Sister Bernadette Therese Vozobule, OP
(1933 – 2014)

*Sister Bernadette Therese walked this life with gentleness and steadfastness, obviously aware of the Kingdom of God within her, and thus reverencing those she met along the way. Her journey with her Dominican family was the joy of her life. And that is one reason why I believe she was ever smiling!*

- Sister Jodie Screes, OP

On February 20, 1933, in Cleveland, Ohio, a daughter was born to John and Josephine (Cerny) Vozobule. She was the last of their nine children, and they baptized her Bernadette Ann. Mary, John, Albert, Frank, Joseph, Josephine, Wenceslaus, and Ann had preceded her into the family.

John Vozobule was in his teens when he left Czechoslovakia for America, and settled in Cleveland. There he met and married Josephine Cerny. It is interesting to note that two of her sisters were Adrian Dominicans, Sisters Mary Lawrence and Mary Adalbert Cerny. Our records show John Vozobule’s occupation as “custodian,” but not where, and Sister does not mention this at all in her autobiography. She wrote that the children knew that their parents loved them very much, and described the happy childhood provided by their “Ma and Pa.”

*Games were played and we had enjoyment in our own yard with many other friends in the neighborhood. Christmas and Easter always brought celebrations of joy, gathering of other relatives to celebrate with us. … We were poor but we were well taken care of even if we used hand-me-down clothing. I remember going to the bakery to buy day-old bread, five loaves for a quarter.*

The Vozobules were members of St. John Nepomucene Parish. Their children all attended St. John Nepomucene School with the Adrian Dominican Sisters. Bernadette loved and admired her teachers, and the desire to become one of them arose in her.

In 1945, when Bernadette was in sixth grade, her mother died. She wrote that the children had been taught to “pitch in,” and that they continued their beautiful life of unity with their father after their mother died.

Bernadette spent her secondary years at Marymount High School in Garfield Heights, just outside of Cleveland, taught by the Sisters of St. Joseph. In 1949, during her sophomore year, she and her siblings were struck by sorrow again at the death of their father. Bernadette graduated from high school in June 1951. Since there were still six of her siblings living at home, she decided to take on the care of the house.

In 1952 her sister Josephine entered the Sisters of Charity and became known as Sister Christopher. Four of Bernadette’s cousins had also become religious sisters in other congregations. Again the desire for religious life arose in Bernadette, and finally, on February 1, 1953, three weeks before her twentieth birthday, she became a postulant in Adrian.
In her autobiography Sister included a rather humorous story. Her brother Joseph was the head of maintenance at Hoban Dominican High School. Mother Gerald gave her the black veil as a postulant, and asked her, “Bernadette, did you bring your toolbox with you?” She chuckled as she asked the question, “but,” Sister Bernadette Therese wrote, “I shook!”

She received the habit and her religious name on August 4, 1953, and professed her first vows on August 5, 1954.

All of Sister Bernadette Therese’s ministry was in Michigan. Her first assignment sent her to St. William School in Walled Lake, where she served for a year as a sixth grade teacher. She wrote of this year as “a difficult year,” but she found the other Sisters kind, understanding, and helpful. Her second assignment was to St. Joseph in Maybee, where she taught for six “happy” years in combination grades: third and fourth, second and third, and fifth and sixth. She also had a happy relationship with the other teachers, children, and parents.

In 1961 she was sent to St. Pius X School in Southgate as a second grade teacher for four years. She wrote,

*The primary grades were in a special section of the school called Holy Angels Hall. Father Swift (the pastor) called me “the Dean of Holy Angels Hall.” Community living with the sisters was wonderful. Parents and parishioners highly respected the sisters. It was a joy, preparing the young ones for First Confession and reception of the Holy Eucharist.*

In August 1962, as a result of summer study, she received a bachelor’s degree from Siena Heights College (now University) in Adrian, with a major in home economics and minors in English and mixed science. In 1965 she served for a year on the secondary level at St. Agatha High School in Detroit, teaching English, clothing, and religion. She spent the summer of 1965 at Michigan State University in East Lansing, beginning study on a master’s degree. She, however, did not continue that study, perhaps for health reasons.

The next year she was assigned to St. Mary in Royal Oak, where she spent twenty-six years, for a few years teaching junior high classes and clothing on the high school level, a half day in each. For the remainder of the years she taught in the elementary grades. She also taught religion classes to the four- and five-year-old children on Sundays, was responsible for planning liturgies for the primary children, and was a member of the Parish Council.

About her years there she wrote, “Personal relations with all members of the staff, faculty, parents, and students were beautiful experiences.” That this was true is shown by the fact that when she left in 1992 a dinner was held for her by the parish and school at a prominent restaurant. An expression of appreciation was given to her:

*You take the time to be a friend. You are a generous person, always giving of your talents and sharing whatever you have with those around you. And the nicest gift of all is the time you take for others, to talk, to listen, to smile, to understand, to lend a helping hand, or just be there. There aren’t many people as genuinely nice as you are. Hope you know how much you are appreciated. You will be missed by all, young and old.*
These years also brought more sorrow into Sister Bernadette Therese’s life. In 1973 her sister Mary and her husband both died. Her brother Albert died in 1988, and Frank and Joseph both died in 1989. There was also a period of great joy in 1976 when her nephew, Robert Glepko, was ordained to the priesthood.

Beginning with 1992, she taught for seven years at St. Mary Magdalen School in Hazel Park. She remained there for five years after her retirement in 1999. Even in retirement, she was not idle. She helped on the Worship Commission, and to train the liturgical ministers and altar servers.

Sisters Therese Mary Foote and Marie Doran also ministered there, and the three of them lived in the parish house, which they rented from the parish.

A memorial was received from Diana Rastelli, who worked with Sister Bernadette Therese at St. Mary Magdalen Parish. She wrote in part:

*One of the memories of Sister Bernadette was working with her with our altar servers. She was a great instructor for the ministry. When she taught the children she would take her time and start with prayer and talk to the children about God and how much a privilege it is to serve God. Her calmness and instructions touched those children. ... It was important for her to plan trips for the servers. We went bowling and then had lunch at the sisters’ home. What a treat! I loved working with her.*

*On a personal side, I would go to the sisters’ home occasionally, just to talk. I felt so comfortable and content with my inner self after discussing issues that I had on my plate. ... There are so many memories of Sister at our parish. It was so vibrant and fun.*

In 2003 Sister Bernadette Therese celebrated her Golden Jubilee, and she was given much recognition in the parish and in the parish bulletin. In an interview, she was asked what her hobbies were. She listed: “More private time with the Lord, notes to the sick, making phone calls, embroidery, computer email cards, word search puzzles, and reading.”

When asked what life lessons we can learn, she said, “Learning to take a day at a time. Setting priorities, beginning with my prayer life. Accepting changes that I cannot change. Letting the Spirit work where He will.” She also said that her fifty years of religious life were “Golden years. Grace filled and happy.”

Afflicted with painful arthritis, she left the parish in 2004 and returned to Adrian. There, she took up residence in the Dominican Life Center/Maria, and remained there until her death on January 25, 2014, at the age of eighty. Because she requested a green burial, she was interred in the Congregation Cemetery on the afternoon of January 27, 2014.

The Mass of the Resurrection was held for her on January 29. It was celebrated at the 10:30 a.m. Mass. Father James Hug, SJ, was the presider, and Sister Jodie Screes was the homilist. Sister said in part:
Not too very long ago, Sister Bernadette Therese was sitting in our circle of worship here with her light blue jacket, prayer books, and rosary, raising her beautiful voice in song. Not too long ago she was with her sisters, eating with difficulty of course, but there in the dining room . . . ever observant, ever smiling. And just a short while ago we would observe her slowly walking down the second floor hallway to her room, most likely in chronic pain, and probably returning from her daily visit with her dear friends.

We say a final farewell, Godspeed, to this gentle, holy woman on this cold January day. She is remembered from novitiate days as “a silent leader of goodness with a great smile on her beautiful face at all times.” She was a reminder to many of us of the power of a smile – that it can work magic. It can heal emotional pain, it can remove physical pain, and it is contagious. Her smile made others feel accepted and appreciated – perhaps encouraged as well. Smiles do have the power to break down the cold walls of indifference and warm a lonely heart. Mother Teresa once said, “Peace begins with a smile.” And Sister Bernadette exuded peace. Her very being spoke of peace.

On the afternoon of January 29, a remembrance service was held for Sister Bernadette Therese in the Rose Room. A great number of Sister’s friends were present at this service. Sister Jo Gaugier, Chapter Prioress of Holy Rosary Mission Chapter, extended sympathy, and welcomed all those who were present. The opening ceremony included a small procession: bringing to the front and setting up on a table the Constitution booklet, a book of First Communion pictures that Sister had kept, and a pillow given to her by her class at Royal Oak when she left.

Many short remembrances were given. Several of the Sisters spoke of her service to others in spite of the pain that she endured. She helped the Sisters by making them aware of what was going on in the Congregation, by aiding them in use of the computer, in helping to order clothes and other articles by mail, by giving assistance to Sisters at meals, and by always greeting others with a smile and a pleasant word.

Her love of Lawrence Welk’s music was mentioned, and the fact that she was still able to hear quite well. Brought out also was her generosity and her ability as a teacher, both with the little ones and with the teenagers. Her creativity was noted, her ability to sew and to make beautiful quilts. “She wasn’t able to do that recently because her fingers were so painful.”

Her faith and her prayer life were remembered. She was the prayer person in one of the Mission Groups, and was called “a blessing.” Her interest in what was going on in the lives of the Sisters and her prayers for them was the topic that several of the Sisters emphasized.

God has taken Sister Bernadette Therese to eternity. We can imagine the rejoicing taking place there as she meets her beloved parents and the relatives and friends who have preceded her, and shares her smiles with them. There she can look upon the face of the God Whom she has loved and served for so many years.