



60th Jubilee

Sister Therese (Agnes Catherine) Rotarius, OP
Born to earthly life: May 9, 1928
Religious profession: August 15, 1949
Entered eternal life: February 24, 2016

*The environment is on loan
to each generation, ...
which must hand it on to the next.*

Pope Francis, Laudato si'

Theresa Cecilia Rotarius was born to Agnes Morian and Peter Rotarius on May 9, 1928, in Warren, Michigan, and baptized at Saint Clement Parish in nearby Center Line. She was just fourteen months old when her thirty-eight-year-old mother died a week after giving birth to her eighteenth child. Some time later, after their home burned, the family moved into a large



About Age Seven



About Age Ten



First Communion



Baby Therese and Mother

farm house with Theresa's paternal grandparents. Grandma Rotarius died when Theresa was about five, but Grandpa lived to be ninety-seven — at which point Theresa's oldest sister took charge of her siblings.

To attend the country school meant a five-mile walk, so Theresa's kindergarten was limited to good weather days. When she



Eighth Grade Graduation

started first grade at Saint Clement's, she stayed with her Aunt Mary on school days. But by the next year her sister Mary had married, and Theresa went to live with her in Roseville, Michigan, where she entered third grade. When she was nine, Aunt Mary's daughter asked whether Theresa would like to be her little girl, since she and her husband were childless. They lived in Bad Axe, Michigan, where Theresa joined them and completed her elementary education with the Adrian Dominican Sisters, and then attended ninth grade at Bad Axe Public High School.

When people would ask her what she wanted to be when she grew up, she would always answer, "A lady tramp!" — because she thought it would be so nice just to go from town to town helping people. (In those days when tramps came to beg they were first given some small job to do, Theresa had been told this was a way of preserving their dignity.)

At the beginning of the Second World War, the family moved to Detroit, and Theresa attended Saint Clement's High School. By her junior year, she wanted to join her teachers' community, the Racine Dominicans. Her parents not only withheld their consent, but transferred her out of Saint Clement's as a senior. "If you get away from the Sisters," they said, "you will forget about the convent." During the preceding summer and that year she worked as a file clerk at Briggs Manufacturing Company, attending night school to complete her credits for high school graduation. But at home things were very tense. Whenever Theresa would do something not quite right, she would hear, "And you want to be a Sister?"

One Saturday she got into an argument with her father and ran away from home. Knowing he would be looking for her, she darted into an alley and then into a nearby church, where she found a priest hearing confessions and told him her story. When he asked whether she had a place to stay, she said yes — and then walked the three miles to her

Aunt Mary's house, who with some reluctance allowed her to stay. About a week later, Theresa received a call from Sister Gerold Thome at Saint Clement's Convent, asking her to come. When she arrived she found her parents there! After a long discussion, it was agreed that she could enter the convent when she was eighteen, *if* she would return home now — and so she did.



High School Graduate



About Age Seventeen

On May 9, 1946, she celebrated her eighteenth birthday, and on September that same year she boarded the train for Racine.

She didn't find it difficult to adjust to convent life. But one day it almost ended. Her first class of the day was music with Sister Cordula Neu. All of the postulants loved Sister Cordula and would hurry to class to draw the staff on the board. That day Theresa was determined to be first; but after using the chalk-holder to draw the staff, she discovered it had only four lines, not the required five. So she drew the fifth line freehand. Of course, it was not straight like the other four lines, and the girls all got the giggles. Just then Sister Madeline Vaughn, the mistress of postulants, stepped into the room and reprimanded them because it was silence time. After she had left the room, Theresa continued drawing the fifth line; but now it was even



Postulant



Reception Day, August 4, 1947

shakier and the girls began to giggle again. Sister Madeline came back and told Theresa to see her after class. After a stern reprimand, she said, "If that is the kind of religious you are going to be, you might as well go home." Theresa replied, "Well, I will!" and stormed out of the office. Back in her room she realized how trivial the entire thing was, and went back to apologize. It was, she said later, the only time she almost left the convent..

Theresa and her classmates were received into the novitiate on August 4, 1947. She became Sister Agnes Catherine of the Infant Jesus. (Agnes was her birth mother's name and Catherine, her foster mother's name.)

During the second year of her novitiate, Sister Agnes Catherine's birth father died. She returned to Center Line for his funeral wearing a black veil, not the white novice veil. Sister Patrice O'Brien met her in Chicago to see that she would transfer to the right train.

Never having had any science in grade school or high school, she was excited that year about her first science class from Sister Jane Schilling. She found it so exciting to see small things under the



At Saint Norbert's College

microscope, and eagerly looked forward to each class. Her obvious enthusiasm, she thought later, might have been the reason she was eventually sent to Saint Norbert's College to get a degree in biology.

She celebrated her first profession on August 15, 1949.

During that same second year of novitiate Sister Agnes Catherine did her practice teaching at Holy Name School in second grade. Because the second graders did not read cursive writing, she had to learn to print. She later remembered one of her pupils asking Sister Madonna Martin, "Why does Sister write so big and so slow?"

Sister replied, "Because Sister Agnes Catherine wants everyone to see and she wants to make each letter perfectly."

She loved teaching from the outset. At Holy Name she would have the same group of students for second, then fourth, and then seventh grade. Her fourth grade boys "played Mass" Saturday mornings at the Stommel residence. One day Russel Stommel and classmate Peter asked if they could say Mass for the class. Prayers were said in English and they faced the class. This was years before the Second Vatican Council and the introduction of the vernacular liturgy.

Sister Agnes Catherine celebrated her final profession on August 15, 1955.

That fall she was sent to Detroit's Assumption Grotto to teach eighth grade. Classes were very large, sometimes more than fifty students. She tried to learn their names as quickly as she could, reciting each name at the end of the school day. One day she simply could not remember the last student's name — but the students gave her a hint: "King of the Cowboys." Of course, Roy Rogers!

One incident at the Grotto helped Therese become more aware of bigotry. At lavatory break, a student came running to inform her that the boys were going to throw Peter, the smallest boy in class, out the window. Going into the lavatory, she saw two boys hanging on to Peter's legs as he dangled out the third floor window. After carefully getting Peter in safely, she asked for an explanation. Peter said, "Paul is wearing N - - - colors." (Paul was wearing a



About 1966

brown tie and a pink shirt. In the coming years, whenever she saw that brown and pink combination, she would pray for those two boys.)

Another incident that made a lasting mark on her heart was the abduction of a second-grade girl on her way to school, whose body was found in the dump weeks later. Therese learned what compassion meant to a grieving family.

In the fall of 1956, Sister Agnes Catherine was assigned as principal, eighth-grade teacher, and local superior at Saint Charles in Burlington, Wisconsin. She would remember her six years there as busy, though the total enrollment never exceeded four hundred.

The sisters had no television set, but they would often go to the parish rectory to hear Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, all but obligatory listening for Catholics at the time.

She was overjoyed in 1962 to be sent to her home parish in Center Line to teach ninth-grade earth science.

Meanwhile, she was spending her summers at Saint Norbert's College in DePere, Wisconsin, and received her baccalaureate degree from there in 1959. She would go on during succeeding summers to study geology and biology at Indiana University in Bloomington under a National Science Foundation grant, receiving her master's degree in 1968. She would pursue further graduate courses at the University of Wisconsin-Superior.

Because of the space program, the government was eager to provide science and math teachers opportunities to become more proficient in these areas. So Agnes Catherine applied for several National Science Foundation grants which took her to Cornell, Ball State Indiana, Michigan Tech, the University of Wisconsin in La Crosse, Viterbo College in La Crosse, and Lamar State College in Beaumont, Texas.

In the fall of 1964, she was sent to teach eighth and ninth grades at Saint Mary's in Janesville, Wisconsin. While there, she and Sister Cletus Freiburger, the music teacher, became interested in oil painting and took classes at the local vocational school and set up an art studio in the large recreation room in the convent.

One Saturday evening in May of 1965, Mother Mary Magdalen called to say she needed someone who could teach in both high school and grade school, and on Sunday afternoon Agnes Catherine was on her way to Plain, Wisconsin, to finish off the academic year there.

But the following fall found her in the science department at Saint



At Saint Mary's in Janesville

Catherine's High School in Racine. The sisters there were at that time living in the old motherhouse across Park Avenue from the school, where Sisters Agnes Catherine and Rose Ellen Mlodzik set up an art studio in the cupola.

Her first year at Saint Catherine's, she recalled, was very exciting, but by the second year Agnes Catherine was finding it difficult to adjust to such a large living group and asked to be transferred to a smaller mission. Mother Mary Magdalen Martin obliged, sending her to teach eighth grade at Saint John's in South Milwaukee, where she found the smaller community of ten far more congenial. But near the end of the term she was asked to return to Saint Catherine's — though she would be allowed to live with a smaller local community at Sacred Heart, one of the first Racine Dominicans to live away from her place of work. There she set up an art studio in an empty coal bin in the convent basement.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council many Sisters resumed their baptismal names. Since there were two sisters at the high school named Theresa (the other being Theresa McGinniss), and since the sisters didn't ordinarily use their family names, the two decided that one of them would be Therese. And so Sister Agnes Catherine became Sister Therese Rotarius.



1967

Beginning in 1970, Racine Dominicans were no longer assigned ministries and living communities but discerned and chose their own in dialogue with other sisters and the executive committee. So in 1973 Therese applied for and received a National Science Foundation grant to attend the University of Wisconsin-Superior. She received a master's degree in earth science there in 1974.

In Superior, Therese lived with the Franciscan Sisters. For Christmas and Easter dinners the sisters always invited two or three lay people who would otherwise be alone. And all year they collected clothing for the migrants in Texas; Therese and two others delivered a truckload of clothes to Texas during Easter break.



1978

At that time, Sister Patrice O'Brien, who was teaching at Holy Angels School in Sturgis, Michigan, informed Therese that the school was in need of an eighth-grade teacher and principal, and asked her whether she would apply. She did, and accepted the dual position. But in the course of the year someone wrote to Saint Charles School to inquire about Sister Therese Rotarius and was informed no one by that name had



1974, Silver Jubilee

ever taught there — as she was still Sister Agnes Catherine at the time. Unwilling to live under the cloud of suspicion this generated, Therese withdrew at the end of the year, responding to an invitation to teach eighth grade at Saints Peter and Paul School in Green Bay. More than once Therese locked horns with the very conservative pastor there! In each case it was a matter of putting common sense and charity over the letter of the law.

In 1978, the principal of Saint Catherine's High School called to ask whether Therese might be interested in resuming her former science position, and she accepted. During that year she took her first computer programming class and was rewarded with a computer in her classroom. She learned to put her grades on the computer and was soon interesting other teachers in the new technology.

Her earth science curriculum included chapters on recycling, with aluminum foil and soda cans at the top of the list. She personally recycled seven thousand dollars worth of aluminum cans.

About this time she read an article about dishonest auto mechanics who would often take advantage especially of women customers who they presumed did not know much about cars. So she took classes at vocational school, got her A-C Delco Service Certificate from General Motors, and developed and during the summer break taught a week-long course for the sisters entitled TLCC (Tender Loving Car Care). Soon she was offering the course to others: LaCrosse and Bay Settlement Franciscans, the Racine and Madison YWCA, and Edgewood College.



Tender Loving Car Care

In June of 1987 she participated in a study tour to Israel directed by Sister Rose Thering, and would always treasure the memory of walking on the ground Jesus walked.

In 1994, while Sisters Evelyn Lins and Judene Walsh were coordinators at Siena Center, they asked Therese if she would be interested in becoming “life assistant” at the Center, identifying and meeting needs of the senior sisters. That year she arranged to have all of her high school classes in the morning and to spend her afternoons at Siena. The following year, after twenty-five years of teaching at Saint Catherine's, her new position became full-time. She found working with the senior sisters a special joy. She started exercise classes, opened a “little store” for sundries, provided car trips, and formed knitting groups.



Helping S. Margaret Dresang on the computer

Then one day in 1997 Sister Mary Ann Pevas asked if she would like to attend a two-day workshop in computer maintenance for which she had signed up but could not attend. Therese accepted. She began taking computer classes at Gateway Technical College. and introduced the computer to sisters at Siena. Eight new computers were set up in the D-Wing recreation room. Classes from Gateway Technical College continued at Siena, with Gateway providing a teacher and

twelve laptops. Therese would continue this ministry until her final illness, even after declining mobility necessitated her use of a wheelchair.

She was so excited when Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment, *Laudato si'*, appeared that she made copies for any sister who would promise to read it and discuss it with others. And she was an ardent supporter of the community's Eco-Justice Center.

Therese had worked for some time on a reflective autobiographical account, determined to complete it before her death. When it was finished at the end of January 2017, she declared, "I'm ready now!"

In mid-February, she was experiencing nausea and difficulty eating and drinking. She saw her doctor on the fourteenth, after which a CT scan showed an abnormality in her pancreas. On February 16 she underwent surgery at Ascension All Saints Hospital, but though there were small improvements over the next few days and plans were in place for a move to Lakeshore Manor for rehabilitation, her life quietly ebbed away on February 24. Sister Agnes Johnson had been with her for a time, and Sister Alice Rademacher was with her when she died. Besides her Racine Dominican community, including two classmates, Sisters Evelyn Lins and Michelle Olley, Therese was survived by a number of nieces and nephews. Her parents, foster parents Clarence and Catherine Kelly, and fifteen brothers and sisters — Joseph, Sylvester, Francis, Louis, Anthony, Peter, Adolph, Mark, Anne (Berger), Mary (Rinke), Josephine (Budzyn), Aloysius, Clarence, Margaret, and Mathilda had entered eternity before her — the last four in infancy.

According to her wishes, Therese's body was cremated before her March 3 funeral liturgy. Her cremains were brought to Siena Center's chapel at 8:30 that morning, with a Remembering Service



Golden Jubilee, 1999

in which, more than anything else, stories were shared of her deep personal and communal prayer life. “The best word to describe the presence with which Therese shared the sign of peace at liturgy is the Hebrew ‘Shalom,’” Sister Carmen Agbuis reflected. “She would fully connect with you through her eyes and her hands.” The funeral liturgy was celebrated at 10:30 with Father Ed Cook presiding. Interment followed in the community plot at Holy Cross Cemetery on Highway 32 in Caledonia.