblings and her father in 1980. From left, Francisco, Ana, Camilo (father), and Altagracia. Sister Ana, right, with Doña Fabiola, her aunt who raised her, at their home in San José de Ocoa.

Sisters Rosario Martin and Ana Félix. From left, Sisters Carol Cross, Ana Félix, Rosa Reyes, Anne Liam Lees, Helen Faiver, and Margarita Ruiz.
From left: Sisters Anne Liam Lees and Ana Feliz in 1989. Sister Ana Félix, right, during a pastoral visit in the Dominican Republic, circa 1980s.

From left: Sister Ana Félix preaching on her Silver Jubilee in Jarabacoa, DR, 1979. Sister Ana Feliz, left, with her Mission Group members in the DR, Sisters Elisa Doherty, Rose Anne Schlitt, and Basilia de la Cruz.
The 2014 Diamond Jubilarians included: top row, Sisters Ana Félix, Susan Mary Parker, Joyce Hibbert, Patricia McCarty; middle row, Sisters Diane Weifenbach, Barbara Gentry, Dorita Wotiska, Mary Trzasko, Dorothy Dempsey, Beth Ellen Butler, Phyllis Kreiner; front row, Sisters Jeanine Boivin, Anele Heiges, Yolanda Pomante, and Ruth Anne Kelly. Not pictured are Louise Borgacz and Alice Marie Schmid.