Sister Mary Daria Herbella, OP
1926-2019

The very small town of Springerville, Arizona, in the east-central part of the state just 17 miles from the border with New Mexico, gave the Adrian Dominican Sisters the twenty-four-year-old Ida Mae Herbella.

Ida Mae was the seventh of ten children born to Dario and Eladia (Dominquez) Herbella after the couple moved to Arizona from the Galician Province of their native Spain. The three “middle children” died in infancy before Ida Mae came into the family, leading age-wise to a set of three older children, a gap of several years, and then the younger four beginning with Ida Mae. It was almost like having two families merged into one, she wrote in her autobiography. She was twelve years old when the youngest sibling, Jaqueline, age four, died of diphtheria.

Dario had been conscripted into the Spanish army as a young man and served until being medically discharged due to a hernia. He then went to work in a mine, where he earned 25 cents a day in addition to having his room and board provided, and eventually he saved up enough money to book passage on a ship to Cuba. There, he worked in the sugar cane fields until he had the money to go by ship to San Francisco, where he worked as a longshoreman. Working hard and continuing to save gave him the means to return to Spain as a successful man.

Back in his hometown of Raigada, Dario met and married Eladia, and the two returned to the United States, sailing first to New Orleans and then traveling to Arizona by train. The couple initially made their home in Flagstaff and then moved to a cabin owned by the rancher for whom Dario went to work tending sheep. In time, Dario was able to buy property in Springerville and own a general store there.

Ida Mae, born on November 7, 1926, was baptized as Eladia Maria but was always known by the Americanized version of her mother’s name; she wrote in her autobiography that she never knew she was named after her mother until the Congregation needed a copy of her baptismal certificate in order for her to enter.

She started school at age five because of when her birthday fell, attended elementary school in Springerville, and enjoyed her experience there, at least until it was time for seventh grade. It seems that there were too many children enrolled in that grade, and so the school decided that the children of business owners should skip ahead to eighth grade; evidently, the expectation was that these children would go into their family’s business any way and so they did not really need that year of education in order to work.

For Ida Mae, however, the result was a year of missing friends who were the same age and trying desperately to fit in with a class of older students. And when it came time for high school, which was in nearby Eagar, a twelve-year-old Ida Mae had to adapt not only to classmates who were older than her, but to a school dominated by Mormons as both students and teachers. Even so, she played the cymbals in the school band (writing in her autobiography that she could relate to the Psalms’ command to “praise God with clashing cymbals”), sang in the glee club, and had an active social life. “Our biggest aim was to be in a committee that would place the junior prom outside of Lent,” she wrote in her autobiography. “The Mormons didn’t understand that Good Friday was not a day to have a prom.”
It was the time of World War II, and her brother, Charley, had gone into the Army. That meant any thought of college for Ida Mae went by the wayside because she, the next oldest, was expected to take her brother’s place helping out in the family store until Charley came home.

In addition to that task, she worked temporarily as a postal clerk. As was the case for other workplaces during the war, the fact that so many men were in the military left vacancies in the postal service, and the local postmaster asked Dario if Ida Mae could fill in for several hours a week. Dario was not in favor of any of his daughters working for a salary, but he allowed her to take the job.

Charley was discharged from the Army in the spring of 1945, but not long after the family celebrated his safe return, they mourned Eladia’s death. Ida Mae wrote in her autobiography that the stress of constantly worrying if Charley would make it home from the war took a toll on her mother, and in early June Eladia was taken to a Phoenix hospital, where she died in late August.

“I had prayed that if Mom regained her health I would go to the nunnery,” Ida Mae wrote. “When Mom died I told God, ‘So you don’t want me! Well, O.K., then I won’t be a Sister!’”

God apparently had other ideas, however. One evening, Ida Mae overheard her father debating the Catholic Church with a visitor — on the “against” side; he “loved to argue,” she wrote — and she was so dismayed by his comments that she went to her room and told God that she would know it was time to enter the convent when her father told her to do it. She was sure there would be no way such a thing would actually come to pass … but at a later date, a family argument concerning Dario’s store led him to tell her he would sell the business and she should go to the convent.

Her connection to the Adrian Dominican Sisters had started circa 1943 when Sisters from Winslow, Arizona, came to Springerville to teach summer school. They lived across the street from the Herbellas and were invited by the family to come over and use their washing machine as needed. Ida Mae liked the Sisters’ neat Dominican habits and their fun-loving spirit, and so when she made that bargain with God over her mother’s health, the Adrian Dominicans were the congregation she had in mind.

Now with her father’s approval in hand, she wrote to the convent in Winslow asking how to seek admittance to the Congregation. The Sisters at the convent then helped her get ready, including asking her what religious name she wished to have. “I had no idea what that meant,” she wrote, and when the Sisters explained that it had to be a saint’s name and that sometimes women took some form of their parents’ name, she figured she was “off the hook” given that Dario and Eladia weren’t saints’ names. But then, as she paged through the missal the Sisters had given her, she came across the husband-and-wife martyrs Daria and Chrysanthus and “the die was cast,” she wrote.

When her entrance date neared, the Winslow Sisters arranged a flight for her to Chicago, where she was met by Sisters from Star of the Sea convent, given some lunch, and put on a train for Adrian. She arrived at the Motherhouse quite late at night, so it was not until the next day that Mother Gerald met her, put the veil on her head, and welcomed her to the community. As it so happened, that day was Ida Mae’s twenty-fourth birthday.

After about a month in Adrian, in December, she was sent to teach kindergartners at St. Gabriel School in Detroit to replace a Sister who was ill and had come to the infirmary. Living in a convent full of very different Sisters, in such a different climate than sunny Arizona, gave her some emotionally dark days, she wrote in her autobiography, and she began to think she had made a mistake by entering. But summer in Adrian and a fulfilling experience as a novice helped clear away her doubts.
Her canonical novitiate year completed, the new Sister Mary Daria was sent back to her native Arizona, first to teach at St. Mary School in Kingman (1952-1959) – during which time her father died – and then to Loretto School in Douglas (1959-1962). In fact, virtually her entire life in active ministry was spent in the Southwest/West: Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and California.

After her three years in Douglas, Sister Mary Daria went to St. Raphael, Los Angeles (1962-1965); St. Anthony, Casa Grande, Arizona (1965-1967); St. Lawrence O’Toole, Oakland, California (1967-1969); Holy Cross High School, Santa Cruz, California (1969-1971); Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Flagstaff, Arizona (1971-1977), where she served as principal; Queen of Heaven, Albuquerque, New Mexico (1977-1981); and Trinidad Catholic High School, Trinidad, Colorado (1981-1982). As a talented musician in both piano and choral singing, she often taught music in the course of her ministry.

Along the way, she earned her bachelor’s degree in English from Siena Heights College (University) in 1959 and her master’s, also in English, from the University of San Francisco in 1967.

Her time at Queen of Heaven was the start of a turning point in her life. She got involved with adult faith formation in the parish (in addition to directing the Spanish choir) and enjoyed it very much, and went on to earn her master’s in religious education from St. Thomas University in Houston in the summertime. Then, a year after she left Queen of Heaven, she was back in Albuquerque because the pastor of Queen of Heaven asked her to help form a new parish in the city. She taught faith formation at the new parish, Church of the Risen Savior, and assisted the pastor in numerous ways.

After five years there, Daria returned to Adrian to serve as a physical exercise aide at Maria Health Care Center, where she spent three years before deciding she wanted to go back to Arizona. The final twelve years of her active ministry were spent in pastoral work at St. Mary of Angels Parish in Pinetop, Arizona (1990-1997), and San Clemente Parish, Los Lunas, New Mexico (1997-2002). After leaving that ministry, she lived first in Phoenix and then in Albuquerque for several years before taking up residence at the Dominican Life Center in 2009.

Sister Daria died on April 3, 2019, at the age of ninety-two. She had been an Adrian Dominican Sister for sixty-seven years.

She “lived joyfully as if she was the only one God loved, and taught others to do the same,” said Sister Maria Goretti Browne in Daria’s funeral homily two days later. “Thank you, Daria, for the example you have left us, the example of a holy, dedicated, joyful, witty person in love with her God. May you have eternal peace … where you can continue to clash those cymbals and so glorify God for all eternity.”
Right: From left, Sister Mary Daria, her father Dario, and her sister Barbara (Bobbie Jo)

From left: Sister Mary Daria gives Sister Mary Edwardine Schairer a ride in her wheelchair. Sister Mary Daria in Kingman, Arizona
From left: Sisters Mary Donalda Fredricks, left, and Mary Daria Herbella at Holy Cross Convent, Santa Cruz, California. Sisters Mary Daria Herbella, left, and Charlotte Moser at the General Council farewell celebration, June 2016

From left: Sister Mary Daria and Father Oliver Curran in front of St. Mary of the Angels Church, Pine Top, Arizona. From left, Cathy Moeller, Sister Mary Daria’s student, and Sisters Marie Luisa Vasquez, Maria Daria Herbella, and Marie Carmen Gonzales
From left: Sister Mary Daria serves as Music Director and pastoral minister at Risen Savior Parish, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Sister Mary Daria’s crowd: back row, from left, Sisters Mary Daria Herbella, Elisa Joan Doherty, Thérèse M. Haggerty, Agnes Peplinski, Rita Brunett, and former Sister Elaine LeVotte and, seated from left, Sisters Anne Liam Lees, Marian Edward Guethlein, and Catherine Ahern.

Members of the 2001 Golden Jubilee August Reception Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Elisa Joan Doherty, Dolores Slosar, Celine Marie Regan, Judith Ann Lieder, Anne Liam Lees, and Marie Wiedner; middle row, from left, Sisters Thérèse M. Haggerty, Julianne Wolny, Catherine Ahern, Agnes Peplinski, Jeannine Holway, Clara Ann Budenz, and Elizabeth Lynch; and front row, from left, Sisters Marian Edward Guethlein, Nancy Hanna, Dolores Marie Dolan, Mary Daria Herbella, and Rita Brunett.