



Sister M. Thomasina Zajac, OP
Born to earthly life: March 27, 1919
Religious profession: August 4, 1939
Entered eternal life: March 16, 2012

Your people will be my people!
Ruth 1, 16

“With unconditional love for people of all religions, races, and backgrounds, Sister Thomasina Zajac lived her faith these many years,” said Sister Sharon Simon in welcoming the many family and friends who came to

honor and remember “Sister T” at her funeral.

Aniela Czelusniak’s and Thomas Zajac’s daughter Balbina was born on the family farm near Wausaukee, Wisconsin, on March 27, 1919, and baptized at Saint Augustine Parish. Throughout her nearly ninety-three years, she would take great pride in her Polish heritage.

And she would love the natural world that had surrounded her as a small child.

To nurture her ethnic spirit and to be sure that she would learn to speak Polish, Bohemian, and Russian fluently, Balbina’s parents sent her to school in Chicago for the first three years of her formal education. When she returned to Wausaukee to start fourth grade at Saint Augustine’s, she couldn’t, she later recalled, speak a word of English! she said. She learned quickly, however, from her Racine Dominican teachers.

Following her junior year of high school, on August 31, 1935, Balbina traveled to Racine to become a postulant. Two years later, when she entered the novitiate, the Racine Dominicans were celebrating the



Balbina as a postulant, 1936



Little Balbina as flower girl

seventy-fifth anniversary of their founding, and Balbina was delighted to receive as her religious name the name and title of one of the foundresses, Mother Maria Thomasina Ginker of the Blessed Sacrament, the name she proudly kept until her death.

Sister Thomasina was introduced to a ministry of teaching while she was a senior novice, walking each weekday to Holy Name School, a few blocks from the motherhouse. She continued to teach at Holy Name for two more years after pronouncing her first vows on August 4, 1939.



Sisters Rose Dominic (later Marie) Bettinger and Thomasina, about 1939



The 1945 final vow class cleaning vegetables!

In 1941 she was assigned to Saint Bernard's in Madison; in 1944 to Saint Benedict the Moor in Milwaukee; and in 1946 to Saint Aloysius in Sauk City. The 1948 term found her back in Racine, at Saint Patrick's, but two years later she was sent northwest again, this time to Saint Mary's in Tomah.

Michigan next claimed her services, beginning with two years at Detroit's Assumption Grotto (1951–1953). During her summers she had been completing college courses at Dominican College, and in the summer of 1953 she was awarded her baccalaureate degree in education. Then she was back in Michigan, this time for a year at Nativity in Detroit.



1947

From there she was sent to the Fox Valley, first to Saints Peter and Paul in Green Bay (1954–1957), and then to Holy Cross in Kaukauna (1957–1963). But then Michigan beckoned again. She spent the 1963–1964 term at Saint Clement in Center Line, and 1964 until 1966 once more at Assumption Grotto in Detroit.



Golden Jubilee, 1989

In the intervening summers, she had pursued and in 1965 had obtained a master's degree in education and liturgy at Notre Dame University. She was particularly excited by her work in liturgy, since liturgical reform was in full bloom on the Notre Dame campus. At every opportunity, she would take her Racine Dominican sisters who were also studying on the campus, to special celebrations of Mass and Office.

She spent the 1966–1967 term teaching again at Saints Peter and Paul in Green Bay. After a two-year sick leave, she was given permission to care for her elderly mother in Wausaukee until the latter's death in 1981.

After having taught elementary school — and loved it — for more than forty years, Sister Thomasina began to discover a whole new world when she found herself in 1981 at Sacred Heart School in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. For the next twenty years, she would open her heart, her home, and her life to Hmong and other East Asian

people who had emigrated to this country. They became her family, and she a member of theirs, as she thrust all her energy and resources into helping them learn a new language and survive in their new culture.

They called her “Sister T” and “Mamma.” She moved from the classroom out into the community in her efforts to help struggling friends get housing, food, work, and whatever else they needed to get by. (She had always been something of a pack rat, wasting nothing, and now her



Sister T with her ever-trusty "Beetle"



Cross-Cultural Cleaning Service in training



Sister T with her gardeners at market



About 1990

basement held a grand store of furniture, dishes, utensils, tools, bedding, and clothing!) If there were problems finding a home for a large family, she would work through town hall meetings until she succeeded in settling them. She taught people to garden so they could grow food to feed their families and sell produce. She organized a housekeeping business, *Cross-Cultural Cleaning Service*, to help people learn marketable skills and earn a living. These efforts would continue to flourish long after she left Eau Claire. She lifted immigrants up when they felt ignorant and unimportant.

In the midst of these new ministries, she taught for a year (1987–1988) in District 1 of Eau Claire’s Technical & Adult Education system, and from 1988 until 2001 at Chippewa Valley Technical College. She was indeed part of the Eau Claire “family.” She always got to know her students’ entire families, and learned from others as much as she taught.

Only when her body could no longer bear the demands of her ministry did she consent to move to Racine. That was October 31, 2001. She was eighty-two years old. Still, for a decade more, she “did her thing” and preached her message as she made her way around Siena Center. As her health failed, she moved to Lakeshore Manor on August 24, 2011.

On the evening of March 16, 2012, just hours after Sister Rita Vander Velden’s death, one of the aides at Lakeshore called to say that Sister Thomasina was near death. Sisters Bee Schellinger, Agnes Johnson, and Pat Mapes went to Lakeshore immediately, and came into her room just moments after Thomasina had breathed her last. She was less than two weeks from her ninety-third birthday.

Thomasina had always disliked Remembering Services. “They can tell me to my face!” she would say. But a marvelous Remembering Service she had anyway, with several nephews and many Hmong and Vietnamese friends in attendance.

Said her grand-nephew Michael: “Sister Thomasina was an amazing inspiration when we were kids;

she always taught us kindness and faith in God.”

Thomas, who had first met Thomasina thirty years before, when he was just eighteen, told of how she had helped him to become active in local politics and to run for city council — as she had helped many to learn English, get through college, get good jobs, and move into leadership in the community.

“Sister T had a wonderful heart,” said Thomas in the name of the Eau Claire Hmong community. “She helped us and loved us in so many ways. She helped us adapt to our new life and made us feel welcome in our new home of Wisconsin. Sister T is a heroine to many of us. She found resources to help our families and she taught us to become leaders in the community and in the church. She was an angel on earth for us.”

Her Hmong friends brought with them a white-on-white embroidered tapestry to cover Sister Thomasina in her casket “so that she will always be Hmong.”

The morning after her funeral, Sister Thomasina’s body was interred with her sisters in the community plot at Holy Cross Cemetery in Caledonia.



A trip to Pewaukee, 2004

Sister Thomasina with Suzanne Noffke, Agnes Johnson