

Wake Reflection Sister Barbara Zilch

Tomorrow we will celebrate the Mass of Christian Burial for our dear Sister Barbara whom we all remember as someone who always wanted to have everything done several days, sometimes weeks, maybe even months or years ahead of the date due. Well, dear Barbara, you have done it again!

Several years ago when the community was asking Sisters to prepare autobiographies and funeral requests, Barbara not only sent suggestions for readings and hymns as most did, she also wrote her whole Wake Service! It is surprising she did not complete the task and write her own Obituary and this Wake Reflection but maybe it is because she was too humble to write all that she has accomplished in her short 81 years.

Barbara Anne, the firstborn daughter of Robert and Florence Bodmann Zilch, was born on January 30, 1938 in Amherst, Ohio. Her sister Mary, brother, Jim and sister Jane soon completed the happy family. Barbara's autobiography will be quoted extensively since it is so well done. She wrote: "We are all three years apart in age and since I left for the convent at 17, I was not home during the teenage years of my siblings. I attended St. Joseph grade school where I was taught by the Sisters of Notre Dame. My first two years of high school were at Amherst High. When my dad's work took him to Pittsburgh for a year, we moved to a home near the Motherhouse."

From Barbara's Vocation Story: "Not wanting to attend an all girls Catholic School, I did attend Bethel High School for one day! Not being at all comfortable with the size of the school and the atmosphere I experienced, I enrolled in St. Francis Academy and once again found myself under the direction of religious Sisters. This time, I found Sisters who showed light hearts and joyful spirits. When I saw them sled riding down the hill from the cemetery, I felt strongly there just might be a place for me with this Congregation. During those years, the grade school was also housed in the Academy. I struck up several conversations with Sister Marita Dargis, who taught third grade at that time. Sister listened to my questions about religious life as well as my chatter about life in general from the perspective of a 16-year-old girl. Through her kindness and interest, I found my desire for religious life become stronger."

Continuing from Barbara's autobiography: "Upon my return to Ohio, my senior year took place at St. Mary's Academy. It was at that time that I seriously thought of religious life. It was the spirit of St. Francis that drew me back to Pittsburgh and the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God.

Because my dad was a construction worker, often he did not work during bad winter weather and as a result, we needed to watch our money." [*Barbara was known to be a penny pincher!*] Barbara continues: "I remember many a dinner meal of a dish we called 'poor man's dinner.' This casserole consisted of a lot of noodles, canned tomatoes and a flavoring of ground beef. The wonderful spice that mom cooked with made up for the lack of meat. During our years of schooling, my mother taught grade school in the local public school.

My paternal grandparents died while I was in grade school. My maternal grandmother died before I was born. My grandfather owned a dry goods store which I worked in while in high school as a clerk for fifty cents an hour. Big money! He died when I was a novice.

As a family we enjoyed the simple things of life such as family gatherings and summer picnics in the nearby park. On our birthdays we were allowed to pick what we wanted for dinner. Birthdays were mostly an immediate family celebration. Pie was a birthday favorite rather than cake.

Growing up, all of the children in the neighborhood played the usual outdoor games. Often on Sunday evenings during the summer we sat on the porch swing and listened to stories on the radio. Thanksgiving was celebrated with all the relatives at my godmother's home. Following dinner, we picked names for Christmas exchange among the cousins. We celebrated Christmas Eve and early Christmas morning at home. We then went to my Grandfather's for the remainder of the day where all of the cousins, aunts and uncles gathered for dinner and a gift exchange. The men in the group played cards, the women visited and the children played games. Those were times of happy memories. Following high school graduation, I entered the community on September 8, 1955."

To complete her autobiography Barbara just added the community ministry list which shows that she taught primary grades for twenty years, the last six at Mt. St. Peter in New Kensington, where in 1979 she became the principal. She did not mention that she earned her Bachelor degree from Duquesne University in 1962 and Masters of Education in Administration just four years later or her four semesters at St. Bonaventure University in Franciscan studies. It may be a surprise to some that Barbara also trained to be a massage therapist at Community College but never fully used that skill.

It is interesting to note that in 1970 when Barbara was 32 she was asked to serve as Infirmarian at our Motherhouse. Perhaps it was at this time that she toyed with the idea of becoming a nurse. However, she returned to teach second grade at St. Valentine the next year until her request to join the Intercongregational House of Prayer in Uniontown, PA from 1983-1985.

It was the fulfillment of a strong desire to establish a community where members from various Pittsburgh Franciscan communities would spend significant time in prayer and contemplation and invite others to join them for retreats and spiritual direction. This was Barbara's dream and request for ten years prior to that assignment. However, in her last year she was also serving as our Vocation Director and felt that she needed to return to the Motherhouse to spend full time in vocation ministry.

In 1991 she attended the Institute of Religious Formation at St. Louis University which gave her excellent preparation for her next assignment as Director of our newly established Franciscan Spirit and Life Center and community Formation Director. During this time, she also directed the Franciscan Associate program but felt the need to resign when she was named Director of the Spirit and Life Center. On the feast of the Stigmata in 1995 the Associates gathered for a Thanksgiving and Prayer Service, blessing Sister Barbara as she moved to this new role. She served our retreat center program with energy and enthusiasm until her next call – this time to leadership in our community.

During the first renovation of the Motherhouse about 1995, Barbara was in charge of helping the sisters move from the motherhouse to their interim residences. She was a master planner for these moves and the return trips. Then much later when the Motherhouse was sold and everyone was involved in the new reality of moving sisters to skilled and assisted living in Presbyterian Senior Care in Oakmont, Barbara was the head organizer. During the Motherhouse Estate Sale Barb could be seen running around helping every group that was assigned to their particular sale. She was the "Moving Queen" with lots of enthusiasm for hard work!

From 2000-2016 Sister Barbara was elected Provincial Councilor assisting the Sisters in their ministries. She was willing to take on any task and often found herself doing the manual work like washing Jubilee dishes and moving chairs in addition to the many needs of congregational leadership. Sisters who served in leadership with Barbara noted that her greatest gift was her organizational ability and attention to detail. Her ability to support others on the team and serving as secretary was also noted but the gift that many appreciated was her spirituality. Her search for God was evident in our many faith sharing times. Serving in congregational leadership is challenging but Sister Barbara met the challenge well.

In 2000, Sister Barbara was named the President of the Franciscan Child Day Care Center Board. She devoted another fifteen years as President and advisor to the day care Directors. In 2005 she was asked to be Moderator of the St. Francis Alumnae Association which continued until her death. She loved working with our Alumnae and was a great fund raiser for the Tulip Luncheon raffles!

In 2009 Sister Barbara was again requested to direct our Franciscan Associates. This program proved to be a life giving and energizing experience for her. Even her own mother joined our Associates as a Prayer Associate from Florida! We were utterly amazed when Barbara desired to join our Associates for their Annual Commitment just this past month when her heart was weak and she was failing. She devoted time and prayer to our Associates calling those who were sick or unable to attend the monthly programs. They were a gift for her life even to the end when Johannah, who will read at tomorrow's liturgy, cared for Barbara on her last day at Nativity Convent while we Sisters were having an all-day meeting to prepare for our coming General Chapter.

The Nativity Sisters are to be commended for their steadfast care and attention to Barbara's every need these past six months. She had good and bad days but she always spoke so gratefully about their concern for her. Last Saturday night, when it became apparent that Barbara needed 24-hour care and the decision was made to transport her to the Willows Skilled Care Unit, the Sisters followed the ambulance and got her settled for the night. By this time God was beginning to call Barbara and we found her unresponsive on Sunday. We prayed with her to help her prepare for her new life with God whom she loved with all her heart.

Perhaps because her life was one of constant acceptance of the will of God as expressed in her congregational assignments, she did not have to spend much final time in preparation for this last "God" assignment. She had said she was not ready but God knows our hearts even though we don't truly understand the grace given for a happy death. Ultimately Barbara must have been ready because her good and loving God called her after just one day of final suffering. She had been a faithful and dedicated Franciscan woman. Many of the tributes to her bear this out:

- "Sister Barbara was a kind, caring, thoughtful woman of God. She worked tirelessly on the Day Care Board until she could not." (Board member Pat Bibro)
- "Oh my goodness – she will be so very missed." (Kathy Hess, Finance Committee member)
- "Thank you for sharing the sad news. She was a wonderful Lady and I enjoyed working with her over the years as Council Member and liaison with the FCDCC." (Bud Ellis, Financial Consultant)
- "I'm sorry to hear of Barbara's death. We did so much good work together. She will celebrate her new life with gusto." (Sister Bea Eichten, President, Little Falls Franciscan Sisters)

We Sisters knew Barbara as a quiet and thoughtful person who was truly dedicated to our Franciscan ideal. She spent quality time in prayer and reflection always seeking to know God's will for her. There was also a fun-loving side as you can see from the photos that are displayed here. She loved dressing up for the Brazilian "June Festival" and playing the part of the "bride."

However, there was yet another side of Barbara. It was her love of music. At the end of our service she has asked that we play a song she loved, "Time to Say Goodbye," sung by Sarah Brightman and Andrea Bocelli. Although Barbara did not understand Italian and even though it is almost entirely in Italian, this song spoke to her. The words, "time to say goodbye" are sung just twice. However, as music soars Barbara must have known that it was "Time to Say Goodbye."

And so, goodbye, dear Sister Barbara, may your loving God give you peace and the rest that you deserve. Eternal rest, grant unto her, O Lord. **And let perpetual light shine upon her.** May she rest in peace. **Amen.**

Written by Sister Peg Markey
Read by Sister Joanne Brazinski
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