Sister Bernadette Marie Dwyer, OP
(1933 – 2014)

Sister Bernadette Marie Dwyer, a talented artist and an excellent teacher, was clothed in the Dominican habit on her Reception Day, and wore it all through her religious life. She called the habit “a sign of the Church,” a sign that she served the Church in her work and in her life. She also considered it economical. “Wearing the habit is a lot cheaper than buying a wardrobe!”

In the years before her death, she taught at St. Isidore School in Bloomingdale, Illinois. Most mornings found her in school at 3:00 a.m., where she spent her time correcting notebooks, papers, and artwork, and watching the sun rise. “I know I’m an oddball,” she once said. “But I wouldn’t change a thing about my life.”

The future Sister Bernadette was born to Clarence and Anne (Menary) Dwyer of Detroit on March 7, 1933, and baptized Joan. She was the second of their four children, preceded by Beatrice and followed by Marilyn and Don.

In Sister’s file is a long write-up of her family history, which was dictated by her aunt, Pansy Dwyer, in 1987. The family story began in Ireland with the sinking of one of the ships from the Spanish Armada in the Irish Sea and the escape of a Spanish sailor, Don Carlos, who found refuge on an Irish farm. He worked for the farmer and married the farmer’s daughter.

One of their sons left Ireland for Canada, and three generations later Clarence Dwyer was born in Quebec. Clarence attended college and became an accountant. He married Anne Menary, who was also a Canadian, but from Toronto. The couple moved to Detroit, where Clarence found a good job as a traffic manager for a transit company. His wife later was a supervisor for Sears.

Their daughter Joan was mischievous and played many tricks, some on her mother. Apparently a fussy eater, she fed the vegetables that she didn’t like to the family dog under the table or traded food with her sister.

All of her elementary education was obtained in public schools, begun at Roosevelt School at the age of five. These years included four years of piano lessons. Her parents enrolled her in religious education classes at St. Monica Parish, where she first saw religious sisters. She asked her mother who they were and what they did, and was told that they did God’s work. After mulling this over in her mind, she decided that she might like to be a sister some day.

Her junior high years were spent at Redford Union High School. She began her high school years at the age of thirteen as a boarder at St. Joseph Academy in Adrian, and soon entered the Preparatory School that was opened there for young girls who were considering entrance into the Congregation. The “preps” lived in the Academy dormitory, but were forbidden to associate or talk with the Academy girls who were not “preps.” Joan sometimes found herself in a bit of trouble because the Academy girls tried to get her to talk to them. She graduated from St. Joseph Academy in August 1948.
On February 2, 1948, at the age of fourteen and before graduation, she entered the postulate. She was the youngest in the group of young women who entered at that time. She said, “We were a teaching order, something I didn’t know when I entered. Before I knew it, I was being taught how to teach.” And she became an outstanding teacher. Joan received the habit and her religious name on August 10, 1948, and professed her first vows on August 11, 1949.

Within a short time Sister Bernadette was on her way to St. Agatha School in Gagetown, Michigan, where she taught in the middle grades for a year. She then spent five years at St. Laurence in Chicago, again in the middle grades. In 1955 she was assigned to St. Joseph School in Homewood as a teacher on the junior high level until January 1957, when she was transferred to St. Pius X in Toledo, Ohio.

As a result of summer study at Siena Heights College (now University) in Adrian, in August 1957 Sister Bernadette received a bachelor’s degree with a major in English and minors in history and Spanish.

From 1959 on, all of her teaching apostolate was in Illinois as a teacher of junior high students. At that time she was assigned to St. Patrick in Joliet for four years, then to St. Denis in Chicago for two years. In 1965 she taught religion and English for a year at Bishop Muldoon High School in Rockford. Returning to the elementary level, Sister Bernadette again taught junior high students for five years at St. Nicholas in Chicago.

She had continued her summer studies at Siena Heights College, and in 1970 she was awarded a master’s degree in guidance and counseling.

Beginning in 1971, she taught for two years at St. Alexis in Bensenville. For a year she taught religion in the elementary grades at Visitation in Elmhurst, then spent two years at St. Albert the Great in Burbank as a teacher of religion on the junior high level. During her time there, in 1975, she, her mother, and her siblings buried her beloved father.

Sister Bernadette decided to try something different, and in 1976 became a teaching principal at St. Irene in Warrenville. Before long, she realized that the role of principal was not to her liking, but she persevered for five years.

During this time she earned a certificate in pastoral theology from Siena Heights College; and, as a result of summer study at Mundelein College in Chicago, in 1977 she received a second master’s degree in religious studies.

Sister Bernadette left St. Irene in 1981, and once more served as a junior high teacher, this time at St. Mary School in Downers Grove. Her mother had become ill, and she lived with Sister Bernadette Marie for several years until her death in 1984.

In 1986 Sister Bernadette Marie moved to St. Isidore in Bloomingdale, where she taught on the junior high level for fifteen years. On the occasion of her Golden Jubilee in 1998, a large picture of her and a lengthy article about her appeared in the Chicago Tribune of February 8. In it one of
her ex-students was quoted as saying that she remembered Sister combining art lessons with religion.

She would ask us to select a passage in the Bible and then illustrate it. She loved art, and always told us she wanted to go to the Grand Canyon so she could paint it. At the end of the year, we gave her an easel and a jar of money so she could buy a ticket to Arizona and finally paint the canyon.

The students believed that Sister gave the money away, rather than using it herself. However, her interviewer discovered that she was planning to visit the Grand Canyon that year of 1998.

The article quoted Sandy Renehan, principal at St. Isidore, as saying that Sister Bernadette Marie had diabetes, which caused a slight tremor in her hands. “But she still does calligraphy and teaches it beautifully.” Of her it was said that she was full of energy and constantly creating, that she had new ideas and carried them out.

Articles about her also appeared in the Daily Herald, and in two other unidentified newspapers. Her picture and a write-up about her were featured in the St. Isidore Parish Harvester. The article called her “a blessing to St. Isidore School and our Parish Community.”

In 2001, Sister Bernadette had a problem in the classroom, possibly a slight stroke, which necessitated a short time in the hospital. Her hands were affected, the tremor became worse, and she was unable to continue her art work. Her memory was also affected. She knew that her teaching ministry in the classroom had come to an end, and she returned to Adrian. This was a difficult time for her; but it was eased somewhat when she was able to work successfully with one of the students at St. Joseph Academy.

At the wake, Sister Jo Gaugier, Chapter Prioress of Holy Rosary Mission Chapter, said:

Then, in 2003, while walking to get a haircut, she suffered a major stroke . . . and was taken to the hospital. ... As time passed, she continued to suffer periodic episodes. Despite her inability to get out words that were “on the tip of her tongue,” she was cheerful and almost always ate everything that was put before her. She retained her impish smile and was always very cordial. She was a delight to everyone with whom she interacted.

God took Sister Bernadette Marie to eternity on April 24, 2014.

A wake-remembrance service was held for her on April 25 in St. Catherine Chapel. Sister Jo Gaugier extended sympathy, and welcomed all who had assembled to bid Sister Bernadette Marie farewell. She summarized Sister Bernadette Marie’s life and ministry, and added:

The glint in Sister Bernadette’s eyes told us that she was up to something—and her smile betrayed her. God blessed her with a marvelous sense of humor and laughter, as well as an artistic talent that she shared with all. She loved beautiful things, and appreciated the beauty in all of God’s creation.
Her sister Beatrice, always called “Angel” by Sister, remembered:

*On behalf of the family, I wish to express gratitude for all the wonderful work that the sisters and staff have done in their care of Sister Bernadette Marie. You sisters probably knew her as a fine member of your community, someone who was happy and smiling but didn’t raise any ruckus. She didn’t always behave like that. I was the victim of many of her smart aleck tricks, and I played some on her, too. I knew her tricks, and she knew mine.*

*One day we went to the movies, got a good seat, and were quiet. ... The movie was “The Song of Bernadette.” She rode all the way home on the bus with her hands folded. ... That movie impressed her so greatly that she became a nun. Her paintings were beautiful. The painting that hangs over her bed is really beautiful. She became a wonderful artist, and it was natural to her. She loved people, and “truth” is her motto. It guided her life.*

**Sister Theresia Scheuer spoke for the “crowd.”** She said in part:

*One of the things that we remember her for is that for special celebrations she would make cartoon booklets, and they were beautiful. She had tremendous art ability. One time, for our twenty-fifth jubilee, she made an entire book, a page for each of the sisters in our crowd. Her cartoon drawings of each one and the clever sayings that went with each picture were priceless.*

*We are grateful especially for her patience in the illness that she had for so many years, and the good example that she gave. We loved her smile. And we are thankful for the joy she shared with us through the years.*

In her long remembrance, Dr. Sandy Renahan, principal at St. Isidore School at that time, wrote:

*Her students were taught more than English. They became orators, they wrote poems, they created prayers in their journals, they practiced calligraphy, they were expected to help others, and they were required to be respectful of each other. All of this they did. My daughter was her student, and she speaks often of what she learned from Sister and how she feels that her life was shaped by her.*

*I wish I could be with you now as you and Angel celebrate Sister. I am so glad to have had Sister Bernadette in my life.*

Sister Bernadette Marie’s funeral liturgy was celebrated on April 26. Father James Hug, SJ, Motherhouse Chaplain, was the presider, and Sister Mary Pat Dewey was the homilist. Sister said in part:

*I began to reflect on what Sister Bernadette might say to us today. My first thought was that she would want us to be joyful. She always had a beautiful smile, and her smile became even more radiant near the end of her life. ... She loved teaching and loved all of the children who came to her. Her room at Maria was filled with photos that former students sent of their families and the next generation. ... She had a beautiful painting on her wall. Her mother had asked her to make*
a holy picture, and this was the result [a painting of the Virgin Mary]. Sister Bernadette was truly a contemplative woman!

When the beautiful ceremony came to an end, Sister Bernadette Marie was laid to rest in the Congregational cemetery, planned over a hundred years ago by Mother Camilla Madden.