

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER BERNADETTE DEL DUCA March 9-1929–October 8, 2019



As we have shared memories of Bernadette over these past days, a quote which is familiar to so many of us, not from scripture, the writings of our founders, or some theological work, but from William Shakespeare has resonated with me:

“Her voice was ever soft, gentle and low, an excellent thing in a woman.”

In my Novitiate days, it was often spoken as a reminder; sometimes a reprimand. To Bernadette, it was natural.

Bertha Frances Del Duca was born on March 9, 1929 to Francis and Rachel Just DelDuca. She was the first born of four children: Bertha, Gemma, Bonnie, and, finally, Francis, who was well formed by his parents and three older sisters. How has he survived?

As we all know, these were not Cookie-cutter children. Each one was and remains unique in every way. How did Frances and Rachel manage these diverse and challenging personalities? Love and loyalty were the cohesive forces, in this traditional and beautiful Italian family.

Education was important to Francis and Rachel, and they chose to send little Bertha to Saint Benedict School, which was a long walk from where the Del Duca’s lived at that time. Bertha, and then Gemma, would walk together with friends up the hill and then home again, to and from Saint Benedict. One of their friends was Clarina DiPietro. Bertha and Clarina remained fast friends through grade school, high school, and then Seton Hill College graduating in 1951—each pursuing a career in teaching at Cathedral School.

The piano was, as Gemma described, the center of the Del Duca household. Bertha began taking lessons from Sister Harriet Omlor, her mentor throughout grade and high school. When she chose to continue her music education at Seton Hill, she became the student of Sister Francis Clare.

In September, following graduation, Bertha began her career as a teacher at Cathedral School where she taught third grade and private piano lessons.

After two years of teaching, in June of 1953, she petitioned to enter the Sisters of Charity, following Gemma who had entered in 1950. I wonder if she waited until Gemma was out of the Novitiate to begin her journey in religious life. If the Community thought on September 8, 1953 that they were getting another Gemma, they were very wrong. Actually, we probably couldn't have survived two Gemmas.

In reviewing Bernadette's file for facts and figures, I was touched when I read her application to enter the Sisters of Charity. After she had signed her name, there were the names of three witnesses, one of whom was Clarina M. DiPietro, her life-long friend.

On June 27, 1954, she received the habit and the name Bernadette. Bertha was gone forever! I can recall her annoyance when one of the DiPietro girls would call her Bertha. From that day forward to her family, she was Bernie and to all of us, Bernadette.

Upon examination, Bernadette's curriculum vitae might appear rather ordinary and uneventful. Following the Novitiate, she was assigned to various grade schools to teach music and private piano lessons until 1963, when she was missioned to Canevin High School where she forged her long and deep friendship with Sister Pat Jordan. Her quiet, gentle nature was balanced by Pat's hearty laugh and exuberant spirit. The two were a "dynamic duo."

Her time at Canevin came to a conclusion in 1969, when she was assigned to replace Sister Cecilia Ward as Community Music Supervisor. That was quite a switch for those of us who were teaching classroom music. I remember the first time she visited my classroom at Resurrection School. I didn't really know what to expect. She sat in the last seat, first row. Throughout the class, she would smile or nod approvingly. At the conclusion of her supervision, she offered positive support and constructive criticism. When she returned, some months later, she expected that you had taken her advice and had made

the improvements which she had suggested. She was no push-over. In spite of her quiet, gentle nature, Bernadette had strong convictions which were often conveyed non-verbally with the rolling of her beautiful blue eyes or in one strong sentence. When she spoke, you listened.

During these years, she attended the summer session at DePaul University and completed her Master's Degree in music in 1971.

In 1974, her ministry trajectory changed direction when she became the Information and Referral Person at Saint Kieran Parish in Lawrenceville. Her soft, gentle voice and spirit brought consolation and joy to the elderly parishioners that she visited. My grandmother was one of those who was the recipient of that ministry and so looked forward to her frequent visits when they would talk and pray together. The highlight of the visit took place right before she left, when she would sit down at the piano and play to my grandmother's delight.

In 1975, she had the great joy and privilege to travel to Rome for the canonization of Saint Elizabeth Seton. To be in the city of Rome was her delight, as she traveled and explored the sights of the Eternal City with companions Sisters Pat Jordan, Catherine Meinert, and Beatrice Ann Parenti.

In 1978, it was back to the classroom at Holy Innocents School in Sheridan and then to Sacred Heart, where she taught private music lessons to children and adults, and traveled to Elizabeth Seton Children's Center, serving as Accounts Receivable Manager.

Throughout the years Bernadette remained the loyal "older" sister. Although she never traveled to Israel and didn't always understand why Gemma remained when the political situation was precarious, to say the least, she supported her ministry. Once, in conversation, I asked Bernadette how Gemma was doing; her reply, "Dancing around Israel." And to another sister, she stated, "Gemma goes to Israel more than I go to Rite Aid."

She was Bonnie's strength and support as she cared for her aging parents and grieved with her following their death. She loved you, Bonnie.

And, she loved her Baby Brother, Francis. You were the “apple of her eye.” She worried about you as you made your way around the Big Apple and so looked forward to your visits, especially at holiday time.

Bernadette was residing at Sacred Heart Convent when it closed in 1999. One of the parishioners interviewed the final group of Sisters and published a biography, citing each one’s personal history. When asked to reflect on her years of life at Sacred Heart, this was Bernadette’s reply: “I’m grateful to have been given the opportunity to live with so many wonderful Sisters and to have served so many in my various ministries. The thing that drew me to the Sisters of Charity was their devotion to the Eucharistic Lord. I have always been grateful for the opportunity provided by Sacred Heart for daily Eucharistic Liturgies.”

To those who would live a life dedicated to God, she offered, “I would say, center on Jesus—in the scriptures, in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist, and service to others.”

And now, dear Bernie, “you have arrived on the mountain and met the Lord for whom you have waited.” “The trumpet has sounded and your God has given you the victory”.

Rest quietly, gentle, loving soul.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Maureen O’Brien
October 11, 2019*