

## **REFLECTIONS FOR S. MARIE HELENE WERDEL OSB**

This evening we gather to remember a woman of strength, courage, faithfulness and compassion. A woman who took to heart the Chapter from the Rule of St. Benedict we just heard and who lived it in her daily life as she served our community as procurator and in other leadership roles in the monastery and college. A woman who in her 92 years of life was family, friend, mentor and sister to so many.

Barbara Werdel was born August 10, 1924 in a big red granary to John Werdel and Elizabeth Kusser Werdel. The family home near Stephan, SD was still under construction at the time. Her family roots reach back to Bishop Martin Marty who asked her grandfather, Simon Kusser, to move his family to the Stephan Indian Mission to be the shoemaker for the mission. Her Grandfather Werdel had settled in an area south of Miller, SD. Thus began a family rootedness in the Dakota prairies that continues to the present day on land that she never lost her love of.

Barbara was the second oldest in a family of six girls and one boy. In her autobiography she writes that "when I was nine years old the first real sorrow entered my life. On May 30, 1934 my father died at the age of 38 at the Pierre hospital, as the result of a sinus operation. He left my mother with seven children ranging in age from 11 to 11 months." In the midst of the Great Depression, Barbara and her brother, Pete, along with a hired man, who worked for board and room, did much of the farm work. Her mother was always worried when Pete and Barbara were out with the horses and machinery amid the ever threat of a rattlesnake being caught in a tire tread and thrown at the youngsters. In her autobiography S Marie Helene recalled the days of the dust storms and grasshopper plagues when the topsoil was hurled into huge dust banks so that chickens and livestock could freely roam from field to field and the roads were slickened by the grasshopper casualties.

S Marie Helene attended a country school through the eighth grade. Every summer she would spend two weeks at Stephan Mission taking catechism instructions. She wrote that "we enjoyed these weeks with the Sisters, mostly perhaps because we got away from the farm work and chores of which we always had plenty." S Marie Helene attended Miller High School for one year and then her mother scrimped and saved so she could send her six daughters to Mount Marty High School in Yankton.

After high school graduation in 1941, S. Marie Helene stayed home for a year helping on the farm. During this year she discerned that God was calling her to religious life. As she shared her decision with family and friends, more than one person asked her how she was ever going to manage not being able to wear jeans, her normal work attire. Little did she know at the time that in her senior years she would be able to again wear jeans.

On August 15, 1942, S Rose Marie Bierschbach brought S. Marie Helene and Rosalie (S Evangeline) Anderson to Sacred Heart Convent. She attended Mount Marty College and entered the novitiate on June 23, 1943, receiving the name, Marie Helene. She made her first profession in 1944 and final profession in 1947.

In 1944 she was sent to Dimock to start what she thought would be a long teaching career. She spent several years teaching in Yankton; Pueblo, CO; Albion, NE; and Richardton, ND. In June of 1957, Mother Jerome told her that she needed someone to be procurator at the convent and business manager at Mount Marty College and "since I could drive a car she thought I could do the Job!" S Marie Helene had barely two months to work with her predecessor to "find out all there was to know."

For the next 16 years not only did she drive the car, but she helped supervise the building of a large new section of the monastery, a college dorm - Corbey Hall, the new Mount Marty High School, and Roncalli Student Center. She later served as manager of the college bookstore and director of plant operation at the college during which time Cimpl Arena was built. During her time as director of plant operations, faculty, staff and students had a great respect for and on occasion a tad bit fear of S. Marie Helene because they knew a stern look or a note signed S. Marie Helene was serious business and was to be heeded. But they also knew that if they needed a listening ear or a word of advice she was always there for them. MMC graduate David Lyons recounts her commitment to good stewardship of the college's material resources: She taught me how to be "thrifty" as when a group of Mount Marty College students and I were converting the mothballed Little Bede Gym into the On Campus Non-Alcoholic Club, "The Bistro" in 1990.

One day we discovered we had run out of nails. I ran over to her office to request a supply requisition form to buy new supplies.

Sister replied, "Hang on a sec. Let me walk over with you."

She came in, inspected, and squealed with delight when she discovered a bucket full of bent, discarded nails.

"Problem solved," she said. Sister poured out the bucket, grabbed a hammer and proceeded to pound the bent nails in to 'kind of a straight form.'

"Supply Requisition Form Request DENIED!" she said happily.

S Marie Helene served Mount Marty College for a total of 37 years and continued to be an avid supporter of the college and all its activities the rest of her life. Over the years she also served on several hospital, college and monastery boards and committees always willing to share her wisdom and insights.

After listing her different ministry assignments she wrote, "I hope the prayer life that is so necessary was there also. I know it was not all it should be or all I wanted, but perhaps the Lord will give me time to improve on that and in doing so help others come closer to His Kingdom." I think those of us here tonight can attest that we are closer to God's Kingdom because of the presence of S. Marie Helene in our lives.

After leaving her ministry at the college, she took on a number of different ministries at the monastery including serving as chapel sacristan for a number of years. In her leisure time, she enjoyed raising flowers and plants, making rosaries, feeding the squirrels and birds, playing cards and fishing.

In 1994 she celebrated her 50<sup>th</sup> jubilee of profession and also was part of a humanitarian trip to Russia that same year. She was privileged to mark 60 and 70 years of monastic profession. Another highlight of her life was taking a college alumni Caribbean cruise with her five sisters in 1995. I'm told they were quite a hit on the boat with their matching t-shirts numbering their birth order.

Her family was very important to her and she loved "going home" to spent time on the farm, play cards into the early hours of the morning following her rules of the game or even changing them if so inclined, visiting her siblings and in-laws, nieces and nephews or having her family visit her at the monastery. She loved being a part of any family gathering. Her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, along with that of S. Evangeline, was celebrated at the monastery with many family and friends in attendance. Losing Loretta and Marita and several of her in-laws was painful for S. Marie Helene, and Pete's sudden death was especially difficult. She said that "not only did I lose a brother, I also lost someone who was like a father figure to me in many ways." But she said her faith carried her through these and other difficult times in her life.

I would like to close with a prayer that she prayed as procurator and gave to me when I assumed that role in 2011. I think it speaks of her deep and humble faith and how she served the community as servant leader and mentor.

*Dear Lord Jesus Christ, be my light and guidance every minute of this day. Grant me the grace to use wisely the monastery property placed in my care. Give me the knowledge and foresight necessary in my dealings with the business world and with my Sisters in religion that all my decisions may benefit my community.*

*Grant that in my contact with others, I may spread your Kingdom on earth and bring others to know and serve You better and give greater love and glory to Your Holy Name.*

*May I serve You and my community always, asking no recognition or reward but to love You with every ounce of my being now and in eternity.*

Thank You, S Marie Helene, for living out this prayer so graciously and so humbly in our midst. Well done good and faithful woman. Eternal peace and joy be yours.

By S Mary Kay Panowicz OSB, 9/15/16