

Sister Miriam Racas, OSF

Nellie Racas, daughter of Anthony Racas and Agatha Juskauskas was born on April 6, 1925 in Detroit MI, the youngest of five children. Her sisters, Joann and Anne, and brothers Stanley and Joseph took special care of their baby sister. Nellie was later to be baptized Angela Mary and received the name Miriam as a novice in our community.



Her older sister Joanne was married and then Anne became Sister Bonaventure, a Sister of Mercy. Her brother Stanley also married in 1933 so Miriam did not live very long with them. She wrote in her autobiography that these were Depression days. She stated that the day the family was evicted from their home, the State Hospital notified them that her father died of black lung disease. She was just two years old. Later, with her older siblings gone, her mother took in boarders to support the family. Sister Miriam spoke lovingly of her mother's great yet simple faith being the reason she chose her baptismal day May 11 for her celebration day.

It was on this day, after celebrating her "other" day with visits and gifts from her sisters, that she had a stroke in the early evening. One of her very best friends on the Westminster staff, Nancy King, was with her and even stayed the night to be with Miriam afraid she might die that night. Over the next five days Miriam was unresponsive and gradually giving her life back to God who finally called her on Monday, May 16. Both Sisters Janice and Elise were with her when she peacefully breathed her last.

In her autobiography, Sister Miriam wrote: "Mother David was principal (St. George School in Detroit) and before she left for another assignment she made sure I would become a Sister of St. Francis. She had me skip the 8th grade and go to our Academy. I entered my senior year as was customary." Thus began Angela's life in Pittsburgh as a Franciscan!

If there were a contest for a sister who has ministered in many different ways, Sister Miriam would probably win it! After teaching students grades 3 to high school for 24 years and serving as principal for 27 years, she began several new ministries to work with the poor. Even when she was free in the summers, she volunteered as counselor, cook and tutor for troubled boys at Adelphoi House in Latrobe and later as a counselor at a camp with twelve blind teenage girls. It seems Miriam just couldn't sit still for a minute when there was a need.

After spending a year assisting street youth at Covenant House in New York City in 1982, Sister Miriam spent a great deal of time preparing to be a Residential Counselor at Boys Hope in Detroit in 1992 only to have the time cut short after two months because of illness. Then in 1993, she was invited to be part of the Neumann-Bachmann intercongregational mission in Gallup, NM. Miriam served as principal of a small grade school there for three years.

On returning to the motherhouse, Sister Miriam began another ministry, that of Dietary Manager at the Franciscan Spirit and Life Center. Many priests and retreatants still speak of her wonderful meals and excellent homemade breads! Also during that time, Sister Miriam and her good friend Sister Augusta volunteered twice a week at the Community Food Bank for two years.

In 2002 Sister Miriam offered to serve in our Lithuanian mission. She wrote that this was a ministry close to her heart since she was able to visit her Lithuanian roots. She taught catechetics to mentally challenged adults. But Miriam suffered for years from arthritis and since the bitter cold weather in Lithuania was a challenge, she had to return to motherhouse. Sister Miriam then served as the Receptionist Coordinator for several years. She also wrote that “One of my joys was my visit to our Sisters in Brazil for a month. Language was no barrier to our sharing in community living at Paz e Bem.” So it would seem that, for Sister Miriam, “variety was the spice of her life!”

In 2016, Sister Miriam felt it was time for some assistance and asked to move to Assisted Living at Westminster Place in Oakmont. She wrote: “At Oakmont I was greeted at the front entrance with an Honor Guard of more of my loving Sisters. Sister Dolorita with flowers and 2 abreast: Sisters Rosalie, Marita, Lilly and Berenice. And so here I am – with more memories. This will be a great chapter I know.” It was during her six years there that she truly lived her Ministry of Prayer and Presence to the residents and the staff. Pope Francis has written that it is so important for us to LISTEN to others. In these last final days, many staff persons have shared that Miriam’s ability to listen, **really** listen, was her great gift to them. We thank you, Sister Miriam, for your Franciscan presence, fidelity and generosity.

Eternal rest grant unto our Sister Miriam. May she rest in peace.