

Sister Mary Michele Garas, OSF

Born: April 3, 1942

Entered our Community: September 8, 1963

Returned to God: December 11, 2018

Ausrele Vitalija Garliauskas, daughter of Erna Hakaite and Stasys Garliauskas, was born on April 3, 1942 in Utena, Lithuania. Ausrele loved her two brothers and three sisters but their early childhood was a difficult one. At the end of World War II, her family escaped Russian-occupied Lithuania and lived for five years in a displaced persons camp in Germany. Ausrele was 2 ½ years old, Stanley just one and Rita kicking under her mother's heart. After the family immigrated to the United States, Jonas, Regina and Lucija were born.

Ausrele once wrote: "I was born happy, a dancer, a singer." Tracing her early years, Ausrele wrote that after graduating from Holy Redeemer High School in Detroit, she was a dental and medical assistant from 1959 – 1963. She said: "The desire to join the convent attracted me and frightened me at the same time." It was only after her 21st birthday that she finally decided: "my destination – convent."

In 1963 she entered the community, received the name Sister Mary Michele and after studying at Holy Family College in Manitowac WI and LaRoche College in Pittsburgh. Sister Michele received her BS in Education from Carlow University in 1976. Her 24 years teaching primary grades led her to Moon Run, New Kensington, Mahanoy City, Grand Rapids, Michigan and even a short time in her home parish of St. Anthony in Detroit. She always said she loved teaching her little first and second graders because they were **more her size!** Sr. Althea remembers that Michele would shout from the kitchen at St. Anthony's Convent: "Tall one, reach me that dish on the top shelf!"

Her first grade stories are delightful: The children were falling asleep one hot afternoon so Sister Michele said: "Do I have to get up on my desk and dance for you?" They shouted "Yes!" So she did!

The first graders were taught to put their papers on the last bench. One little boy repeatedly asked her if he should put his paper on the last bench and in frustration, she responded: "No, just throw it out the window!" And of course he did just that! There are countless other stories which always kept us laughing! Many of us remember Michele as our teacher of Lithuanian "best phrases" and jokes!!

After 24 wonderful and fulfilling years of teaching, Sister Michele asked if she could return to her beloved Lithuania because she felt called to contribute to the rebuilding of the Church there after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Courage and compassion were essential as she entered a country and culture that had not been hers for many years but was still considered *home*. So, in 1992, she returned to her birthplace of Utena and taught in the same school where her father had studied and eventually was its director.

As Sister Michele wrote in her Lithuania Report to the 1996 General Chapter, “I taught all the religion classes from grade 1 – 9 with double grades of third, seventh and ninth. I was also the Spiritual Director of the school and was instrumental and responsible for a variety of spiritual and religious experiences. With pride and joy I, along with great supporters, was able to make a dream come true – have a chapel-prayer room realized. For the first time Mass was celebrated at Saule School on St. Casimir’s feast day.”

In this report, Sister Michele also spoke of the need for a sacramental program for parents and faculty plus gatherings of catechists, which she helped to organize. She reported that the sisters were involved in visiting poor country families and providing food, clothing and love for them and also giving talks at various country schools.

Sister Michele concluded the report with this summary: “We, the Sisters of St. Francis, are a vital part of our refoundation, mission and viability in Lithuania. We have impacted people’s lives only through the power of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Life is movement, life is change – and God is calling us to movement and change in the Gospel, in Franciscan life and our life in Lithuania, and most of all in a deeper life with the Lord. We are the hands and feet and voice of Jesus . . . We pray that we may walk through our days with the vision of creating something of value and beautiful for the Kingdom of God.”

Michele was an artist as well and sketched a lovely Lithuanian wayside cross on her Chapter report, which we have in this service booklet. Her singing ability was well known and she loved singing with the very professional Church choir. But ... who can forget Michele’s way of filling every space on a card or letter and then adding little notes inside the card?

It was very difficult for Sister Michele to leave her beloved Lithuania but because of her health needs, she had to return to the motherhouse in 2012 where she was still able to continue to serve as receptionist, sacristan and assistant to the coordinator.

Michele suffered from arthritis most of her life but somehow could make fun of even that. Four years ago when we left our motherhouse, Michele transferred to Westminster and then Woodside Place, the premier Presbyterian SeniorCare facility for those with Alzheimer's. Michele seemed to enjoy her room there in the Schoolhouse neighborhood with all her stuffed animal friends. Being able to walk freely in the building and outside was good for her. Eventually she needed more care and was moved to the skilled unit at the Willows. The Willows staff enjoyed Michele even though she wasn't able to participate much in the Activities. She would have a big smile when she joined them and even occasionally threw a ball... and she knew all the Bible quiz answers!

However, these last few years have been difficult as Michele found she was forgetting more and even unable to recognize some of us. Our Sisters and staff cared lovingly for her and tried to assist her to eat. Just these last weeks she was placed on Hospice since it was more and more difficult for her to swallow. On better days, she could weakly smile and hold our hands but tired easily. Through these years, her family has been faithful with their frequent visits and loving care for their "big sister."

We will miss our "Lithuanian Princess" who spread joy and laughter both with us and in her beloved Lithuania. Goodbye and God bless you, Michele. *Eik su Dievu! Dievas tave laimina!*

Give eternal rest to our beloved Michele, O Lord, and may she spend her eternity spreading joy and happiness, and maybe even dancing and singing! Amen.

S. Peg Markey
December 12, 2018