



## **Sister Elizabeth “Betty” Gibbons, OP 1936-2020**

Many Detroit residents know well two of the city’s landmarks: the Fisher Building, topped by its “golden tower,” and the Fox Theater. Sister Betty Gibbons’ father had a key role in both buildings’ construction.

“My father, Eugene Joseph Gibbons, was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1905,” her autobiography begins. “He graduated from the University of Detroit with a degree in Civil Engineering and was the managing engineer during the construction of the Fisher Building and Fox Theater in Detroit. A year later this engineering company closed due to the Depression.”

Elizabeth Gibbons, always known as Betty, was born in Mount Clemens, Michigan, on November 26, 1936, to Eugene and Marie (Baribault) Gibbons. Marie was born in France in 1906, but after her mother died when Marie was just three years old, her father, Betty’s grandfather, sent the children to live with relatives in Quebec, Canada. He eventually followed, and the family came to Detroit when Marie was fifteen. She and Eugene married in 1929, just before the Great Depression hit.

After the Depression cost Eugene his engineering job, he went to work for Sears, Roebuck and Company, and when he was promoted to management the family moved to the Chicago area, where the company’s headquarters was. By that time, Betty had two younger siblings: Eugene Louis and Marilyn, known as “Mickey.” Another sister, Claire, was born in Oak Park, Illinois.

Betty and her sisters attended St. Edmund School in Oak Park, where they were taught by Adrian Dominican Sisters; Sister Willard Reagan was Betty’s teacher from third through sixth grades. Betty graduated from Oak Park High School in 1954 and then spent a year at Cardinal Stritch College in Milwaukee before entering the Congregation in June 1955. For the first few months of the 1955-1956 school year, she taught at St. Mary School in Adrian before beginning her canonical novitiate year – receiving the religious name Sister Claire Eugene – that December.

Her first assignment after making first profession was to St. Joseph School in Homewood, Illinois (January 1957 to June 1960). After that, her next several ministries were all in Florida: Blessed Sacrament School, Tallahassee (1960-1962); Our Lady of Lourdes School, Melbourne (1962 to November 1963); Holy Name School, Gulfport (November 1963 to December 1964); Blessed Sacrament in Tallahassee a second time (December 1964 to June 1967); St. Jude School, St. Petersburg (1967-1968); and St. Monica School, Palatka (1968-1969).

Over these years, she earned a bachelor’s degree in English from Siena Heights College (University) in 1959 and a master’s degree in education from Barry College (University) in 1967.

After completing the 1968-1969 school year at St. Monica School, Sister Betty took a leave of absence from the Congregation until October 1970. When she returned, she became a teacher at St. Albert the Great School in Burbank, Illinois.

By that time, she was beginning to feel drawn to social justice issues, and after the 1970-1971 school year she left teaching behind to enter pastoral ministry. A variety of ministries followed: pastoral minister at St. Patrick Parish, Joliet, Illinois (1971-1973); parish service coordinator for Catholic Charities in Chicago (1973-1975); pastoral minister at St. Jerome Parish, Indian Rocks Beach, Florida (1975-1976); religious education director at St. Jude Parish, St. Petersburg, Florida (1976-1978); pastoral associate at St. James Parish, Maywood, Illinois (1978-1982); social concerns director at

Sacred Heart Parish, San Diego (1982-1986); and campus minister and then assistant resident director at Barry College (1986-1989).

She next entered a completely different type of ministry at Barry for several years, becoming the college's director of computer services and, in 1992, earning a master's in computer management there.

Then in 1993, she returned to Blessed Sacrament Parish in Tallahassee, this time to serve as a parish minister, and remained there until 1998 when she returned to Illinois. She became programs manager for the National Federation Priests Council in Chicago in 1999, and then in 2001 she went to St. Richard Parish, also in Chicago, as its director of catechesis. After that, she was coordinator of the adult high school program at St. Leonard's Ministries, an organization that offers a variety of ministries to help men and women coming out of prison to transition back successfully into the life of society, in Chicago from 2002 to 2004.

Sister Betty continued to live in Illinois, serving as a counselor and activities specialist, until 2009 when she returned to Adrian. She lived in Weber Center for several years until moving to Regina and then to Maria. Her passion for social justice issues continued until her unexpected death on April 14, 2020, aged eighty-three and in her sixty-fourth year as an Adrian Dominican Sister.

Her autobiography concludes with these words: "I want to be remembered as the dog lover that I am. ... But I would mostly like to be remembered as a Christian woman who tried her best to serve God and others."

Among the remembrances of Sister Betty were a number from her "crowd," including these:

Sister Molly Nicholson: "I remember Betty's marvelous laugh especially when the crowd gathered together in earlier years! She was a great listener as well."

Sister Kathleen Waters: "I lived with Betty at Saint Patrick's in Joliet. She was working in the parish and did so many wonderful things for senior citizens. Everyone loved her there. I also remember her infectious laugh. ... I'm sure she is at peace now and spreading that wonderful laugh all through heaven. Those who knew her will say 'Betty is here' and laugh along with her."

Sister Joan Mary: "When she worked at St. James in Maywood with the seniors, I remember especially the great sensitivity she had for each one of them and their situation. ... In the capacity of the social/pastoral worker for the parish she was certainly challenged; however, being with her always lightened up their lives because they knew they had a friend in Betty."

Another remembrance came from Sister Kathleen Klingen, who knew Sister Betty when they both taught at St. Clare in Chicago.

*She was a fun loving community member. ... One time she promised gifts for each sister during the community time in the evening. Following the game Betty presented wrapped gifts for all. She instructed all of us to open them at the same time. While opening one after the other you heard, "That is a beautiful statue. I have one just like it," etc. When we heard, "You have a picture of my parents!" we figured Betty was able to give gifts because she took them from our rooms to give as a joke, of course, to someone else.*

*... I am grateful for the times we shared and the many laughs over the years.*

Sister Mary Ann Ennis preached the homily for Sister Betty's funeral, reflecting on the readings Sister Betty had selected, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, and John 17:3-11.

She began by calling special attention to one section of the Old Testament reading: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."

"One thing I'm sure of is there was always a season for Betty to play cards, and she always made time, especially for pinochle with her friends," Sister Mary Ann said. Noting the timeliness of the reading considering the world's troubled times, it "reminds us that only when we stand together in faith can we stand together. It's also a comfort for any of us who have had a wee bit of doubt along the journey. ... I believe all three readings can be summed up perhaps in one way: it's really about living and walking in the way of love."

Sister Mary Ann went on to read a different version of the 1 Corinthians passage, this one from "The Message," and concluded her homily by saying:

*As I was reflecting on Betty's life and her journey with us, I came across a Quaker prayer that I'd like to end with. It's the very last line of the prayer. ... "Life is eternal, love never ends, death is only a horizon, and a horizon is nothing more than the limit of our sight." ... I like that notion that life is eternal and love never, never ends, and the understanding that the mystery of death is a horizon, and the limit of our own sight.*

*So just for today for each of us as we journey, sometimes in sadness and grief but sometimes in the extravagant love and joy of God, we ask ourselves one question: what time is it in my life? Betty didn't know when she woke up that morning it would be her last morning. What time is it in our life?*

*So as we come to the table and celebrate Betty's life and death, it calls us to walk, not alone, but to walk together as one family, always walking in that way of love and trusting that God walks with us.*