Sister Philomena Perreault, OP
1924-2019

Now that she has gone before us, well marked with the sign of faith, she adds her value from heaven, cheering us as we refuse poverty and indignity, making sure God sees what we are doing and blesses us, and interceding for our work to rebuke evil and make poverty recede. Even recede by one half an inch.

These words are excerpted from an email sent to Adrian by Father Rick Frechette, CP, to be read at the wake service for Sister Philomena Perreault. Father Rick and Sister Philomena had spent many years working together in Haiti, right from the start of the Our Little Brothers and Sisters orphanage (Nos Petits Frères et Soeurs) which Father Frechette helped found in 1987.

Marie Therese Perreault was born on July 30, 1924, in Manchester, New Hampshire, the youngest of five children – the others being Lucien, Rita, Irene, and Leo, who was killed in World War II – born to Arthur and Marie (Arel) Perreault, French-Canadians who had immigrated to the United States. When she was two, her parents divorced, and she and her siblings were all sent to an orphanage. Her mother took her (and only her, out of all her children) back for good when Sister Philomena was ten years old.

Sister Philomena’s next stop was Eureka, California, after she completed her elementary education. She went to work at a medical clinic while attending high school and actually did not complete her schooling until years after the usual age for doing so. A retreat at the Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park, California, in 1949 connected her with Sister Kevin Ryan of the Dominican Sisters of Everett, Washington (later to become the Edmonds Dominicans), and she ultimately decided she wished to become a religious.

She entered the community in August 1950, at the age of twenty-six – and finished her high school education at that point, attending the sisters’ Holy Angels Academy in Seattle – and received the habit and her religious name in June 1951.

After completing her canonical novitiate year, Sister Philomena was missioned to Menlo Park, where she did domestic work at Queen of the Rosary Convent and assisted at the Vallombrosa Center. She served there two times, from 1952 to 1953 and from 1955 to 1956. In between, she did domestic work at St. Dominic Convent, the community’s motherhouse in Everett, and then in 1956 she assisted as the motherhouse was moved to Edmonds and the community became the Dominican Sisters of Edmonds. She spent the next five years (1956-61) at the new motherhouse, Rosary Heights, as sacristan and laundress.

What became her true mission in life began in 1961, when she was sent to St. Helen Hospital in Chehalis, Washington, to be a nurse’s aide. Four years later, Sister Philomena began licensed practical nurse’s training at Gray’s Harbor Community College in Aberdeen, Washington, completing her degree in 1966. This was followed by a year of LPN duties at St. Joseph Hospital in Aberdeen.

In May 1967, she and Sister Fidelis Halpin packed up a station wagon with medical supplies and their belongings and set off for Alcoman, Mexico, where they ministered at a medical clinic serving local people and orphans for the next eleven years. It was here that they met Father William Wasson, a co-
founder of Our Little Brothers and Sisters (Nuestros Paquanos Hermanos in Spanish), whose orphanage was nearby. When Father Wasson moved the orphanage moved to Miacatlán, more than 100 miles to the south, the Sisters decided it was time to return to the much more moderate climate of the Pacific Northwest.

Sister Philomena served at St. Helen Hospital from early 1979 until 1982 and then was a nurse at St. Alphonsus Convent in Seattle, Washington, from 1982 to 1986. Following a sabbatical year (1986-87), she embarked on the adventure that lasted the rest of her active ministerial life: caring for orphans in Haiti.

Father Wasson took a small team including Sisters Philomena and Fidelis to Haiti to scout out a site for a new orphanage. The result was St. Helene, located in Kenscoff in the Haitian mountains, where Sister Philomena was in charge of the baby house and a small clinic. By year’s end, twelve babies had arrived.

In a letter Father Frechette wrote for Christmas 1997, he said of Sister Philomena, “For many (babies), hers was the first face they ever saw when they could see clearly. Hers were the arms that held them when they cried at night, from nightmares or fevers. Hers was the voice that made them turn their little heads, looking for ‘mom.’”

Sister Philomena herself wrote about the first baby the orphanage ever received: Chantal, weighing three pounds and diagnosed with AIDS. Her mother had died in childbirth and her father was unable to care for her. The orphanage had no cribs yet, and so for a few weeks Chantal was placed in a dresser drawer which Sister Philomena lined with blankets, and fed by Sister Philomena with an eye dropper every two hours night and day. In time, Chantal developed into a normal-sized baby and it turned out that she did not have AIDS after all.

Ministering in Haiti could be a very difficult, if not dangerous, proposition. On the one end of that spectrum, Father Frechette’s Christmas letter described Sister Philomena as scrubbing mud out of the cisterns, up on the roof with a sledgehammer, battling rats, cooking in the backyard over a campfire during an embargo which starved Haiti of basics including fuel, and catching rain in pots and pans in times of drought. On the more serious end of the scale, the nuns and priests often faced great danger, to the point that Sister Philomena began keeping a machete under her bed “just in case.”

Father Frechette’s letter continued,

> It got so bad that someone offered to take our whole orphanage (we had over 300 kids at the time) on a big ship just offshore where we could live seaworthy lives until the danger passed. Sister objected. She wondered if whoever’s idea it was had ever tried to change a diaper on a boat. As for me, I would rather face a firing squad than change a diaper, and the thought of changing a diaper on a rocking boat was too much for me to take. She had my vote. We were staying put.

When 20,000 international troops came to Haiti to stem the violence, soldiers could often be found at the orphanage, eating Sister Philomena’s homemade chocolate chip cookies and playing on the swings and seesaws with the children.

In all, Sister Philomena spent some fifteen years in Haiti, first at the orphanage and later caring for sick babies at St. Damian’s Hospital, and looked after some one hundred children — the one hundredth of which she gave the name Dominic. Those who knew her bestowed the title “The Mother of the Mountain” upon her.
Among those who got to know her during this time was Barb Tomasini, a board member of Project Haiti of the St. Alphonsus Foundation in Boise, Idaho. In her remembrance at Sister Philomena’s wake service, she recalled her first Project Haiti trip, during which her first encounter with Sister Philomena came.

I met her at St. Helene’s Orphanage where she cared for the orphan infants newborn to two years old. I remember vividly how Sr. P would sit them around the table for their meals. She had twelve in her care at that time and she affectionately called them “her twelve disciples.” While sitting them on their potty chairs she would practice the sign of the cross with them.

Donna-Marie Hayes, who met Sister Philomena in 1999 when Donna-Marie came to Haiti as part of a St. Alphonsus medical team, recalled Sister Philomena’s gentle way of caring for even children with terrible diseases. “Sister insisted that touching was part of human healing, no matter holding a swaddled baby or hugging a diseased person,” she said.

Sister Philomena’s ministry in Mexico and Haiti was certainly work that was near and dear to her heart. But a highlight of a different type came in 1996, when with the help of Father Frechette and his frequent-flyer miles, she was able to travel to New York to see and meet Mother Theresa. “Such a moving experience. I will never forget it,” she said. Later, in 2002, she, Father Frechette, and Barb Tomasini were part of a team that visited Mother Theresa’s home base in Calcutta, India.

In 2006, finally unable to continue with the physically demanding work, Sister Philomena left her beloved Haiti. “I suspect that was the saddest day of her life,” said Sister Mary White, who preached the homily for Sister Philomena’s memorial Mass. And yet, Sister Mary continued, Sister Philomena always found ways to be of service even as a resident of Rosary Heights and later at the Dominican Life Center, to which she moved in 2010. Whether it was helping in the mail room or folding towels, Sister Philomena continued to serve even as Alzheimer’s robbed her of her memory.

Sister Philomena went to her God on May 7, 2019, at the age of ninety-four and in her sixty-seventh year of religious profession: fifty-one years as an Edmonds Dominican and sixteen as an Adrian Dominican, after the Dominican Sisters of Edmonds merged with the Dominican Sisters of Adrian in 2003.

Said Sister Mary in her homily,

In the reading from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians,¹ we have a theme so familiar that we could probably all recite it from memory. It tells us many things that Love is and is not. Most of us spend our lives trying to live what it preaches. It seems to me that Sister Philomena preached by what she lived.

… For her, her work was her prayer. The service of God’s people, young and old, was her prayer. Service to the children of Mexico and Haiti was her prayer. Folding towels was her prayer. LOVE NEVER FAILS!

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:1-7
From left, Sister Philomena, Father Richard Frechette, who worked with her at the orphanage in Haiti, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta with a baby from the orphanage. Sister Philomena enjoys a light moment at the 2018 Fall Family Fest, held in the Dominican Life Center courtyard for Co-workers and their families.
From left: The last Sisters to reside at Rosary Heights in Edmonds, Washington are, from left: Sisters Dorothy L. Berg, Michele Kopp, Mary White, Philomena Perreault, and Judy Byron. Sister Philomena at an audience with Pope John Paul II.

From left, Sister Fidelis Halpin; Father William Wasson, founder of Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos Orphanage in Haiti; and Sister Philomena Perreault, January 17, 1983. Members of the 2012 Diamond Jubilarians August Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Marion O’Loughlin, Diane Odette, Diana Bader, Norma Dell, Mary Ann Zakrajsek, and Attracta Kelly (Prioress) and front row, from left, Sisters Marie Quenneville, Mary Nugent, Jean Horger, Philomena Perreault, Barbara Bieker, and Mary Giacopelli.
Sister Philomena with her family: from left, Kathy; her father, Arthur; Sister Philomena; Rita; Frank; Richard; Andrew; and her mother, Marie.