



Sister Marya Klapkowski, OP

Born to earthly life: August 23, 1924
Religious profession: August 15, 1953
Entered eternal life: August 29, 2015

“...She brought hope and joy to all her goodness”

– S. Brenda Walsh, OP

Born Irene Marianne, daughter of Matthew and Mary, she was the youngest of five siblings, with two brothers and two sisters. The Klapkowski family owned a grocery store in Chicago managed by Irene’s mother while her father worked at the foundry. The grocery store was a focal point of the neighborhood, and she greatly admired her mother’s kindness towards the customers. From grade school until she left to become a Racine Dominican, Irene took pride in

keeping the shelves neat, clean and stocked. She also helped to keep the books in order. The work at the store and her mother’s example gave her a start in business and helped in developing her talent for putting people at ease with her kindness and smile. As S. Phyllis Marie Grzeczka phrased it, “Her smile brought the joy of Jesus...”

Her parents were both Polish immigrants and sent Irene to parochial school with half the day taught in English and half in Polish. She left high school at age 16 to work at a paint and wallpaper store while taking night classes to get her diploma. After taking business courses in high school, she worked in the personnel department Guardian Electric Company. Irene would eventually get a Bachelors degree from Loyola University.

She left Guardian Electric to join the Sisters of St. Dominic of Saint Catherine of Siena (Racine Dominicans) at age 26, after getting to know some of the sisters over card games on trips to Wisconsin with a priest from a parish where she helped in the office. Her first mission as S. Marya was working as the business office manager at Dominican College where “people never minded talking to Marya about their situation. They found a listening ear, a friendly welcoming person...,” according to S. Rosaire Lucassen. After Dominican College closed, she was treasurer at St. Catherine’s Infirmary. Then, “after retirement,” she was excited to become receptionist at Villa St. Anna where she worked for another 15 years, often coming in early so she could spend time with residents and say hello to everyone before her work day began. Her co-worker and friend, Dorothy Dziengel, said of her, “Her smile made it a pleasure to come to work...she was so caring to all...”

Throughout her life, S. Marya carried her Polish heritage with pride and continued to read a Polish daily gifted to her by S. Adele Karwacki’s father after meeting her once years ago. She celebrated her heritage with fellow Poles by keeping alive Polish dancing and Christmas songs. She also retained her affection for Chicago and for the Cubs and the Bears. She made fast friends with anyone who shared this predilection.

To paraphrase words from S. Rosaire, her classmate, S. Marya exemplified Jesus with her approachable manner, her willingness to reach out and her ability to help people feel whole again, to heal. S. Marya was able to do this with her smile, by listening, and also, with her words, gestures and hugs. S. Agnes Johnson said of S. Marya, “She was a joyful woman for whom laughter was no stranger. [She had] a song to sing, a smile to give, a hand to clasp or embrace. All of us are better for having known her.”