Sister Sarah Cavanaugh, OP
1928-2020

As a member of a family where love flourished between mother and father, sister and brother, I developed a feeling of worth as an individual. Loving friendships with boys and girls, men and women in adolescence and adult life have helped me to realize the need to give of myself as well as receive the affection and attention of others. Beyond my need for people I have a great need for a loving relationship with my God.

These words, quoted by Sister Carleen Maly in her homily for Sister Sarah Cavanaugh, were written by Sister Sarah as part of a class assignment at Siena Heights College (University). “Sarah’s life from roots in her loving family extended to desire to share that love with many more as an Adrian Dominican,” Sister Carleen continued. “In her words, ‘I felt impelled to give my entire life to growth in love with Jesus Christ.’”

Sarah Ann Cavanaugh was born on August 24, 1928, in Detroit to Harry and Alice (McNamara) Cavanaugh. The second of Harry and Alice’s seven children – four boys and three girls, born over the course of nineteen years – she was baptized Sarah because she needed to have a saint’s name, but right from the start everyone called her Sally. Everyone, at least, until she entered the Congregation and, she said in her 2016 “A Sister’s Story” video, Mother Gerald disliked the name Sally.

The Cavanaugh family lived in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, where Harry was a police officer, although he was also trained as a master plumber and building contractor. Raising seven children during the difficult years of the Great Depression was a challenge, but Grosse Pointe, with its good schools, parks, playgrounds, and location on Lake St. Clair “was a special place to grow up,” Sister Sarah said in her life story.

The family attended St. Paul Church and all the children went to the parish school through 12th grade. At the start of third grade, Sally suffered a ruptured appendix and almost died, and missed several months of school as she recuperated. Having her teacher, Sister Joan of Arc Bachand, and another Sister who taught at the school coming to visit her often in the hospital made a real impression on her; the seeds of religious life that had already been planted in her were nurtured by the Sisters’ kindness.

Sally’s family was loving and prayerful, and she had a full family, parish, and social life. She also enjoyed sports; she learned to play golf from her father and played basketball in school, which entitled her to take a weekend trip to Adrian with two of the Sisters from St. Paul’s. The visit only cemented her desire to become an Adrian Dominican Sister, although she wrote in her life story that her mother found the decision difficult because Alice could not understand why Sally did not want to marry and have children as she had done.

Sally graduated from high school in 1946 and entered the Congregation on September 8 of that year. When she became a novice the next year, she received the religious name Sister Michael Henry, after a brother and her father.

After completing her canonical novitiate year in 1948 she was sent to teach at St. Philip Neri School in Chicago, which she described as “a wonderful experience” that helped her overcome her homesickness. She spent two and a half years there before returning to Adrian in February 1951 to begin work at Siena Heights toward her bachelor’s degree in biology. She was missioned to St. Rose
of Lima School in Miami Shores, Florida, that August, and completed her undergraduate work at Barry College (University) in 1956, followed by a master of science degree in education from Barry in 1959.

With her degree work completed, Sister Sarah was sent to Aquinas High School in Chicago, where she taught a variety of science courses until 1962. At that point, she was appointed superior and principal at St. Vincent de Paul School in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Her summers from 1962 to 1967 were spent teaching at Siena Heights, and then in summer 1967 she attended a National Science Foundation grant program in geology at Notre Dame.

She fully expected to return to teaching high school science when her term as superior and principal ended, but the Congregation had other things in mind: in 1967 she was appointed elementary school supervisor for the Congregation’s ninety such schools in Michigan, Ohio, and New York, working alongside Sister Rose William (Margaret) Moran.

Two years later, in 1969, she was elected to the Immaculate Conception provincial team and served the province until 1976 with titles that shifted from director of education to director of ministries to provincial administrator. It was a period of great change in the Congregation including moving from being assigned to one’s ministry by a superior into an open-placement system.

Once Sister Sarah’s time in office was up, she went to St. Gerard School, Detroit, to serve as its principal, and stayed there until 1983 when she became principal at Regina Dominican High School in Wilmette, Illinois.

In 1989, she became Barry’s associate vice president for institutional advancement, a job she held for the next eighteen years until 2007. That summer, she and Sister Marie Damian Schoenlein traveled together to Albuquerque, New Mexico, for retreat, and the two quickly became friends.

As it so happened, Sister Marie Damian had been asked by the Congregational leadership to begin what became the Adrian Rea Literacy Center, and she asked Sister Sarah to be her co-founder and use her expertise as a fundraiser to help get the center going. Sister Sarah spent the next twelve years with the center as administrative assistant, tutor, and faithful volunteer, until her health diminished in late 2019.

Sister Sarah died in Adrian on April 15, 2020, aged ninety-one and in her seventy-second year as an Adrian Dominican Sister.

Sister Carleen began her homily for Sister Sarah by reflecting on the readings selected for the funeral Mass, 2 Timothy 4:6-8 and John 15:12-17, and how relevant they were to Sister Sarah’s life.

As we were preparing for our Sister Sarah’s celebration of life, there were two Scripture passages that the Holy Spirit seemed to direct us to. The first was the passage from Paul’s letter to Timothy, and the second was in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ last discourse where he describes the characteristics of a disciple’s love.

Paul recognizes that his death through martyrdom would be imminent. He is testifying to the accomplishments which Jesus had foretold that he would do in his name. Also, Paul says he has been “poured out” in sufferings just as Jesus had indicated would happen at the time of his conversion. But through it all, he has kept the faith.

In John’s Gospel Jesus knows the time has come for his death and speaks words of love to his followers. “You are no longer servants. You are my friends, my beloved,
because I chose you to know what I have done so that you will now carry it forward.” To be “the beloved” meant to offer themselves in loving obedience in this community of love they share. The beloved hears the Son as the Son has heard the Father.

These readings indeed captured the essence of Sarah’s life: grounded in love, outpoured in mission.

… And Jesus said, “I call you friends, beloved, because I have made known to you everything that I heard from my Father.” The beloved was to offer oneself in loving obedience in the common life.

Sarah was no stranger to responding “in obedience.” She answered the Congregation’s calls in humility. … Sarah embraced each ministry full-heartedly.

… Reflecting again on the words of Paul and his sufferings being poured out, I believe a part of Sarah’s suffering over these last months of her life was her inability to help and care for others. She fought for this and put up a good fight to get back to doing what she so wanted to do, even though her body would not permit her to do that.

Through it all Sarah kept the faith. She has achieved what she longed for: “Beyond my need for people I have a great need for a loving relationship with God.” Sarah has achieved that, and Jesus says to her, I do not call you servant any longer, I call you my friend, my beloved. You have fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. Come and rest from your labors and be at peace.