



Sister Oda Marie DeGroot, OP
Born to earthly life: October 27, 1916
Religious profession: August 4, 1940
Entered eternal life: May 24, 2017

“It’s a beautiful life! There’s no better life.”

Sister Oda Marie’s reflection on being a Racine Dominican

Lambertha (Bertha) Mary DeGroot was born on October 27, 1916, to Wilhelmina Hurkmans and Henry DeGroot of Northland, Michigan, and baptized at Saint Joseph Parish there. She would later tell of how hard her mother worked to bring her into the world. The midwife could not do the delivery; so the doctor needed to be called to the home. “I was a big baby, and Mom was glad we both made it through the delivery.” Bertha and her siblings were first-generation American, both of their parents having been born in The Netherlands, and Bertha would for all of her life maintain connections with her Dutch relatives.



First Communion

She was the second youngest of five children, including a brother who became a Salvatorian priest and her sister Alma who became a Racine Dominican. An older brother, John, died at the age of twelve. Her maternal aunt, Sister Lambert Hurkmans, was also a Racine Dominican.

Henry DeGroot was a competent carpenter, and built their four-bedroom home to be sturdy and strong. That house would still be standing beyond Bertha’s death. She would speak fondly of being raised on the farm with her siblings and helping with chores such as milking cows and feeding the chickens. She attended and graduated after eighth grade from a small one-room, public school.

In the wake of a visit from Sisters Lambert and Alma and seeing their happiness and good health, Bertha decided to give the Racine Dominicans a try. She was twenty-one when she became a postulant on August 30, 1937. On August 4 of the following year she was received into the novitiate as Sister Oda Marie of the Humility of Mary. She pronounced her first vows on August 4, 1940, and her final vows on August 5, 1946.

Her first mission assignment, immediately after her profession celebration, was to Saint Norbert’s in Roxbury, Wisconsin. Assignments followed at Saints Peter and Paul in Green Bay (1941 to 1942), the motherhouse (1942 to 1946), and Saint Benedict the Moor in Milwaukee (1946 to 1951). She had warm memories of her time at Saint Benedict’s — even when the children would



Joe, Anna, and Bertha



Bertha as a postulant, 1938



The DeGroot Family, about 1945

throw out food they did not like. In time and with the help of two other women, she grew to know what foods the kids would eat and took care to respect their tastes.

In 1951, Oda Marie was transferred to Saint Catherine's High School Cafeteria, where she served as manager until 1960, at which point she returned to Saint Benedict's for two years. One of her trade-make treats was her home-made root beer!



At St. Catherine's, 1954



Sisters Alma, Lambert, and Oda Marie with Father John



At St Catherine's, about 1960

From 1962 until 1964 she cooked for the Dominican friars at Saint Pius in Chicago. Then, after an interim year at Holy Cross in Kaukauna, she rejoined the friars for two years, this time at the Dominican House of Studies in River Forest, Illinois. The 1967 fall

term found her back with her sisters at Aquin Hall, the residence of the Saint Catherine's High School faculty.

She was fifty-six when she first lent her talents to the Siena Center kitchen. Then, from 1979 until her retirement in August of 2003, she served as a volunteer with a few other sisters at the Salvatorian Mission Warehouse in New Holstein, Wisconsin, organizing and repackaging goods for missions around the world. The Mission Warehouse would accept food, clothing, and medical supplies and equipment, and ship these to places in need. The repackaging allowed the Center to send more needed items to sites with much less bulk and waste. All shipping costs were covered by donations and fund-raising done by the Mission Warehouse. Oda Marie loved her time there — interacting with the other volunteers, helping with the mission work, making coffee for the crew, creating community, and cooking with three other Salvatorian Sisters.

Whenever the opportunity presented itself, Oda Marie participated in food service seminars and in tailoring classes at Racine Vocational School to broaden the depth of her skills. She sewed clothes for needy children from donated fabric. In her spare time she enjoyed doing stitchery and embroidery, always careful in her choice of



Clothing for the poor



Red Riding Hood dolls



What a ride! (1969)

colors. She was most known for her embroidered pillowcases and Red Riding Hood dolls.

Oda Marie also liked to travel. She and Sister Vivian Richter rode the Greyhound Bus out west, visiting friends and relatives along the way. She was also able to travel to Holland twice, where she reconnected with cousins and other family members. She visited Germany as well, and one could hear the delight in her voice as she spoke about her journeyings. On car trips, a stop at for frozen custard at Dairy Queen was imperative!

When she celebrated her seventy-fifth jubilee in 2015, Oda Marie reflected, "I have found joy in my ministry and cherished all the places where I was sent to serve." But as age and disability had taken their toll, Oda Marie had moved to Lakeshore Manor in

January of 2012. At the time of her move, visitors were barred for nine days because of a flu outbreak, and she thought she had been “kicked out” of the convent! But she quickly adapted to her new surroundings, and entertained visitors as much as they entertained her. Her sweet tooth never faded, and she would routinely stock up on candy from the snack cart — only to have the nurses confiscate it while she was asleep.

Eventually her energy waned, declining significantly on May 23, 2017. She died shortly before two o’clock on the morning of May 24. She was one hundred years old, and the oldest living member of the community at the time. She had celebrated her hundredth birthday with specially requested home-made tomato soup.

Oda Marie always seemed happy and never took for granted what she had or the people around her. There was no time to be grouchy, and being grouchy did not get you anywhere, she said. She had a lovely

and endearing smile, and many recalled with affection her firm handshake and hug at the kiss of peace at Mass. “You have to make your own fun in life,” she remarked toward the end of her life; “but you know, I’m getting tired of making my own fun!”

Oda Marie’s funeral was celebrated on the morning of May 30, with her nephew Father Francis DeGroot presiding. Besides relatives, the community welcomed Brother Regis Fust, SDS, and Sister Dora Zapf, SDS, from the Salvatorian Center. Interment followed in the community plot at Holy Cross Cemetery in Caledonia. June 2, 2017.



2000



Another joy ride!



At the Warehouse



2012