

Sister Agnes Marie Kohel, OP
Born to earthly life: July 7, 1920
Religious profession: August 4, 1939
Entered eternal life: November 4, 2012

*The teaching of kindness
is on her tongue.*

Proverbs 31:26



2007



Lorraine with Mother and little sister Lucille, 1922

Lorraine Elizabeth Kohel was born in west Racine on July 7, 1920, the first of Agnes Veltus' and Carl Kohel's eventual seven children. She began her education in the local public school, but when her parish school opened she transferred to Saint Edward's. After only a week at Saint Ed's, she came home and announced she was going to be a Dominican sister, just like her second grade teacher, Sister



Young Lorraine

Marcelline Palzkill. As she progressed into the upper grades, she was sometimes asked to take over a class of younger children in their teacher's absence, an experience which made her realize that she really wanted to make teaching her life's work. Sister Adele Schwin helped enliven that resolve by inviting Lorraine to attend Reception at the motherhouse — an impressive ceremony in which the postulants entered the chapel in bridal attire, and later returned clad in the habit



First Communion, 1929



Lorraine as a postulant, 1935



Reception Day, 1937

and white veil of the novitiate, to receive their new names.

Lorraine was barely fifteen when on August 30, 1935, she moved across town to begin her formation as a Racine Dominican, leaving behind her parents and four siblings. The mistress of postulants, Sister Anna Marie Langenfeld, explained that she would be a “junior postulant” at first, since she would have to complete her high school education before she could be admitted to the novitiate.

At her reception of the habit on August 4, 1937, she became Sister Agnes Marie of the

Immaculate Conception. Each Saturday during her first year as a novice, she and Sister Benedicta Albers were assigned to work in the motherhouse print shop, mimeographing “seat work” sheets for use in the community’s elementary schools.

Just before Christmas during her second novitiate year she was sent to substitute for another sister at Saint Clement’s School in Center Line, Michigan, for four weeks. This meant she would have to make up, on her return, for the college classes she had missed. She credited her success in this to the kind help of Sisters Victoria Thies, Demetria Meyer, and Domitilla Kelly. That same year she was thrilled to be asked to play the part of Mother Romana Thom in a pageant for the latter’s golden jubilee.

Other than those weeks in Center Line, Sister Agnes Marie would spend her entire life of ministry in Wisconsin. After her first profession on August 4, 1939, she was missioned to Saints Peter and Paul School in Green Bay. The following year she began a five-year assignment just down the Fox River at Saint John’s in Little Chute. Next came two years (1945 to 1947) at Saint Victor’s in Monroe, three years (1947 to



About 1945



About 1960

1950) Holy Cross in Kaukauna, and four years (1950 to 1954) at Saint Augustine's in Wausaukee.

Meanwhile, apart from her final-vow year of 1945, she was spending her summers pursuing history studies at Saint Norbert College in DePere, and was awarded her undergraduate degree there in 1954. (At her funeral, her brother Lester would say, "We always said she was the dumb one in the family because she was still going to school!")

That fall term found her at Saint Bernard's in Madison, where she worked for the next three years (1954 to 1957). Three years at Saint Mary's in Tomah followed (1957 to 1960); then four at Saint Rose in Racine (1960 to 1964) and five at Saint Francis Xavier in Merrill (1964 to 1969). In the summer of 1966, she had completed her work for Certification in Religious Education at Saint Scholastica College in Duluth. In 1967 she had been appointed local superior of the Merrill community. Two years later she had the sad duty of closing that school. Sister Clarice Sevegney, who had lived with her in those final months, commented that Agnes Marie had a way of "being there," and expecting others to "be there." She had a hard time dealing with the one of her students' revelation that he was gay, said Clarice. But she "prayed her way through it," and that student would come to regard Agnes Marie as one of his best mentors.



1975

In 1969, Agnes Marie moved to Saint Louis School in Caledonia — her first experience of having to apply and interview for a

position. During a paper drive there in April of 1975, a car which somehow slipped from park into reverse pinned her against a brick wall, leaving her with multiple fractures. After discharge from the hospital in June, the months she had to spend at Siena Center in a lower body cast and then a long leg cast were hard for this ever active woman to accept, but that could not stop or even dampen her indomitable spirit! She was up and about in a wheelchair in time to resume her ministry in Caledonia by the start of the school year.



Christmas Stollen at OLO

S. Mary Bede Reisinger, S. Agnes Marie Kohel, Betty Hall, S. Alexia LaPorte



Golden Jubilee, 1989

Sisters Helen Arts, Agnes Marie Kohel, Benedicta Albers, Pauline Benigni, Thomasina Zajac

By then she had taught at every level of elementary and middle school except first grade, but she especially loved the sixth grade. Sixth graders, she said, were “neither fish nor flesh, not too young and not yet sophisticated as eighth graders, who know everything.” And the best part of being a principal, she would say, was “helping teachers to do their best and watching the children

grow and improve from year to year.” She admired what good teachers the Racine Dominicans were — whether in the classroom or elsewhere, “teaching always through example and witness.”

During her spare time through many of these teaching years and the years still to come, she made hundreds of rosaries, including a number of fifteen-decade rosaries for novices-to-be. When Sister Helen Arts made the rosary Anne Morehouse of Saint Bernard’s in Madison would receive at her



The Siena Center Bell Choir, directed by Sister Yvonne Renner, 1997

Sisters Rita Lui, Marian Diedrick, Grace Smith, Lisa Kane, Agnes Marie Kohel, Vivian Giddings

reception into the novitiate, Agnes Marie teased that Helen's rosaries were always too loosely chained and that she, Agnes Marie, would have to rechain this one within a year! Actually, said Anne, it didn't need rechaining till after her profession! Agnes Marie even learned to make the "rose-petal rosaries," an art practiced by just a few sisters. Rose petals from weddings and funerals would be fermented until deep black and then ground and rolled into beads which would then be pierced and chained into rosaries — usually to be given to the families from whom the roses had come.

In 1977, Agnes Marie was asked to move to Our Lady of the Oaks Convent in Pewaukee, where she served first as assistant administrator and then as administrator. She had a special love and care for the senior sisters and the infirm, and so her seven years at OLO were happy ones. Everyone knew her as a good listener.

When OLO was closed in 1984, she moved with the rest of that community to Siena Center. There she spent much of her time for

the next decades driving sisters to appointments and elsewhere. Sister Kateri Byrne, director of nursing, often relied on her to transport sisters to and from the hospital or emergency room. She was always available, day or night, willing to help whenever her assistance was needed. Working crossword puzzles and reading were among her favorite hobbies.



Diamond Jubilee, 1999



The ever-ready driver at Siena Center

In April of 2010, failing health dictated a move to Lakeshore Manor. There her ministry continued, especially through her good cheer, bright smile, and unfailing "thank you" for every small and great service. Sister Jean Ackerman, who often served as communion minister at Lakeshore, remarked that Agnes Marie would make her wonder who was ministering to whom! She loved to sit near the nurses' station so that she could see as many other people as possible. Sister Grace Marie Kraft would pop by to share the Sunday comics, and others would stop to say good night.

On the afternoon of November 4, 2012, the community was alerted that Agnes Marie's condition seemed to be declining, but Sisters Agnes Johnson and Pat Mapes found her alert, even though she couldn't speak. Sisters Rosalie Lauer and Jean



At Lakeshore Manor, May 2012

Ferstl were with her when she died very peacefully around 9:15 that same evening. She was ninety-two years old, the last of her class of six. She was survived by one brother, Lester, and his wife Jean as well as nieces and nephews.

As she welcomed the congregation to Sister Agnes Marie's funeral liturgy at Siena Center on November 8, Sister Agnes Johnson rightly referred to her as a "very generous, very prayerful, common yet uncommon woman who gave most willingly of herself for the good of others." Father Kenneth Mich presided at the Mass, and Sister Jean Ferstl preached the homily.

The next morning Agnes Marie's body was interred in the community plot at Holy Cross Cemetery in Caledonia.



The Kohel Family about 1950

Charles, Lester, Lucille, Ralph, Donald; Sister Agnes Marie, Father Carl, Mother Agnes