



Sister Mary Catherine (Kate) Nilles, OP
Born to earthly life: January 29, 1927
Religious profession: August 15, 1949
Entered eternal life: March 20, 2014

*. . . till the Day dawns
 and the Morning Star rises in your heart. . . .*

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Her family, schoolmates, and teachers called her “Mary.” Then, during her days on the faculty at Nativity High School in Detroit in the late 1960s, one of the sisters dubbed her “Kate,” and from then on that’s how she was known by most of her friends. Quick-witted and fun-loving, she was also respected for her deeply contemplative spirit. Sister Gayle Bogdanowitz discovered that while

touring the community’s far-flung missions with Kate as her guide shortly after joining the Racine Dominicans. “She let me speak, let me think, and I am so grateful for that,” said Gayle at Kate’s Remembering Service.



Little Mary

Born in Milwaukee on January 29, 1927, she was committed to Saint Joseph’s Orphanage by her birth mother. There, two months later, baby Mary Catherine was adopted by John and Irene Gannon Nilles of Madison. She also gained a brother at that time — Jack, whom the Nilleses had adopted from the same orphanage two years earlier.



Mary and big brother Jack (with Chucky!)

The senior John Nilles owned and operated a hardware store on Atwood Avenue on Madison’s east side, and while the children were very small the family lived in a flat above the store. Mary learned early on to love everything connected with that store and would for the rest of her life find visiting hardware stores a special treat. When she was about five years old, her parents

purchased a small house just a few blocks from the store and from Saint Bernard's Church and School.

The Nilleses were very active in their parish, and whenever her mother would be working at a funeral dinner she would leave little Mary with the first-grade teacher. There, sitting quietly in a desk at the back of the classroom, she took in everything she saw and heard until, by the time she would normally have entered first grade, she was ready for second and so moved on!

It was about that time that Mary one day found a tiny squirrel which had fallen from its nest. She promptly named it Chucky and adopted it as her special pet, trundling it around the neighborhood in her doll buggy. Chucky caused quite a stir when she took him to the convent and he found his way onto one of the sisters' shoulders and up under her veil! Mary would later recall that she was even then "drawn to the sisters like a magnet," finding them fun-loving and relaxed.

From Saint Bernard's, she progressed to Edgewood High School on Madison's west side, where she met the Sinsinawa Dominicans. But



Visiting day in Racine

when she decided to enter the convent after completing high school and two years of college with them, she returned to her Racine Dominican friends at Saint Bernard's for guidance. She was not quite twenty years old when on September 2, 1946, she became a postulant at Saint Catherine's.

Because she already had more college credits than many professed sisters, Mary was immediately sent across town to Sacred Heart School to teach, spending only the weekends back at the motherhouse with her classmates. Much later she could laugh at how she had covered nearly the entire curriculum in her first day at Sacred Heart, all the while enjoying her pupils' antics!

The following summer, on August 4, Mary received the Dominican habit and the name Sister M. Terence of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. At the end of her novitiate, on August 15, 1949, she pronounced



Young Miss Nilles



Reception

Betty Vissers, Helen Peddle, Mary



1960

her first vows, after which she was missioned to Saints Peter and Paul School in Green Bay. She had fond memories of her five years there, living with the other “young sisters” in a second house down the street from the main convent.

During the summer of 1950, Sister Terence graduated from Dominican College on the motherhouse campus. Several summers later, in 1958, she would complete a master’s degree in education at DePaul University in Chicago.

After just one term at Saint Mary’s in Racine (1954–1955), she

was assigned to Nativity High School in Detroit; there she taught for the next four years. In 1959 she was assigned to Saint Mary’s in Tomah as principal and local superior. At the time she was just thirty-two years old and the youngest sister in the house.

In 1962 she was transferred to Saint John’s in South Milwaukee. Teaching with her in the upper grades were Sisters Rita Lui and Jean Verber. Jean would remember it as a “crowning” time for her as a teacher as the

three shared creative ideas and ways of giving their students new and wonderful experiences. But



Tomah, 1960

Sisters Terence, Claveria McGinley, Agnes Marie Kohel, Bernice Flaherty, Modesta Zant, Mary Ann Haas

three years later Sister Terence was back in Tomah, serving as principal and local superior once again for the next three years. A year back at Nativity High followed, and then two as principal at Saint Mary’s in Kenosha. While at Nativity she resumed her baptismal name, Mary Catherine, and soon became “Kate” to her friends in community. But after just a year she was back in Wisconsin, this time at Saint Mary’s in Kenosha.

By now Kate was beginning to reconsider her vocational path. In March of 1971, believing that she wanted to marry, she obtained a dispensation from her vows. During the next nearly thirteen years outside of



Kate makes her new profession, October 13, 1983, with (r-l) Sisters Rosaire Lucassen, Eunice Lang, Suzanne Noffke



Joining in a Jubilee barn dance with S. Pat Mapes shortly before her “great fall” in 1988

community she did a good deal of traveling and served as principal, as nursing home administrator, and as employee educator for Westinghouse, teaching prospective mentors how to teach. But though she did a bit of dating, she slowly became convinced that her true calling was as a Racine Dominican. She re-entered community in October of 1983, and on March 9, 1986, renewed her profession.

She had been principal of Saint Mary’s School in Hales Corners since 1984 and continued in that position until 1987. One of the teachers who had served with her there would still marvel years later at the integrity and joy Kate had brought to her ministry, saying, “She had a special ability to raise people’s spirits.”

In the fall of 1987 she accepted an invitation to teach at Holy Cross School in Santa Cruz, New Mexico. Back at Siena Center for the Christmas holidays, a freak tumble in a corridor left her with a badly fractured shoulder. Repeated surgeries over several years would make her progressively more lame and pain-ridden; yet she continued in full-time ministry — for two years as assistant superintendent of schools for the Diocese of

Joliet, Illinois, and then, after a year of sabbatical at Saint Stephen Priory in Dover, Massachusetts, for a year and a half as principal of Holy Family School in Marinette, Wisconsin.

Kate’s greatest joy in her nearly fifty years as teacher and educational administrator had come from assisting and mentoring young teachers. A gifted educator herself, she loved to see them grow in skill, instinct, and confidence as they worked with students. When she retired to Siena Center in 1994, she began a six-year ministry as tutor in the Adult Learning Program.

In 1998 Sisters Kate and Suzanne Noffke moved to the Barclay Apartments about two miles from Siena Center. There Kate devoted more and more of her time to assisting Suzanne with community history research and as proofreading partner for Suzanne’s publications. It was a particular pleasure for her to portray our co-foundress M. Thomasina Ginker when the first volume of the history saw the light of day in 2004.

As deteriorating vision from macular degeneration made this task and her favorite pastime of reading increasingly difficult, she resorted to more and more powerful magnifiers and brighter and brighter lighting, always preferring this over listening to books on tape.



Kate as M. Thomasina Ginker, with Suzanne in 2004



Landlord Jim Wiesner and his dog greet Kate and S. Dorothy Ann Greiber during Chapter, 2014

session and to say her last goodbyes to her sisters.

By March 19, when standing and walking required more help than Suzanne could provide, Kate moved to Hospice House. As others were packing her things, she and Suzanne shared communion one last time, pondering together the line from the Second Letter of Peter: “Keep your attention closely fixed on [Jesus’ majesty], as on a lamp shining in a dark place, until the Day dawns and the Morning Star rises in your hearts.”

Kate died in her sleep very early the next morning. Suzanne was called and, along with Sisters Evelyn Lins and Alice Pittz, went to her bedside, soon to be joined by Sisters Maryann McMahon and Lisa Kane.

Kate had often used humor to deflect attention from her ailments, lifting others’ spirits wherever she went. When asked how she was, she would invariably respond — even as she was dying — with a grin and a twinkle, “Miserable, but thank you for asking!”

Her cousins and many friends joined the community for her funeral liturgy on March 24, with Father Roger Nilles presiding. The Noffkes, Kate’s “adopted family,” were there also. Suzanne preached.

Kate’s body was laid to rest in the community plot in Holy Cross Cemetery in Caledonia.

Early in February of 2014, Kate began to show signs of confusion, sufficiently alarming to warrant a trip to the emergency room. Scans revealed two brain tumors, subsequently shown to be malignant. Told that removal or radiation would at best win her only a slight extension of life, Kate chose to return home and “let things run their course.” With assistance from Hospice Alliance, she was able to stay there for just over a month, and was even able to attend Chapter at Siena Center in late February, thrilled to be present for nearly every



A sense of humor to the end!





The Barclay Girls in 2007
Sisters Kate Nilles, Alice Pittz, Evelyn Lins, Barbara Fisher, Suzanne Noffke,
Linda McClenahan, Shirley Kuchta, Shirley Kubat, Dolores Enderle
(missing: Betty Ann Heegeman)



An vacation in Canada, 2008



Kate, Michelle Olley, Audrey Affholder, Evelyn Linds, Theresa Rottarius



Kate's 60th Jubilee, 2009



With Nurse Pam Hudson, February 2014