Sister Margaret Augustine Exworthy, OP 1940-2019

When as a high school sophomore Nancy Jane Exworthy, the future Sister Margaret Augustine, told her mother that she wanted to enter religious life, her mother dropped the bowl she was drying and ran upstairs to her room, crying.

It was many years before Nancy Jane found out what had prompted her mother’s emotional reaction. After Nancy Jane made final profession, her mother finally told her the tale of her very difficult birth, to the point that the doctor had come out of the delivery room and asked her father which one, mother or baby, he wanted saved if it came down to that.

“My mother said she prayed and prayed for help, and she heard a voice say to her, ‘She’s mine. Will you give her back to me?’ and my mother said yes, and when she said yes, I was born,” Margaret said in her “A Sister’s Story” video in 2017.

“And I was kind of sickly as a child, so she always thought that some time I’d be gone, and she said when I told her I wanted to be a Sister, she heard the same voice. That’s what startled her and she dropped the bowl; it wasn’t my announcement. She said the voice said, ‘Remember, you promised.’”

Nancy Jane was born on September 16, 1940, to Francis and Jane (Szekely) Exworthy. She was the older of two children; her sister, Kareen, was born just over six years later.

Her maternal grandmother was born in Croatia, which later became part of Yugoslavia, while her maternal grandfather came from a town in the Austro-Hungarian Empire that became part of Yugoslavia after World War I. Francis came from English stock and was baptized Catholic but not raised as one, although he converted later in life. He was born in Detroit, while Jane was born in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Eventually, the Szekelys and the Exworthys lived next door to each other in Detroit, which is how Francis and Jane met. They married in December 1938.

Nancy Jane attended several grade schools and then went to Dominican High School. It was during a retreat her sophomore year that she decided she was being called to religious life. After her mother’s dramatic reaction over the dinner dishes that evening, her father told her that it was all right if she became a nun, but she had to finish high school first. She did, and entered the Congregation right afterward in June 1958. She received the habit and her religious name that December.

After completing her canonical novitiate year, her first mission was to Resurrection School in Lansing, Michigan, where she was from February 1960 until the end of the school year. She then spent eight years in Chicago, six years at St. Ailbe and two at St. Kevin.

From there, she went to St. Patrick School in Escanaba, Michigan, where she taught from 1968 to 1971 before the school was part of a merger that resulted in Holy Name Central School. She then became principal of the consolidated school, although she was given the title of superintendent because it would help her better relate to the superintendents in the area.
During these years, she completed both her Bachelor of Science degree, majoring in chemistry, from Siena Heights College (University) in 1969, and her Master of Science degree in Administration from Barry College (University) in 1976.

Sister Margaret left Holy Name in 1979 to become principal of St. Michael School in Orland Park, Illinois, and stayed there until 1985 when she asked to go to Florida, where her parents had relocated. Her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and she wanted to be closer to where they lived in Melbourne. As fate had it, she became assistant principal at Melbourne Central Catholic High School, and spent four years there.

In 1989, she was named director of Rosarian Academy in West Palm Beach, Florida, and shepherded the school through a challenging time of high debt. She traveled to other similar schools to find out what Rosarian could do differently, and one of the decisions ultimately made was to close the high school division.

By 1994 she had overseen a real turnaround for the Academy’s situation, and with her parents’ health declining, Sister Margaret resigned her position and spent the next year taking care of them. She returned to the classroom the next year, however, teaching junior high at Holy Name of Jesus School in Indialantic, Florida. Francis was admitted to a nursing home during that time and died in December 1996; Jane passed away in August 1999.

The experience of ministering to her father and other residents at the nursing home, and of continuing to live with and care for her mother, led Sister Margaret to begin contemplating a life after teaching. That new life took shape in 2000 when she was asked to go to the DePorres P.L.A.C.E. adult literacy center in Riviera Beach, Florida.

Sister Margaret served at the literacy center for fifteen years, three years as program director and twelve years as executive director. During that time, it moved from Riviera Beach to West Palm Beach and became a sponsored institution of the Congregation as part of the Dominican Rea Literacy Corporation. It was honored with the Excellence in Education award by the Florida Literacy Coalition in 2009.

In her annals for 2000-2001, her first year there, Sister Margaret wrote that working at the center “has been a blessing in my life. Teaching adults to read, some black American, some poor, some Hispanic, some refugees, has opened my eyes to the real world. I believe I am living out our statements by helping adults better their lives and those of their families through learning to speak and read English. … Our students tell me that De Porres P.L.A.C.E. is like home, filled with caring people.”

Not long after she arrived, the growing diversity of the area led the center to add a successful English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program to work with adult immigrants who wanted to learn English. Between both components of the center’s program, hundreds of people over the years have learned to read and write English and gain other skills they would need to succeed.

She retired from the center in 2015 and continued to live in West Palm Beach for almost four more years, except for some time she spent at the Dominican Life Center in 2016-17 recuperating from a medical issue. Over her years in West Palm Beach, she mentored several prospective Associates and met regularly with the men and women in Associate Life there.

Sister Margaret was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer in January 2019 and shortly thereafter returned to Adrian to live out her last days. She died peacefully on March 5, 2019, with her close friend of fifty-seven years, Sister Mary Kay Homan, praying at her bedside.
Tributes to Sister Margaret poured in for her wake service, including remembrances from two Associates who ministered at the literacy center, Nelson and Sandra Pino, and a former student, Kathleen O’Leary. Kathleen’s tribute, which she posted online and which was read at the wake by Sister Joan Mehney, included memories of being taught by Margaret in fourth grade at St. Ailbe’s School.

“She was tall, 5’ 10”, beautiful, in her early 20s, and had the singing voice of a nightingale. … We adored her,” Kathleen wrote. “… When my family life was in disarray, it was Sister and the other nuns who provided me with comfort and acceptance that spoke to this child’s heart. … With age comes wisdom but also the loss of pieces of our heart through death. Thank you for being a part of my heart and my life, Sister. Rest in love and peace.”

Sister Carleen Maly, director of the Adrian Rea Literacy Center, who as Florida Chapter Prioress had been the one to ask Sister Margaret to minister at DePorres P.L.A.C.E., spoke at the wake on behalf of the seven literacy centers in the Dominican Rea Literacy Corporation.

Margaret took the Center to new levels of outreach, serving large numbers of Haitian and Hispanic adult learners who worked at the Port Authority complex at Riviera Beach. She and her committed staff offered conversation groups at various times during the day to meet the needs of adults working two or three menial jobs to make ends meet. Margaret said, “It’s the students who make what we do worthwhile. What’s really inspiring is to know that we touch people’s lives. To hear their stories reminds us of the needs of our learners.”

Sister Mary Kay preached the homily for her friend at the next day’s funeral Mass. She and Sister Margaret first met in December 1961, when Sister Mary Kay came to St. Ailbe’s to teach right after making first profession, and remained friends for the rest of Sister Margaret’s life.

The women often vacationed together to destinations ranging from the Canadian Rockies to Fanjeaux, France, to the Caribbean, where they went on a cruise just before Sister Margaret’s diagnosis. In her homily, Sister Mary Kay told several stories about their traveling adventures, including a humorous anecdote about their trip to the Canadian Rockies. Sister Mary Kay wanted to ride up the Jasper Tramway, which takes riders up into the mountains, and Sister Margaret agreed but “instead of looking out at the beautiful scenery, Margaret was standing in front of me staring into my face. I asked why she was doing that and she said she does not like heights. I asked why she agreed to go on the tram and she said, ‘Because you wanted to.’ That was Margaret.”

Sister Mary Kay’s homily continued:

Margaret was a woman of great faith who was secure in the fact that God loved her. She was a prayerful woman, a joyous woman. The first time I visited after she came to Adrian in February, she looked at me and said, “Happy happy happy.” She chose the readings and the theme for the wake and funeral: Joy. She was a Dominican to her fingertips. When Father Jim [Hug, the sisters’ chaplain] came to anoint her, she preached to all gathered by her bed.

… For me, her friendship was honest, faithful, loving and supportive. She was a valiant woman who never counted the cost but was diligent in doing the work of God.
Left: Nancy Jane, the future Sister Margaret, age 2, 1942. Center: Nancy Jane Exworthy, the future Sister Margaret Exworthy, at her graduation from Dominican High School, Detroit, June 1958

From left: Sisters Imelda Marie Eckhoff, left, and Margaret Exworthy at the 2009 Florida Chapter Assembly. Reception, December 30, 1958
From left: Attending a farewell party for Sister Diane Odette in West Palm Beach, Florida, August 15, 2011, are: back row, from left, Sisters Mary Therese Napolitan, Eileen Sullivan, Jean Crane, Margaret Exworthy, Diane Odette, and Anne Liam Lees, and front row, from left, Sisters Lorraine Sinn, Frances Madigan, Carmen Alvarez, Anne Richard Baker, and Mary Jean Clemenger. Sisters Mary Rose Hochanadel, left, and Margaret Exworthy, Rosarian Academy, West Palm Beach, 1991.

From left: From left, members of the Treasure Coast Mission Group, Sisters Teresita Ruiz, Margarita Ruiz, Grace Flowers, Margaret Exworthy, Mary Jean Clemenger, and Associate Maria McCadden at the opening of General Chapter, October 2015. Members of the Treasure Coast Mission Group include, seated, from left, Sisters Shirley Boettcher and Margaret Exworthy and standing, from left, Associate Maria McCadden and Sister Mary Jean Clemenger.
Members of the 2018 Diamond Jubilee Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Margaret Exworthy, Judith Ann Nelson, Patricia Siemen (Prioress), and Rita Eileen Dean; fourth row, from left, Sisters Mary Anne Yanz, Charlotte Anne Swift, and Joan Hinz; third row, from left, Sisters Patricia Dulka, Iva Gregory, Marilyn Barnett, and Attracta Kelly; second row, from left, Sisters Mary Katherine Dolan, Maureen Fenlon, Patricia Stellmah, Beverly Stark, and Annette Marie Sinagra; and front row, from left, Sisters Kathleen Clausen, Mary Miday, Maria Odelia Romero, Carol Bollin, Veronica Kelley, and Sharon Beckmann.