Sister Mary Trzasko, OP
1936-2020

"Mary was petite of stature, extra-large of heart and hospitality."

So began the eulogy for Sister Mary Trzasko by Sister Mary Jane Lubinski, Adrian Crossroads Chapter Prioress, at Sister Mary’s Ritual of Remembering. “Her life, particularly her life in ministry, was transformed by this saying from Isaiah,” Sister Mary Jane continued. “It became a touchstone for her, assuring her she was on the right path: ‘Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?’”

Sister Mary was born on September 28, 1936, in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, to Joseph and Anna (Stelmach) Trzasko. She was the second of four children; Joe was the oldest, followed three years later by Mary, then Joan, and finally Raymond. Another daughter died at just a few days old.

Her early childhood was a time of (mostly) happy memories in a close-knit family, memories that included sleigh rides, walks with her mother, helping her father plant tomatoes, family picnics, and playing with her friends and her cousins who lived next door. On the not-so-happy side, she also experienced almost drowning in a lake, chicken pox, her grandmother’s wake at their house, and much less traumatic things such as not liking white milk and having to stand and be fitted for new dresses. She also suffered from ear aches, which caused her to miss quite a bit of school, until getting her adenoids removed solved the problem.

Joseph worked in the local coal mine, but mining being the dangerous work that it is, he decided to find a better way to support his family. The Trzaskos moved to Michigan when Mary was six years old, taking up residence in the Polish enclave of Hamtramck.

“It was a different kind of city,” Mary wrote in her life story. “Everything was flat – no mountains.”

She received her primary and secondary education from the Felician Sisters, attending the Felician Academy with the specific intention of becoming a Sister herself. She entered that community, based in Livonia, Michigan, immediately after graduating in June 1953. “I was floating along on the newness of life,” she wrote.

She completed her postulancy in August 1954 and was received as a novice, with the religious name Sister Mary Beata. “I wasn’t too pleased with the name I received since it wasn’t really a name but a title,”¹ she wrote in her life story. “We were the Marion Year group and most of us got names from the Litany to the Blessed Virgin.”

After her two-year novitiate, she was sent to teach at St. Casimir School in Detroit, where she spent the 1956-1959 academic years. After that came a year at St. Stanislaus, Detroit (1959-60) and a year at Queen of Apostles, Detroit (1960-61). She earned her bachelor’s degree from Madonna College in Detroit in 1961, majoring in home economics. This was followed later by a master’s, also in home economics, from Wayne State University in 1966.

¹ According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Beata” means “a woman or girl who has been beatified.”
Subsequent ministries as a Felician Sister took her to St. Michael, Livonia (1961-1962); Patronage of St. Joseph, Detroit (1962-1963); Catholic Central High School, Manistee, Michigan (1963-1964); Mt. Carmel High School, Wyandotte, Michigan (1964-1965); Felician Academy (1965-1967); St. Florian, Hamtramck (1967-1972), and finally St. Hubert in Mount Clemens, Michigan, as educational coordinator.

During her time at Felician Academy, in September 1966, her mother suddenly had to be admitted to the hospital after she and Mary traveled to Cleveland to see a heart specialist. The night before she left for Cleveland, Anna was accepted as a Third Order Carmelite, and that October when she died immediately after unsuccessful heart transplant surgery, she was buried in the Carmelite habit.

Sister Mary’s time at St. Florian coincided with the upheavals brought on by Vatican II, and many of the women in her community, including several in her own convent who were her friends, were leaving. While she did not feel she wanted to leave religious life completely herself, she did find herself questioning many things. Her search for answers eventually led her to take a leave of absence, during which time she came to know the Adrian Dominican Sisters. She transferred to the Congregation in 1973.

While in the transfer process, Sister Mary participated in a series of monthly sessions sponsored by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) dealing with social justice issue, and found herself captivated by the question “Where do you want to put yourself in the struggle?” She wrote:

What I learned was that words are empty unless they are accompanied by action. As a result I became involved with the farm worker movement and started questioning my ministry choices. They were in the midst of the lettuce and grape boycott. I couldn’t believe I was out picketing and leafletting. This was certainly a different woman emerging in me.

A 1974 immersion experience in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico sponsored by the Congregation cemented her ministerial focus, and she resigned from her parish ministry position at St. Paul in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan. In the fall of 1974, she went to an economically disadvantaged area of Cincinnati, Ohio, known as Over the Rhine, to be a community organizer. There, she and Sister Beverly Stark, who ministered with her, began a friendship that lasted the rest of Sister Mary’s life.

They also met a group of Dominican Sisters of the Sick Poor, now part of the Dominican Sisters of Hope, in Cincinnati. Sister Mary wrote in her life story.

Together we prayed and had conversations about the future of the world and religious life, we built community with volunteers and local residents, we laughed, cried and had fun together. We also struggled with how best to respond to the various challenges in the neighborhood: police brutality, death penalty, gentrification, landlord-tenant issues, and more. … The eleven years working there was a life changing experience.

After almost a year (1984-1985) spent with Project JONAH in Tennessee, Sisters Mary and Beverly moved to Beaufort, South Carolina, where both spent the rest of their time in active ministry in community organizing and related work. In 1995, Sister Mary started Thumbs Up, a non-profit designed to enrich the lives of at-risk children through values education and one-on-one tutoring. The seeds of that ministry were planted, she recalled in her life story, when a first-grade girl she was tutoring told her that a neighbor boy could never attend “Fun Friday” because he could not complete his homework and needed help with it.
She served at Thumbs Up until 2007, but she and Sister Beverly continued to live in South Carolina until 2019, when Sister Mary’s declining health necessitated a move to the Dominican Life Center. She died there on February 20, 2020, aged eighty-three and in her sixty-fifth year in religious life, forty-seven of them as an Adrian Dominican Sister. Her memorial Mass, for which Father Jim Hug, the Congregation’s chaplain, was the homilist, was held on February 24, the day after her burial in the Congregational cemetery.

Father Jim drew attention to Sister Mary’s “mantra,” which was printed on the worship and her prayer card and to which Sister Mary Jane later alluded at the Ritual of Remembering: Isaiah 43:18-19.

“It was a wonderful mantra for what came through the Sixties,” he said, and Sister Mary at that time was grabbed by her own “something new”: the mission of Jesus to bring Good News to the poor. And during those long-ago LCWR workshops and her immersion experiences in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, “she came away with the question, ‘Where do you want to put yourself in the struggle?’ It wasn’t ‘Do you know about the struggle?’ It wasn’t ‘What struggle?’ It wasn’t ‘Am I called to the struggle?’ It was ‘Where do I place myself in the struggle,’ because we’re all in it and we’re all part of it.”

Father Jim concluded his homily by noting that Sister Mary’s Thumbs Up ministry came out of her being humble enough to be changed by God through a six-year-old. “Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with God. Today, this scripture is fulfilled in our hearing,” he said.

“… Pray in gratitude for the witness Mary gave us, and secondly, pray that we continue to recognize that that mission and that ministry continues and we are part of it today. Forget former things. Don’t dwell on the past. See, God is doing a new thing. Let’s pray that we see it and are able to respond in the only way that God asks us: by acting justly, loving tenderly, walking humbly."
Center: Sister Mary Trzasko, CSSF, was a Felician Sister before she transferred to the Adrian Dominican Sisters.
Right: Sister Mary at her investiture as a Felician Sister with her parents, Anna and Joseph, August 14, 1954
From left: Sisters Beverly Stark and Mary Trzasko minister to inner-city residents at the Franciscan-on-the-Rhine Mission in Cincinnati. Sisters Beverly Stark and Mary Trzasko begin a new ministry together.

Left: Sister Mary with Nicholas
From left: Sister Mary Trzasko at a family Christmas gathering. From left, Sisters Mary Trzasko, Ellen Schmitz, Esther Kennedy, Anele Heiges, and Yolanda Pomante enjoy the Mid-Atlantic Chapter’s 50th Jubilee celebration.

Members of the 2014 Diamond Jubilee August Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Ana Feliz, Susan Mary Parker, Joyce Hibbert, and Patricia McCarty; middle row, from left, Sisters Diane Weifenbach, Barbara Gentry, Dorita Wotiska, Mary Trzasko, Dorothy Dempsey, Beth Ellen Butler, and Phyllis Kreiner; and front row, from left, Sisters Jeanine Boivin, Anele Heiges, Yolanda Pomante, and Ruth Anne Kelly. Not pictured are Sisters Louise Borgacz and Alice Marie Schmid.