Sister Susan Parker, OP
1935-2020

We have all heard people say when challenged to try something new: “Oh, I can’t do that” or “Oh, no. I wouldn’t even think of doing that” and not even try. Susan was not like that. She had a lot of abilities, a lot of gifts and she didn’t bury them. She used them all – and then notice what she did and did not do. She did not just sit back and pat herself on the back and congratulate herself on her accomplishments. No, she was prompted to do more, to learn more, to be better prepared to assist people more.

In this passage from her funeral homily for Sister Susan Parker, Sister Maria Goretti Browne explored how the Gospel reading for the Mass, the Parable of the Talents, connected to Sister Susan.

Susan Mary Parker was born on November 2, 1935, in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, to Harold and Mary Ann (Stock) Parker. She was the oldest of four children, followed by Thomas, Linda, and John.

Harold was born in Port Huron, Michigan, while Mary Ann was a Detroit native. Sister Susan’s earliest schooling was at Vernier Elementary School, followed by a year at St. Paul School. Then the family moved to what was then known as East Detroit (now Eastpointe), Michigan. It was there that Susan met Janet Wright, who also went on to become an Adrian Dominican Sister, and the two became close friends, attending both St. Veronica School and Dominican High School together. Susan and Janet lived on adjacent streets and Janet’s father drove them to school each morning.

Susan was greatly influenced in her decision to enter religious life by Sister Robert Mary Sitzmann, who taught at Dominican High School and, when the time came, helped her get ready for the convent. Susan graduated in 1953 and entered the Congregation in February 1954. When she was received into the novitiate in August 1954, she was given the religious name Sister Marie Annine.

Her entire life in active ministry was spent within Michigan. After completing her canonical novitiate year, she was assigned to St. Charles School in Greenville, where she taught for the 1955-1956 school year. She went on to teach at St. Gregory, Newberry (1956-1957); St. Agatha, Detroit (1957-1962), during which time (1962) she completed her bachelor’s degree in history from Siena Heights College (University); St. Gemma, Detroit (1962-1968); St. Mary, Chelsea (1968-1969); and St. Norbert, Inkster (1969-1970).

Many of her pupils, especially at St. Gemma’s where she taught choir, were the beneficiaries of her musical abilities; she taught them to sing in two-part harmony, the rudiments of music theory, and how to play some instruments, and her students often performed in school and archdiocesan events.

By 1970, Sister Susan had decided she was called to a different ministry: nursing. She went to nursing school at Detroit Memorial Hospital and worked there as a licensed practical nurse from 1971 to 1987. That year, she completed an associate of applied science degree in nursing from Schoolcraft College and became a registered nurse, ministering as a psychiatric nurse at Detroit Riverview Hospital until 1998.

During her time at Detroit Memorial, Sister Susan met Doris Beach, also a nurse at that hospital and who went on to become an Adrian Dominican Associate, and the two lived together for some thirty-

five years. After they both retired, they split their time between Redford, Michigan, and Florida, and as Doris’s health declined Sister Susan cared for her. When Doris died in 2018, Sister Susan decided to return to Adrian to live at the Dominican Life Center.

Although moving to Adrian was a difficult decision for her, she quickly became involved in campus life, assisting with feeding sisters at Maria, making a wide variety of craft items – including seasonal decorations for her door that brought joy to all who passed by – and bringing her interest in music to bear by learning to play bells in the Sisters' bell choir.

But in early 2020, her health quickly failed, and she died on April 28 of that year, aged eighty-four and in her sixty-fifth year of religious profession.

Sister Janet Wright honored her longtime friend in a remembrance at the wake service. Their separate ministries had taken them in different directions for many years, but when both of them came to live on opposite ends of Redford, they reconnected. Sister Susan and Doris joined the Samaritan Mission Group in which Sister Janet was a member.

At this time, we began to share all the experiences of life in mission and in family, during some twenty-five to thirty years. We caught up on our families – her brothers and sister, how and when her dad died. Sue was very close to her family – Tom, Linda, John and all her nieces and nephews. They shared many retirement years at family gatherings up north at the cottage. Sue cherished those times spent with the whole family in the summer.

… Sue felt the loss of Doris very deeply and was grieving when she moved to Adrian. Our sisters at Regina and the sisters, nurses, chaplains, aides and staff at the DLC were so supportive and compassionate as she began to adjust to a new phase in life.

I know Sue loved her new ministry of feeding the sisters at Maria and took great pride and joy in being a member of the bell choir.

… I feel sorrow at the loss of a lifelong friend. Not being able to be at her bedside when she suffered so much pain in the last months was very difficult, but she had the wonderful care of nurses and aides, her chaplains, Kathy and Michelle, Sister Joanne Peters and all who held her hand and comforted her.

I know she is at peace with Christ the Good Shepherd, our Blessed Mother Mary (to whom she had great devotion) and with Doris, her closest friend.

Sister Mary Alice Naour’s remembrance also spoke of Sister Susan’s great joy in playing in the bell choir and her ministry to the other Sisters at the DLC:

When she was strong enough she began to eat her meals in the solarium with the other sisters. It wasn’t long before she noticed that some sisters needed to be fed and she offered to help them. It was a real joy and precious ministry for Sue to spend her time cajoling, encouraging, joking, and even promising a treat to “her sisters.” And she never forgot them. They came first.

In early March Sue came back to Maria for care. It was just before March 17. I stopped to visit Sue and she asked me to take a green wrapped piece of chocolate to each of “her sisters.” Their smiles portrayed their happiness. Yes, Sue didn’t forget. This was
Sister Maria Goretti’s homily at the next day’s funeral Mass concluded with these words:

Susan never lost sight of who she was in God’s sight. My shepherd is the Lord, we sang today, as she had sung many times in her life. Christ was her shepherd. She had devotion to the Good Shepherd. She knew that by following her shepherd, she was on the right track. If she followed that shepherd in life, the shepherd would not abandon her in death.

On Wednesday, the feast of St. Catherine of Siena, Sister Patty [Harvat] spoke of the attributes of Catherine. As Patty was speaking, I could not help comparing Sue to Catherine. Catherine was a woman of prayer; Sue was a woman of prayer. She and her friend, Doris, who was also an Associate of ours, prayed Dominican Praise faithfully. Catherine was a woman of action and justice; Sue found ways to “jump into action,” so to speak; she even changed ministries so that she could bring justice and mercy to others. … Catherine was a friend of many; Sue, with her warm smile, made many friends in the Detroit area and even here in the short time she lived among us. Catherine was a preacher of Gospel mercy; Sue, with her nursing skills, assisted many of our Sisters, especially in the solarium on 2 South where she patiently and lovingly fed those Sisters who had a hard time feeding themselves. She also ministered to those Sisters who were dying as she sat with them and accompanied them.

This woman of great peace, this pleasant, this extremely gifted woman is now being rewarded for the good she did while in our midst, for the gifts she continued to expand.