Sister Laura Marie Smith, OP  
1928-2020

A summertime trip to Florida in 1951 and a chance meeting there with Monsignor William Barry, one of Mother Gerald’s brothers, led to a new postulant for the Adrian Dominicans in the person of Dolores Smith, the future Sister Laura Marie.

Dolores, who was baptized Ruth Dolores but was never called by her first name, was born on November 10, 1928, in Cleveland, Ohio, to William and CharLaura (Dunn) Smith. She was the youngest of three daughters; the eldest, WillLaura, died at some point prior to Dolores’ birth, and so “my entrance into the world was a most welcome addition,” Laura Marie wrote in her autobiography. Her other sister, Mary Lee, just thirteen months older than she was, became her “protector and guide.” Each day when she came home from school, Mary Lee would teach Dolores what she had learned that day, and even taught her to read using the Sunday comics.

William was born in Ladysmith, Wisconsin, and CharLaura came from Houston, Texas. CharLaura’s parents, Charles and Laura (hence the combined names for their daughter) came from Ireland and Oklahoma, respectively. Laura’s parents had moved West from Atlanta, Georgia, after the Civil War, and their descendants’ resulting Irish and Southern lineage was a source of great pride.

Sister Laura Marie’s life story gives no indication of how or where William and CharLaura met, but after their marriage they moved to Cleveland in large part because of the city’s fine school system. According to the Congregation’s records, William worked as a salesman and CharLaura was a cashier.

When Dolores was just nine years old, William died of a heart ailment, and CharLaura’s parents subsequently moved to Cleveland and she and her daughters went to live with them.

The girls were educated by the Ursuline Sisters for a very short time but CharLaura wanted her daughters to be taught by the Sisters of Notre Dame, and so it was that they began attending St. Peter School even though it was some distance from their home. Time at St. Irma School and St. John school rounded out her primary education, and Dolores returned to St. Peter’s for high school.

Her exposure to the Notre Dame Sisters led her to decide to enter their community. But her family opposed the idea, wanting her to be more mature and educated before making such a commitment. So, after graduating from high school in 1946, she went to Ursuline College and worked part-time for an advertising agency, a job which she enjoyed and which, she wrote, paid for her “extras.”

Then came that fateful trip to Florida in the summer of 1951. Dolores, her grandparents, and a friend traveled there to visit some family members and during a side trip to Miami Beach, she attended Mass at St. Patrick Church, where she met Monsignor Barry.

The Monsignor subsequently introduced her to the Adrian Dominican Sisters who taught at his parish, two of whom – Sisters Kathleen (Charles Mary) Donnelly and Cathryn (Guillelma) Deutsch – showed the family around town.

“What a marvelous introduction to the community this was,” Sister Laura Marie wrote in her life story, adding that she was also taken by the Sisters’ white Dominican habits, which she at first assumed they wore simply because of the Florida heat. After all, she wrote, her family had for a time lived in St.
Thomas Aquinas Parish, and the saint’s statue in front of the church, made as it was of bronze, was brown in color. “I never realized Dominicans wore a white habit," she wrote.

The end result of her Florida experience was that Dolores entered the Congregation on September 10, 1951. This was two days later than the usual entrance date of September 8, because she was in her sister’s wedding party, but as it so happened she was therefore able to reconnect with the Monsignor, who had come to Adrian to visit Mother Gerald.

When it came time to be received as novice and be given her religious name, she requested a name that had something to do with Laura because of her mother’s and grandmother’s names. She said in her 2015 “A Sister’s Story” video interview, “I remember Sister Edmund [Harrison, the novice mistress] saying, ‘Now, I hope you won’t be too disappointed; that’s such a theatrical name. And I said, ‘Theatrical? I never thought of it that way.’”

Whether theatrical or not, the name became hers in religion.

Her “obedience” as a postulant was to work in the office of Sister Bertha Homminga, the Siena Heights College (now University) registrar. “She was a marvel,” she wrote of Sister Bertha in her life story, “generously kind, patient, and never self-seeking.” What’s more, Sister Bertha kept Hershey’s chocolate bars in her desk drawer that were there for the taking, and would even tell Sister Laura Marie to take several – something, Sister Laura Marie said in her “Sister’s Story” video, that made her very popular over in the novitiate.

As a novice, she worked in the bursar’s office, “inherited” by the newly elected Sister Cletus Hinsberger, and found that to be another rewarding place to be as Sister Cletus unfailingly had a smile and a gentle word, even if her young charge made a mistake in the bookkeeping.

After her canonical novitiate year, Sister Laura Marie began what would be an almost fifty-year ministry in teaching and school administration. As a teacher, she was missioned to St. Edward, Detroit (1953-1954); St. Jude, St. Petersburg, Florida (1954-1957); St. Clement, Romeo, Michigan (1957-1960); St. Ann, West Palm Beach, Florida (1960-1961); Assumption, Jacksonville, Florida (1961-1965); St. Joseph, Miami Beach, Florida (1965-1966); St. James, Miami, Florida (1966-1967); and St. Rose of Lima, Miami Shores, Florida (1967-1968).

During her time at St. Clement, in 1959, she completed her bachelor's degree in history at Siena Heights College, followed in 1967 by her master’s in educational administration from Barry College (now University).

In 1968, she was assigned to be the new principal of Our Lady of Mount Carmel School in Wickliffe, Ohio. Her time there coincided with the height of the unrest in Congregation and church brought on by Vatican II, unrest which she said in her “Sister’s Story” came as a surprise to her because “it seemed to have been a little slower getting down South.” But she weathered the times, and stayed at Our Lady of Mount Carmel until 1974 when, with Sisters having become able to choose their own ministries, she decided she would like to go to California and secured a position as principal of St. Philip Neri in Alameda, California, where she spent the next twelve years.

In 1986 she moved on to St. Therese Academy in San Diego, California, and was principal there for four years. Then her sister, who was their mother’s caregiver, had a heart attack, and she returned home to Ohio to care for both of them.

She took a position as principal at St. Christopher School in Rocky River, Ohio, in July 1991 and stayed there for two and a half years until, with her mother and sister both ill and her resulting
extensive experience with a hospital setting, she thought she might like to become a hospital chaplain and entered the pastoral care program at the Cleveland Clinic with the express intent, given her family’s history of heart trouble, of working in the cardiac unit. She was the only woman in the program, along with a priest and five other men.

But while she learned a lot during her months there, “hospital work takes a unique person and I found it very difficult to be in the chaplaincy program,” she said in her “Sister’s Story.” The final catalyst in her leaving the hospital came when in just one day, seven of the hospital's patients died, one of them a baby.

And so, in the fall of 1994 she returned to education, taking a job with the Anchor Bay School District in New Baltimore, Michigan. Her ministry there was to teach and mentor young unwed mothers in a new program called Teen Mom. “What an eye-opener and education this was,” she said, “because the needs, academically, emotionally, and psychologically, were heart-rending, to say the least.”

In 2002, suffering with back problems, she left the school district and began volunteering in the Congregation’s Development Office. She became a resident of the Dominican Life Center in 2012.

Sister Laura Marie died on March 3, 2020, aged ninety-one and in her sixty-seventh year of profession as an Adrian Dominican Sister. Her funeral homily on March 6 was preached by Sister Mary Ann Ennis.

… God is always about life, and we see in our dear sister Laura’s life, she too knew that. She was about life. Even I remember one time walking down the hall, and I knew that Laura was in her wheelchair, but she was in great pain that day, and she looked up at me and said, “And how are you today?” Always, always, positive, generous, thinking of others.

… “I am the resurrection, and I will give life.” Do we believe it? Do we believe that Laura now can throw all her burdens away, that she can cherish the life within? That we can cherish the life within each one of us? She had to make a choice. She chose life. Because she was so trusting that the abundant and abiding love of God would never, never go away.
Left: At her sister Norma’s wedding, April 10, 1948

From left: Dolores, the future Sister Laura Marie Smith, with her mother, 1930. Attending an October 2002 Dominican High School event are, from left, Sisters Rita Sieg, Adrienne Schaffer, Dorothea Gramlich, Laura Pesick, Laura Marie Smith, and Mary Lisa Rieman.
Right: Attending the wedding of the niece of Sister Laura Marie Smith are, from left, Sisters Clara Ann Budenz, Joanne O’Connor, and Laura Marie Smith; Laura Lee and her husband Joseph Soto; and Sister Laura Pesick.

Enjoying a game of Mexican Train are, from left, Sisters Thérèse M. Haggerty, Norma Dell, Joan Murphy, Laura Marie Smith, and Jeannine Holway.
Right: Members of the 2002 Golden Jubilee, August crowd are, back row, from left Sisters Diane Odette, Norma Dell, Elizabeth Ross, Mary Giacopelli, and Marie Quenneville and front row, from left, Sisters Mary Nugent, Claudia Hinds, Jean Horger, Mary Ann Zakrajsek, Kathleen Buechele, and Laura Marie Smith.