Sister Marie Solanus Reilly, OP
1933-2020

Long before Marie Kathryn Reilly, the future Sister Marie Solanus, was born, her mother, Marie Riley, was riding in a Detroit streetcar when she saw what she took to be a church and decided to go inside. She had moved to Detroit to live with her cousin following the tragic death of her fiancé, and her sadness was immense when she walked into that building seeking solace.

It was there that she met Father Solanus Casey, who told her, “God has other plans for you. You are going to meet a very tall Irishman who you will marry and have a happy life.”

Father Solanus’ prophecy came true. When Marie was invited to dinner by a friend, that friend had invited a tall Irishman named Edward to dinner as well. The result, as Sister Marie Solanus wrote in her life story, “was a marriage, three children, a shared deep faith and a lasting friendship with Father Solanus.”

Marie Kathryn, born on July 23, 1933, was the youngest of three children, following Edward and Anne. Anne was born with spina bifida, but on the way to a specialist to be measured for a full body cast, her parents stopped to see Father Solanus, who told them their little daughter would not need the cast. Again, his words turned out to be accurate. In fact, a miraculous healing of her spina bifida even occurred before her next doctor’s appointment, following yet another meeting with Father Solanus.

Given those connections with the man who in 2017 would become Blessed Solanus, it was only natural that years later when Marie Kathryn was received into the Congregation it was with the religious name Sister Marie Solanus.

Marie’s grade school years were spent being educated by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Kalamazoo, Michigan, at St. Margaret Mary School in Detroit, and those years left her with a longstanding desire to enter religious life. But after graduating from Annunciation High School in 1951 she went to work for Manufacturers National Bank in its international banking department, a job she held for fifteen years. She earned her bachelor’s degree in business from the University of Detroit in 1964.

After her mother’s death in 1965, Father George Gaynor, a friend of the family and good friend to the Congregation, asked her if she was still interested in that “Sister stuff.” She was indeed still attracted to the Sisters of St. Joseph, and Father Gaynor told her that was fine but that he had a friend going to Adrian for a visit and would she like to go along? She did, and the result was that on September 3, 1966, she entered the Adrian Dominican Sisters.

Being thirty-three years old when she entered, she of course was much older than the other postulants and novices, who were generally eighteen or nineteen. But, she wrote in her life story, “Throughout my years of formation I marveled at these young ladies, or kids, as I called them. They were an amazing group and it was my privilege to have been with them. Until this day we have a special bond.”

Her first mission after her canonical novitiate year was St. Mary School in Van Wert, Ohio, where she taught from 1968 to 1970. After that, Sister Marie Solanus served in several ways at St. Edmund

At that point she became a teacher at St. Thomas Apostle High School in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and spent the next two years there. During that time, in 1975, she received a most surprising request from Sister Rosemary Ferguson, the Prioress of the Congregation: to bring her prior experience in international banking to bear as one of the Portfolio Advisory Board’s charter members. She served on the board for two years. In a booklet prepared for the PAB’s fortieth anniversary in 2015, she was noted as having had a special interest in the issue of “redlining,” the practice of a bank’s refusing to do business with residents of certain areas of a city. “I thoroughly enjoyed what we were doing,” she was quoted as saying. “It was work, but it was wonderful work.”

Her time at St. Thomas Apostle also coincided with her completing the first of three master’s degrees, a master of arts in religious studies from Mundelein College in 1976. That was followed by a master of arts in teaching math from the University of Detroit in 1988 and a master of education in special education from Marygrove College in 1990.

Sister Marie Solanus’ subsequent ministries took her to St. Hugh Parish, Southgate, Michigan, as religious education coordinator (1976-1977); to Vista Maria School, Dearborn Heights, Michigan, to teach (1977-1982); to the Congregation-sponsored Dominican High School in Detroit, where she served as treasurer (1982-1987); and to Aquinas High School, Southgate, as its business manager (1987-1989).

Following a sabbatical year, she ministered as a therapist at Samaritan Health Center in Detroit for several months in 1990-1991 and then as a teacher at Boysville of Michigan, where she spent her last ten years in active ministry from 1991 to 2001.

One final connection with Father Solanus’ Capuchins came when, after retiring, she volunteered at the St. Bonaventure Monastery’s after-school tutoring program. Sister Nancynn Turner, who coordinated the Capuchins’ children’s ministry for many years, sent a remembrance for Sister Marie Solanus’ wake service that included this passage:

> About 15 years ago, she approached me with the desire to help with the children at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. … Thus for years, right up to the time she moved to Adrian, she came every single week to tutor the children in the Rosa Parks Program. She was a caring and an excellent tutor. She had patience and a beautiful way of bonding with some of our most difficult children. Eventually, she started bringing [Sister] Kathy Voss with her and they both added greatly to our tutoring service. Marie was such a dear, gentle, yet strong woman and I loved her dearly.

Sister Mary Solanus returned to Adrian to live at the Dominican Life Center in 2013. She died on March 16, 2020, aged eighty-six and in her fifty-second year of religious profession.

At the funeral Mass, Sister Joanne (Jodie) Screes, who served as the homilist, began by drawing attention to the second reading, that famous passage of Micah 6:6-8 – those whose words also graced the front cover of the Mass’s worship aid:

> When Marie asks one to do something for her, such as doing her funeral homily, it is difficult to say no because all her life she has been doing things for others and I don’t believe that the word “no” was in her vocabulary. She did act justly, she did love tenderly, Marie did walk humbly with her God. I believe that her Irish family imprinted
Micah’s words in her soul. I can even visualize that the words “act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God” might have been written on her nursery wall!

Sister Jodie went on to make note of the financial acumen which had made Sister Marie Solanus such an important part of the Portfolio Advisory Board:

She was the only woman I knew who read the stock exchange section of the newspaper… as an aside, Marie always spoke so fondly of Sister Julie Hyer’s father, who upon learning that Marie had been in in charge of a bank’s international loan department, sent novice Marie a subscription of the Wall Street Journal!

Her homily concluded with these words:

Dear Marie, woman of wisdom, chief in charge of worrying about the other, loving aunt, loving member of your Faith crowd…You who inspired us by your love of justice, your love of others, your humility….Thank you for bringing Fr. Solanus and his wisdom into our lives, thank you for your scriptural modeling of the Beatitudes! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you.

We know you rest in peace! No doubt your last words to all of us would be:

“Love one another as I have loved you.”
“Love one another as I have loved you.”
“Love one another as I have loved you.”
Right: Sisters Jodie Screes, left, and Marie Solanus Reilly

Right: Sisters Marie Solanus Reilly, left, and Kathleen Voss
Members of the Portfolio Advisory Board (PAB) – from left, Sisters Marie Solanus Reilly, Kathleen Woods, Margaret Andrezik, Carol Coston, and Louise Borgacz – discuss investment strategy in this photo from the December 1975 issue of the Congregation’s publication, In Between.

Right: Sister Marie Solanus Reilly with Sister Nancy Murray, portraying St. Catherine of Siena
From left: Sister Marie Solanus had a special devotion to Blessed Solanus Casey (1870-1957), of the Franciscan Branch of the Franciscan Minor Capuchins, who served as porter at St. Benedict Monastery in Detroit and was known for his piety, love of the poor, and healing powers. From left, Associate Kathleen Woods, then a member of the Congregation’s Portfolio Advisory Board (PAB) with former members, Sisters Carol Coston, Anne Guinan, and Marie Solanus Reilly take part in the 40th anniversary celebration of PAB.

Members of the 2017 Golden Jubilee Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Kathleen Klingen, Marie Skebe, Corinne Mary Florek, and Donna Markham; middle row, from left, Sisters Joanne Podlucky, Mary Jane Lubinski, Ellen Burkhardt, Prioress Patricia Siemen, and Donna Marie Baker; and front row, from left, Sisters Marie Solanus Reilly, Julie Hyer, Nancy Jurecki, and Nancy Murray.