Sister Carolyn Nelson, OP
1933-2020

“I have been blessed in so many ways and for this, I am grateful.” These words concluded Sister Carolyn Nelson’s story of her life, a life which began on January 21, 1933, in Chicago. She was the only child of Edward and Virginia (Schuster) Nelson, but after her father’s sudden death and her mother’s remarriage, she was eventually blessed with a younger sister, Judy, when Carolyn was sixteen years old, and with another sibling whom her parents adopted when Carolyn went to the convent. “My mother and (I don’t like the word) step-father decided that they didn’t want Judy to grow up alone as I had,” she said in her autobiography.

Edward owned a business that often took him on the train between Chicago and Denver. One day he was on the train when his appendix ruptured, and although he made it back to Chicago and a hospital, it was too late to save him. Carolyn was just two years old.

Virginia and her little daughter moved to Detroit to live with Virginia’s parents. The family lived in St. Ambrose Parish, and Carolyn attended the parish school from first grade through high school. Her mother remarried, to Joseph Francis Malley, when Carolyn was six years old.

Carolyn graduated from St. Ambrose in 1951 and went on to the University of Detroit, planning to become a dental hygienist. She also worked in an office; as she said in her autobiography, “My mother said, ‘If there is a death and you have to find a job be sure you back it up with secretarial ability.’ I wasn’t the greatest, but I listened to my mother.”

She entered the Congregation in June 1952, and as a postulant was sent out that August to teach fifth grade at St. Mary Star of the Sea in Chicago. “I enjoyed it very much and lived with a great group of sisters,” she said in her life story.

In December she returned to Adrian to begin her canonical novitiate year, receiving the habit and the religious name Sister Angelita, and to begin work toward her bachelor’s degree at Siena Heights College (now University).

“I remember very vividly wanting to study history,” she said. “I told Sister Bertha [Homminga, the registrar] that I have always enjoyed history and I would like to continue that. She looked at me with those eyes and she in turn said, ‘You don’t tell me what you want to take; I tell you what you’re going to take!’”

But Sister Bertha nevertheless acquiesced to her wishes, and she completed her bachelor’s degree in history in 1959, followed in 1968 by a master’s in history from DePaul University in Chicago.

Sister Carolyn taught at St. Paul School in Owosso, Michigan, from 1954 to December 1958. At that point, she made final profession and was sent to St. Augustin School in Des Moines, Iowa, and was there until June 1960. Subsequent assignments took her to Christ the King School, a newly established school also in Des Moines (1960-1963); St. Mary Star of the Sea School, Chicago, for a second time (1963-1965) and St. Patrick School, St. Charles, Illinois, where she was principal for ten years (1965-1975).
Then, in 1975, she became part of the St. Dominic Province provincial team, serving a four-year term as administrator. Once her time in office was up, she found herself in a familiar location, St. Patrick Church in St. Charles, but in a new type of ministry; director of religious education for the parish. The need for serious back surgery during her time there proved a challenge to her ministry, but she was there from 1979 to 1985, when she went to Marygrove College in Detroit to earn a master’s degree in pastoral counseling.

Sister Carolyn then, in 1988, became pastoral associate at St. Owen in Bloomfield, Michigan, and stayed in that ministry for twenty-three years, until 2011. During her time there, she not only ministered to the parish itself but also expanded its outreach into Detroit and worked with an ecumenical group of pastors in Oakland County and northwest Detroit.

After retiring, she lived in Pontiac, Michigan, for another year until health issues required her to return to Adrian to reside at the Dominican Life Center. She died there on April 13, 2020, aged eighty-seven and in her sixty-seventh year of religious profession.

Sister Rosemary Asaro, Holy Rosary Chapter assistant, noted in her eulogy that although Sister Carolyn’s cognitive abilities had declined, “she maintained her gracious, hospitable spirit, reaching out to others in whatever ways she could.”

“Carolyn, you have shown us that it is possible to keep a peaceful spirit in the midst of challenges when the circumstances are beyond our control,” Sister Rosemary continued. “Pray for us that we can be patient, trusting and accepting of each day as it unfolds.”

Sister Fran Nadolny, a member of the General Council, preached the homily for Sister Carolyn’s funeral:

> This Easter Thursday is a perfect day to celebrate Carolyn Nelson’s entrance into eternal life with the resurrected Lord. Carolyn loved flowers and music and happiness – all of which are present here this morning!

> The readings which I selected¹ for this mass of Christian burial carry the themes of love and service. St. Paul tells us to seek good for one another – not only one-to-one, but seek the good of all. And then he says, ever so simply, be certain to be joyful always, to pray continually, to give thanks constantly. Simple actions really: rejoice, pray, thank. And huge effects on others if we do, in fact: rejoice, pray, thank.

And Matthew’s narrative describes the last words which Jesus spoke to his disciples before he entered into his days of passion and death. Jesus tells of a new way of living and loving and serving. These were his last reminders to us, his followers: Be aware of the other, of those in need, of those who need welcoming, of those stifled due to the inconsistencies in our economy, healthcare and education. Jesus reminds each one of us of our responsibilities to one another for the good of all.

As we heard last evening, Carolyn embodied hospitality, generosity, caring. But the lasting marks which Carolyn leaves are not that she did these things. Her lasting marks are that she taught others to do them too. I can guess that, as an educator, it was a bit easier for her to model the precepts given by Jesus since children are more moldable than adults.

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¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:14b-19; Matthew 25:34-40
In her many years as parish pastoral minister, Carolyn was right there helping to feed those in need, participating in the efforts for Haina in the Dominican Republic, housing the homeless of Oakland County, organizing educational events so that people understood the perils of immigration or the needs of those imprisoned by poverty. And then she stepped away. Her legacy is that the good works and the education continue even now. … That faith community continues to rejoice, to pray, to thank, to serve and people’s lives are changed – both the receivers’ and the givers’.