Sister Barbara Gass, OP
1927-2020

May you now rest in God’s loving arms.
Eternal rest grant unto you, Sister Barbara Gass, and
May eternal light be yours forever.

These words concluded the eulogy that Sister Joanne Peters, Co-Chapter Prioress of the Holy Rosary Chapter, gave for Sister Barbara Gass, a scientist by training, a musician by gift, and a woman of deep, abiding faith in her God.

Barbara Cathryn Gass was born on March 13, 1927, in Wyandotte, Michigan, to Gerald and Cecelia (Sack) Gass. She was the couple’s third child of four, following Dolores and Gerald Jr. and before Mary Louise, who like Barbara became an Adrian Dominican Sister.

Gerald was originally from Portland, Michigan, while Cecelia was born in Toledo, Ohio. Cecelia’s family later moved to Adrian, where she attended St. Joseph School and after completing grade school attended St. Joseph Academy as a day student in the secretarial program. When she graduated from the two-year program, she went to work as a secretary for the Adrian Fence Company – where Gerald happened to work as well.

But the couple actually did not meet at work; Gerald was very active in St. Joseph Parish’s Knights of Columbus, and during a convention held at the parish Cecelia and some of the parish’s other young women who were there to serve meals took pictures of the young men. Cecelia took Gerald’s picture, he asked her for a print and gave her his address to send it to, and the romance bloomed from there.

The young couple settled in Wyandotte after their marriage on February 2, 1922, in a home Gerald had built next to his mother’s dry goods store. He and a partner later converted the business to Gass-Gee Cleaners.

All the children attended St. Joseph School in Wyandotte, where they were educated – and deeply influenced -- by the Adrian Dominican Sisters who were their teachers.

Barbara went on to St. Patrick High School, where in her junior year she took piano lessons from Sister Irmina Souvigney and shared her interest in religious life with Sister Irmina. When she told her parents, they were supportive, but wanted her to finish high school first.

In her senior year, she received the necessary information to enter the Congregation, and proceeded to mail in her application on her way home from school – and only then told her parents what she had done.

She arrived in Adrian on June 25, 1944, and on January 3, 1945, was received into the novitiate and given the religious name Sister Gerald Cecelia after her parents.

Her first mission after making first profession was to Queen of Angels School in Chicago, where to her astonishment she was assigned to teach music. It was a difficult two years (1946-1948) because although she enjoyed music and had done well in music theory classes, she never attained the sort of proficiency on the piano, or any other instrument, that she felt she needed in order to teach.
Sister Barbara did know, however, that she was good in math, and declared that as her major when it came time for classes at Siena Heights College (now University). At her former piano teacher Sister Irmina’s suggestion, she also studied music theory, and given the well-known connection between music and math she did well. But she was told to study piano too, and that did not go nearly as smoothly, so when Sister Bertha Homminga, the registrar, informed her that she was to be a music major “I was crushed,” she wrote.

But pleading her case to Sister Bertha was unsuccessful, and she graduated from Siena Heights in 1954 with a bachelor’s degree in music.

Her next stop in higher education came two years later when she was sent to Michigan State University for a master’s degree in music. She began the program but, despairing, finally asked to speak with Mother Gerald about it, and Mother Gerald allowed her to discontinue her studies. Several years later, Sister Barbara returned to MSU to study physics, which she did want to do, and graduated with a master’s degree in teaching physics in 1966.

After Queen of Angels, Sister Barbara taught at St. Antoninus School, Cincinnati, Ohio (1948-1956); St. Agatha School, Detroit (1956-1957); St. Mary School, Rockwood, Michigan (1957-1959); and St. Mary School, Assumption (Swanton), Ohio (1959-1962). It was only when she became a math and science teacher at Dominican High School in Detroit in 1962 that she began to enjoy teaching. She also discovered that she was better suited to teach high school students than younger ones.

Once she had completed her master’s degree work, she was asked by Sister Marie Johannes O’Donnell, the chair of the Barry College (University) Chemistry Department, to become part of the Barry faculty, and went there in 1967. She spent a very happy ten years at Barry and then, having taken classes in data processing, returned to Adrian to work in the Congregation’s Central Services office.

Sister Barbara became coordinator of the data department in 1978 and worked there until 1985, when she spent several months as a computer operator in the school office of the Diocese of Toledo, Ohio. She then went to work in the Archdiocese of Detroit’s education office for just over a year.

In March 1987, she went to Aquinas High School in Southgate, Michigan, where she was a computer resource person and then bookkeeper until 1989. At that point, desiring to further her theological education, she went to the Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, during her sabbatical year to earn a certificate in theology/ministry studies. Once her sabbatical was complete, she ministered in computer work for the Congregation’s Development Office in Detroit until 1999.

Sister Barbara’s computer and clerical skills bore still more fruit in her final years of ministry: at the Neighbors Caring for Neighbors Clinic in Mt. Clemens, Michigan (1999-2005); in the Congregation’s itinerant preacher program in Adrian (2005-2006); in the Siena Heights archive from 2006 to 2012; and as a volunteer in the Catherine of Siena Library from 2013 to 2016.

She also gifted the Congregation with her musical talents by spending many years as the cantor for Morning Prayer, singing in the Sisters’ choir, and playing in the bell choir.

Sister Barbara died at the Dominican Life Center on March 23, 2020, at the age of ninety-three and in her seventy-fifth year as an Adrian Dominican Sister.

Remembrances poured in for the wake service from Sisters Barbara and Mary Louise’s niece Connie Larsen, and from Sisters Mary Kay Homan and Nancy Murray. Sister Nancy recalled an especially humorous story of the time which she convinced Sister Barbara to dress as the cartoon character
SpongeBob Squarepants for Halloween and how thoroughly Sister Barbara threw herself into the role.

Finally, Sister Mary Louise told those gathered for the wake, and watching from the Dominican Life Center and afar, some of her own memories of her sister. Barbara, she said, read to her and encouraged her reading, taught her how to roller-skate, “was an example for her little sister,” and was both musically and creatively gifted with her knitted creations and doves made out of palm fronds or red ribbons. The two also traveled together to many places in the U.S. and internationally.

… Our time in Adrian for the last few years has been a wonderful connecting time. Barbara, you know I love you. Or, I could say, WE love you: relatives, sisters, friends, especially our supportive friend Sister Mary Alice [Naour]. So now, please remember us.”

Sister Mary Jane Lubinski’s homily for Sister Barbara’s funeral the next morning included these words:

In preparation for this homily, I began by reading Barbara’s autobiography. I felt as if she was sitting right across from me, her smiling face, shining eyes, peaceful countenance, and from time to time a bit of excitement. It was clear to me that the gospel read today¹ was a perfect choice for this generous, talented woman. Easy to hear the welcoming words spoken to her as she reached the other side: “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

… Barbara’s life in the congregation was marked by generosity, always willing, always “yes” even when she was filled with self-doubt. She stepped forward because she was asked to do so.

… Barbara walked humbly with her God. Prayer was a welcome friend, ever searching, ever deepening her union with God, others, and all of creation.

… Rest now dear Barbara, God has heard your longing… and we hear, “Well done, my good and faithful servant. Come share your master’s joy.”

¹ Matthew 25:14-23.