Sister Agnes Louise (Mary Therese) Stechschulte, OP  
(1924 – 2014)

Sister Agnes Louise, baptized Mary Therese, was born January 9, 1924, in Owosso, Michigan, to Louis and Agnes (Ford) Stechschulte. In her autobiography, she wrote this about her family:

My father had been married before. His first wife died as a result of childbirth after the third child. Robert, the baby, died in a year from pneumonia. Relatives in Toledo had taken him in. Leona died when I was six months old. She was playing a game and accidentally swallowed a piece of glass that went into her lungs. James was a survivor. I was the oldest in the second marriage. Two brothers followed: John and Joe.

My mother had been in our community. She entered at 16 and as a novice they sent her out to St. Joseph, Michigan, to teach. She was so homesick that she left from there. She returned to Owosso but it was very difficult because if you left the convent they would talk about you, especially at church. She then went to Ferris Institute and took secretarial courses and became an executive secretary. She thought over marriage very carefully; when she did marry, it was to a very hard-working man.

After recovering from a severe bout with tonsillitis, Mary Therese began attending the local country school when she was seven. During her illness her mother taught her from home using textbooks she borrowed from the school. By the time she enrolled in school her entry test scores placed her in third grade.

After Mary Therese graduated from eighth grade at the age of twelve she went to St. Paul High School in Owosso, where she first met Adrian Dominicans. During her senior year she raised one hundred turkeys from poults (young fowls) until they weighed thirty pounds. At the end of this project her father wrote a check to cover tuition for her first year at Siena Heights College (now University).

Mary Therese had planned to transfer to Marquette University’s Medical School after her sophomore year at Siena, but she became so impressed with Sister Patrick Jerome’s brilliance in the classroom and her self-effacing presence in the dorm that she began to think about religious life. In her autobiography she wrote, “What I was really attracted to be the driving force in her life.”

In her senior year at Siena, Mary Therese entered the postulate at the age of eighteen. She received her religious name, Sister Agnes Louise, at reception and made first profession in August 1943.

Her first assignment was teaching third and fourth graders at St. Dominic School in Detroit. But, according to her autobiography, it was more of a learning experience for her. She wrote:
They were the poorest kids in Detroit which was okay but I found you had to be so sharp and on your toes. Those kids win you over. When we had a free day they would ask if they could come back to school; we’d rather be here, they would tell us. There’s nothing that will turn you around faster than someone who needs you. They were the ones who connected me to teaching.

After three years at St. Dominic School, Sister Agnes Louise was sent to Gagetown, Michigan, to teach grades three, four and five in a classroom at St. Agatha School. She described her experience of teaching three grades in a classroom with fifty students like teaching in “a U of D stadium.”

A fonder memory was preparing the children for First Communion. She said, “I still remember one little guy. [Our school was] part of the public school system up there so we taught religion during the lunch hour. Little Jimmy said, ‘This is the best class of the whole day.’ He really made my day!”

During her first summer at Gagetown, Sister Agnes Louise received her bachelor’s degree from Siena Heights College.

In 1948, Sister Agnes Louise began teaching high school science and math courses at St. Ambrose in Detroit. Her five years there were challenging because it was during the Korean War. The boys had mixed feelings about graduating because they immediately became eligible to be drafted.

Her summers during those years were spent finishing her master’s degree at the University of Detroit, and teaching biology courses at Siena Heights College.

After teaching at St. Ambrose for five years, Sister Agnes Louise was sent to Aquinas, an all-girls high school in Chicago, for the next four years. She enjoyed those years and wrote, “Nothing could excel or be better than the spirit at Aquinas and the girls were so eager to learn and further themselves after they graduated.”

Her time at Aquinas came to an end in 1957, when she was appointed to study full-time at the Catholic University in Washington, DC, to earn a doctorate in microbiology. In addition to receiving a grant from the National Institutes of Health to study at the university, Sister Agnes Louise received another grant that enabled her to work on material for her doctoral dissertation at Walter Reed Hospital.

Sister Agnes Louise finished writing her doctoral dissertation and was on her way to Barry College (now University) in November 1960, where she would continue to teach and administer for the next forty-two years. The year she arrived, Barry had no biology major. By the time she left in 2002, there were over one thousand majors in the School of National Health and Science, with a staff of sixty-four, of which twenty-four were faculty members.

In her autobiography, Sister Agnes Louise wrote, “I have taught over 500 students who have become doctors. It has been a wonderful adventure. I had a wonderful faculty to work with and Sisters to live with.”
During her years at Barry, Sister Agnes Louise also taught in the Dade County Jail on Saturdays with three or four other Sisters. In her autobiography, she singled out one of the men who made a deep impression on her. She wrote, “He told me that he had been an organist in Europe and had played in many of the major cathedrals and basilicas. ‘Sister, I don’t know why I had to come to jail to discover God.’ That was quite a thrill. Two weeks later he was released.”

After her mother died in 1975, Sister Agnes Louise decided to enroll in the nursing program at the Miami-Dade Community College. This was before Barry had a nursing program. She tested out of level-one courses and eventually received her associate degree and passed State Board in January 1979. As a registered nurse, she was now able to offer assistance to some of the Sisters with whom she lived.

By the end of the 90s, Sister Agnes Louise began to see a decline in her health and was experiencing, among other things, more frequent periods of dizziness and light headedness. After receiving a series of injections in her knees that provided pain relief, she moved to Adrian in December 2003 and lived in the Dominican Life Center/Maria. Sister Agnes Louise died December 26, 2014, at the age of ninety.

Sister Jo Gaugier, Chapter Prioress of Holy Rosary, opened the Wake and Remembrance Service with highlights of Sister Agnes Louise’s life and ministry. She said:

*Sister Agnes Louise told many a story and there are many stories of her escapades. She regaled her crowd when attempting to re-sod Novitiate Garden with the help of a horse that would not cooperate. When she was caring for her mother (while teaching), sister friends, intending to give her a break, offered to spend an evening with her mother. When they arrived, Agnes had prepared a meal for all and did the dishes while they played cards with her mother.*

Sister Marcine Klemm shared the following remembrance:

*I first met Sister Agnes Louise when I was sent to Catholic University to begin my graduate studies in Biology. She seemed so down-to-earth and approachable, and willing to assist the newcomers on campus in a warm and friendly manner.*

*When Barry University started its Podiatry Program, Agnes assisted in planning the scientific aspect of the program. She played a role in the nursing program as well. Her scientific knowledge was broad and deep. Through all of her studies and teachings, there was an element of joy and wonder because she always felt the discovery and the beauty of the creation of God. The depth of her prayer life was entwined with all the wonders of God’s creation and she delighted in bringing others to a deep appreciation of the beauty and power of God’s genius.*

*When Sister Carleen Maly realized that both readings Sister Agnes Louise had selected for her funeral liturgy were about love, she checked with her in case it was a mistake. Sister Agnes Louise told her, “That’s it — that’s the message I want, love one another.”*

In her homily Sister Carleen said:
How fitting that Agnes Louise died during the night the day after Christmas — Christmas, the celebration of love and beyond love, the total giving of God’s self to us: to be one of us and one with us. This mystery of total love is revealed to us who believe and the mystery of Christ is in us, to be lived through the ordinariness of our daily lives, as who we are, where we are. Agnes got that and wanted us to hear it not once but twice at her funeral — love one another.

Agnes Louise, without falderal, without being over-bearing or imposing, used her God-given brilliance and modeled, in her self-giving, the mystery of God’s love. In the ordinary process of daily life she loved.

Jesus said it repeatedly, “Again I say, love one another as I have loved you.” Agnes would say, “That’s it, that’s the message I want.” Not once but twice; love one another, love one another.