Sister Lila Watt, OP
1929-2019

Elmhurst, Illinois, was the birthplace of Lila Watt, the only daughter of Melvin and Charlotte (Daley) Watt, and the fact of where she was born led to an incident which was passed down as part of family lore.

Melvin and Charlotte were both of Scottish and Irish descent – with some German and Dutch on Melvin’s side as well – with Melvin mostly Scottish and Charlotte mostly Irish (and very proud of that fact). And as the story goes, one evening when Lila was very young she began crying at the dinner table and when her parents asked what was wrong, her reply was that she had heard them say that foreigners would be sent out of the country. “I figured that applied to me because I was born in the country of Elmhurst, Illinois, not Chicago,” she said in her life story.

Very little is known about Sister Lila’s parents other than their heritage, but according to Sister Lila, the Watt family, which also included her older brother Melvin and her two younger brothers Harry and Neil, was a happy one. Her father, a convert to Catholicism whom Sister Lila remembered kneeling every night to recite the Rosary, liked to tell jokes, was never angry, and never spoke negatively of anyone, while Charlotte was a wonderful mother who enjoying being at home to care for the family.

But when Sister Lila was nine, sorrow came to the family when her father died of pneumonia. The family had just purchased a house and was preparing to move into it when Melvin died, and three of Charlotte’s relatives came to live with them in the new home to help pay the bills.

Sister Lila received a Catholic education throughout her schooling, attending St. Gall, St. John Berchman, and St. Viator parish schools and Josephinum High School, all of which were in Chicago. Then, after entering religious life, she earned degrees from Siena Heights College (University) and Barry College (University).

After graduating from high school, where she received some business training, she went to work as a secretary for the Montgomery Ward Company and helped support her mother. She was in that job for three years before entering the convent, which she did after she and another friend who was interested in religious life met with Father John P. Kennelly, the vocation director for the Archdiocese and a good friend of the Adrian Dominicans. She began seeing him for direction, and in March 1950 she wrote to Mother Gerald Barry seeking admittance to the Congregation.

She arrived in Adrian on June 25 of that year and in August was sent to teach at St. Alphonsus School in Dearborn, Michigan. In December, she was received as a novice and given her religious name, Sister Dominic Marie. Her first mission after her canonical novitiate year was to Sacred Heart School in Munising, Michigan, where she taught third grade for two years. After that came assignments to three more Michigan schools: St. Alphonsus, Deerfield (1953-55); St. Agnes, Iron River (1955-56); and St. John, Ypsilanti (1956-60).

She earned her bachelor’s degree in secretarial science from Siena Heights in 1958, and from that time on most of her teaching ministry involved what were known then as “commercial” classes. By her own admission, she preferred teaching older students, because while the administrative tasks involved in classroom teaching (report cards, discipline, tests, etc.) “were not some of my most wonderful experiences,” she enjoyed teaching commercial classes to students who were of an age to be choosing the subject.
The next several years were spent in West Palm Beach, Florida, first at St. Ann High School (1960-61) and then Cardinal Newman High School (1961-65). She then spent a year teaching twelfth grade at Aquinas College in Nassau, Bahamas, but health problems led her to ask to return to the States and in 1966 she went “home” to the Chicago area, where she spent the rest of her life in active ministry.

She taught at Queen of Apostles, Riverdale, from 1966 to 1968 (during which time she completed her master’s degree in education at Barry); St. Kilian’s, Chicago, from 1968 to 1969; Aquinas High School, Chicago, from 1969 to 1972, and Immaculata High School, Chicago, from 1972 to 1973. She then spent three years (1973-76) as the assistant director of Chicago’s Metropolitan School of Business before returning to classroom teaching for several more years: St. Casimir High School, Chicago (1976-79); Montini High School, Lombard (1979-81); St. Procopius, Chicago (1981-83) and St. Barbara High School, Chicago (September 1983-December 87).

She then served for about a year (May 1988-June 1989) as secretary at St. Rita Rectory, Chicago, followed by several months (October 1989-March 1990) as secretary at the Catholic Youth Office, Chicago, and just over a year (March 1990-June 1991) as executive school secretary at the St. Joseph Carondelet Child Center, also in Chicago.

At that point, she went into Congregational service as the secretary for the Chapter office in Hometown, Illinois from 1991 to 1995. When her health necessitated her return to Adrian at the end of 1995, she volunteered as a secretary at the Motherhouse. “It was very rewarding serving in this capacity for the Sisters whom I loved very much,” she said in her life story. She also served for a time on the Mission Council for Holy Rosary Chapter.

Sister Lila passed away at the Dominican Life Center on November 21, 2019, at the age of ninety and in her sixty-eighth year as an Adrian Dominican Sister. She was the last of her immediate family; Charlotte died in 1979, while Sister Lila’s oldest sibling, Melvin, died in 1990, Harry died in 2003, and Neil died in 2014.

At the wake service Sister Genevieve Jeziolkowski, on behalf of their “crowd,” read a remembrance of Sister Lila that recalled her as a postulant: “able to smile and do what she was asked to do. Whether it was scrubbing floors or addressing an envelope, her attitude was the same: ‘Let’s get it done,’ or ‘Come on, let’s just do it,’ and that was usually said in some funny way which really helped her partner to get into the swing of things.”

Sister Genevieve went on to describe Sister Lila as a welcoming, stalwart woman and as a happy person with a good sense of humor, someone who “enjoyed a good laugh with her friends and those she lived with.”

Lila enjoyed going out and having a good meal at a restaurant as a way of relaxing and spending time with friends. This allowed her the opportunity to dress up, visit the beauty parlor, and look forward to an outing.

… She was a good teacher, instilling values for daily living which would be a strong part of her students’ lives for many years. Lila was kind, happy, cheerful, pleasant, inclusive, efficient, patient, and understanding. There was not a negative or mean bone in her body. She was humble and never pushed herself forward.

Lila was faithful – faithful to her prayer life, to her community, to her duties, and she is now received as a faithful servant receiving the hundredfold.
Left: With her brother Harry; Right: Sister Lila Watt in Lumen Ecclesiae (St. Dominic) Chapel, Siena Heights University

From left: Sisters Lila Watt (left) and Donna Markham; Sister Lila Watt at Navy Pier, Chicago, October 1998; Sisters Dorothy Worthy (left) and Lila Watt
From left: Lila in the Maria Dining Room at the Dominican Life Center, December 2011; Members of the 2010 Diamond Jubilee, December Reception Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Kieran Therese Quirke, Mary White, Ann Rozalia Szabo, Shirley Smith, Jeannine Therese McGorray, Geraldine Maloney, and Sean Morley; middle row, from left, Sisters Rita Crotty, Lucy Ann Quinn, Loretta May, Noreen Burke, Genevieve Jeziolkowski, Marlene Kuhnlein, and Janet Michael Hudspeth; and front row, from left, Sisters Lila Watt, Carol Denise Koenig, Virginia Beattie, Maria Goretti Browne, Ellen Kennedy, Joseph Eilese Hukle, and Donna Markham (Prioress).