Sister Marie Quenneville, OP
1936-2019

Marie worked hard, often behind the scenes, with no need for thanks or praise. She trusted the call to serve, however it came, and responded generously.

Sister Carol Johannes spoke these words about Sister Marie Quenneville in her homily at Sister Marie’s funeral Mass, further describing Sister Marie as a humble woman, a splendid and creative teacher, and a wonderful witness to the Dominican dedication to truth.

Sister Marie was born January 18, 1936, in Detroit, to George and Marie (Bonten) Quenneville. George was born in Stoney Pointe, Ontario, Canada, where his family had a farm, and met his future wife while he was what was called a “nickel immigrant,” commuting on the Windsor to Detroit ferry – which cost a nickel to ride – to work at the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) factory in Detroit.

Marie Bonten had come to Detroit with her mother, Clara, and two siblings from Antwerp, Belgium, in 1921. Her father, Charles, had arrived at some earlier point to get a job and establish a home, and Clara and her children followed. Not knowing a word of English, they sailed for the United States, went through Ellis Island, and boarded a train for Detroit, where Charles met his family at the Michigan Central train station.

Sister Marie Quenneville wrote in her autobiography that as her parents worked together at Nabisco, “Whenever Marie and her crew got behind in packing Ritz crackers, George would wink at Marie and the co-workers and jam the conveyor belt so that they could catch up.”

The couple married in Detroit in 1929 and lived in the city until their first child, John, was born. Hard times during the Great Depression led George to move his young family back to the Stoney Pointe farm where at least they had enough food. As the Depression eased, they returned to Detroit, and as time went on ten more children came into the family: Charles, Marie, Patrick, Thomas, William, Rita, Elaine, Edward, and twins Donald and Donna.

Sister Marie attended St. Bernard School in Detroit, staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph from Kalamazoo, Michigan, for her first few years of school. The family then moved to St. Clair Shores, Michigan, where Sister Marie went to public school for fourth through sixth grades because there was no Catholic school nearby.

In 1947, the Quennevilles moved to Wayne, Michigan, where Sister Marie and four of her siblings attended St. Mary’s School, which was staffed by the IHM Sisters. George paid off the tuition by working evenings as a janitor at the school. A year later, the family returned to Detroit and Sister Marie enrolled at St. Edward’s School, where she first met the Adrian Dominicans, for eighth grade.

Her high school years were spent at the Congregation-run Dominican High School in Detroit. She begged to be allowed to attend Dominican because she had so loved the Sisters she knew from St. Edward’s, and her mother agreed to it as long as she would help pay her way by babysitting. As it turned out, Sister Marie was awarded a service scholarship.
Between being taught by Adrian Dominican Sisters and helping them with odd jobs after school, Sister Marie found herself attracted to the Sisters’ joy and friendliness and began contemplating religious life. With the support of the Sisters from both Dominican High and St. Edward’s, she entered the postulate on February 2, 1952. She completed her last year of high school at St. Joseph Academy and was received as a novice in August of that year, given the religious name Sister Madonna Joseph.

After her canonical novitiate year was complete, she was assigned to Ascension School in Harvey, Illinois, where she found herself with a class of sixty-five second graders. Fortunately, she was mentored by Sister Georgina Luznicky, who helped her write lesson plans, make materials for the Detroit Reading Method, and become a successful teacher.

Sister Marie was at Ascension for seven years, during which time she completed her bachelor’s degree in Latin from Siena Heights College (University), and then in 1960 was sent to St. Denis School, Chicago, for five years. The 1965-66 school year was spent as a teacher and assistant principal at Santa Maria Del Popolo School, Mundelein, Illinois, followed by service at St. Peter School, Harper Woods, Michigan (1966-68 and 1970-72); St. Augustine School, Detroit (1968-70); St. Pius X School, Toledo, Ohio (1972-76 and 1977-79); St. Lawrence O’Toole School, Oakland, California (1976-77); St. Gerard School, Detroit (1979-81); St. Gabriel School, Detroit (1981-87); and St. Cyprian School, Riverview, Michigan (1987-89). While at St. Augustine, she earned her Master of Education degree in children’s literature.

It was during her time at St. Gabriel’s that Sister Marie discovered her niche in life: kindergarten. The first time she was at St. Peter’s, she taught sixth through eighth grades, and discovered she greatly missed teaching younger children. But her principal at St. Gabriel, Sister Sheila Delaney, invited her to start a kindergarten program there, and she stayed there happily for six years and then taught kindergarten at St. Cyprian’s.

After that, she started and directed a preschool program at St. Luke’s in Detroit, but circumstances caused her to stay there for only seven months before she left for St. Ladislaus School in Hamtramck, Michigan, also to teach kindergarten. When the school closed in June 1992, she returned to St. Peter School in Harper Woods for a third time, this time to teach first grade. “I taught some of the children of the students that I had in eighth grade there in 1968 (Grandmother Teacher),” she wrote in her autobiography.

Sister Marie’s mother died in August 1992 after a lengthy illness, the latest tragedy in a string of them for the Quenneville family. Her parents had to bury five of their eleven children: Charles died on Christmas Day 1977; John, who became a priest but then left the priesthood and married, died of cancer in April 1979; Elaine died of a brain aneurysm at age forty-one in May 1985; and Tom died of a heart attack at age forty-eight in December 1989.

Sister Marie herself had a heart attack in November 1993 that required seven months of recuperation time. When the 1994-95 school year began, Sister Adrienne Schaffer, principal at St. Gerard in Detroit, invited her to return there to teach kindergarten, and she remained there until deciding to retire from teaching in 1999, the year after her father died.

She then became a caregiver at Bon Secours Place, an assisted living facility in St. Clair Shores, Michigan, but found the work physically taxing and after just a few months left to be a volunteer in the Congregation’s Development Office, working with Sister Adrienne, Sister Mary Kay Homan, and other Sisters.
It was a ministry that she loved, but she had to leave it in 2009 when a stroke necessitated her move to the Dominican Life Center. There, she was able to fully realize her creative side; she had learned how to quilt during her years at St. Gabriel School when she and her principal and longtime friend, Sister Sheila Delaney, took an evening class in it. Now, at the DLC, she could truly pursue her favorite craft, and many people were recipients of her beautiful quilts. She also used the computing skills she had learned in the Development Office to make greeting cards and name cards for the tables at Chapter Jubilee celebrations.

As it became too difficult for her to quilt and use the computer, she turned to reading, a passion she had had since learning to read at the age of three.

Near the end of her life story, Sister Marie wrote, “I’ve had a wonderful life as an Adrian Dominican and owe so much to the Sisters with whom I’ve lived, who mentored, taught and helped me to grow. When I look at the circles in the cemetery, I know I’m walking among saints. It is holy ground for sure.”

Sister Marie Quenneville joined those saints on June 25, 2019. She was eighty-three and in her sixty-sixth year as an Adrian Dominican. By that time, her brother Donald was her only surviving sibling.

Among those sharing remembrances at her wake service was Sister Sheila, who told a wealth of stories about her friend and what Sheila called “The Quenneville Way.”

“For want of better words I’ll say it this way: You become aware. You understand what is needed. You act,” she said.

“… I love my friend. I’m so happy and blessed to have Marie in my life. I know that she is at peace, and I am at peace knowing that she is enjoying Heaven with the God who loved her so much.”

Members of the family who could not be present sent a remembrance to be read that recalled Sister Marie’s generosity not only with teaching but the way she would arrive for holiday dinners complete with a shopping bag of cans of peanuts and coloring books and crayons for the young ones. And, of course, they recalled Sister Marie’s afghans – which, they wrote, “cured any ailment” – and the quilts which she gave to the family’s newborns.

Fittingly, the cover of the worship aid at Sister Marie’s funeral Mass showed a photo of one of her many quilts.

“Dearest Marie,” Sister Carol Johannes said to conclude her homily at the funeral, “thank you for being such an honest, transparent, generous, trusting sister to us. As you are now at home in that place prepared for you, please pray for us, that we, too, may be at peace with our own mortality, trust the authenticity of our own call, believe in the efficacy of our prayer, and also, and above all, embrace the unfathomable mercy and love of our God.”
From left: Sister Marie’s eighth-grade graduation photo from St. Edward School, Detroit; Sister Marie’s parents, George and Marie (Bonten) Quenneville

From left: Sister Marie attends the 50th class reunion for the Dominican High School Class of 1953, September 2003. From left, Associate Mercedes Fitzsimmons and Sisters Helene Burns, Patricia Sporer, Sheila Delaney, and Marie Quenneville
Right: Members of the 2002 Golden Jubilee, August Reception Crowd are, back row, from left, Sisters Diane Odette, Norma Dell, Elizabeth Ross, Mary Giacopelli, and Marie Quenneville, and front row, from left, Sisters Mary Nugent, Claudia Hinds, Jean Horger, Mary Ann Zakrajsek, Kathleen Buechele, and Laura Marie Smith.

Right: Sister Dorothy Booms, left, and Sister Marie Quenneville celebrate Sister Marie’ Golden Jubilee, June 2002.