Sister Barbara Chenicek, OP
1933 – 2015

It is humble to be given gifts.
We pray they may bring shots of light as they stay with us
And have the urgency of the gentle Spirit

Sister Barbara Chenicek, known to family and friends as Barb, was born on April 7, 1933, in Chicago. She was the first child born to George and Patricia (Pazour) Chenicek. Her brother Don was born three years later. Of her parents, Sister Barb wrote:

My father was brought up in a completely non-Catholic atmosphere. His side of the family has no religious of any kind. He became a Catholic when he married my mother. My mom was raised in a small South Dakota town where the people had never seen a sister and the only priest they ever came in contact with was the aging pastor whom they saw at Sunday Mass.

Sister Barb attended St. Philip Neri for grade school and then Aquinas High School. Choosing the school she would attend was always difficult for her parents because one or the other would insist on her attending a public school. Sister Barb found it remarkable that she had been able to complete twelve years in Catholic Schools.

The compromise seemed to hinge on Sister Barb agreeing to attend classes at the Chicago Art Institute to develop her gift for art. She took classes all through high school and during the two years she studied at Loyola University. Sister Barb even managed to work as a freelance designer at Marshall Fields on Saturdays while studying at Loyola and the Art Institute.

By the time Sister Barb was twenty, her parents were resigned to her decision to enter the Congregation in June 1953. She received her religious name, Sister George Patrice, at reception and in December 1954 she made first profession.

Her first and only assignment to teach on the elementary grade level was at St. Joseph School in Wyandotte, Michigan, from 1955 to 1958. In addition to learning how to teach “with joy and excitement,” she also took an art class and made a series of watercolors of trees and branches painted in thalo blues and indigo. At Sister Barb’s wake, Sister Barbara Cervenka, also an artist, said, “I only saw [this painting] once, but I still remember it.”

Sister Barb received her bachelor’s degree from Siena Heights College in 1957 and her master’s in 1964. The years 1958 to 1970 mark her last assigned years of teaching. Her first three years were spent at Aquinas High School, followed by five years at

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1 From Barb’s poetic reflection at the beginning of INAI Studio, June 2, 1973
Rosary High School. The last four years were divided between the art departments at Siena Heights and St. Dominic Colleges.

These fifteen years (1958-1970) also encompassed significant changes in the Church, religious congregations, and society in general. Among the stimuli were Vatican II, the Congregation’s Chapter of Renewal, the protest movements related to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and the multiple issues related to the Civil Rights Movement. Also during this time, St. Dominic College closed on June 1, 1970.

Sister Barb and Sister Rita Schiltz received a grant to study at the College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, California for a year, 1970-1971. In January they submitted a proposal that outlined their concept of ministry that, three years later in 1973, would become INAI.

We envision ourselves –
- living a “house of prayer” life-style, sharing a simple community experience in a newly-formed or previously existent group.
- locating and establishing places of work (such as in the old laundry) where peace, solitude and creative endeavor are possible
- seeking acceptance for a new role – that of contemplative artisan rather than a thing-maker, fixer, doer.

In 1980, Sister Barb wrote the following in her Christmas letter,

Time has been rich for Rita and me, rich with multiple experiences: in our work we have made in thirty-two environments here at INAI; in the Chapel spaces we have made in Grosse Pointe and Chatham, Ontario. Right now, three chapels in Kansas are about to enter the concept-stage.

Three years later, Sisters Barb and Rita were awarded the prestigious grand prize in the 10th annual Interior Design/Institute of Business Designers competition for their renovation of one of the chapels in Kansas. An article about the award, printed in the Interior Design magazine, noted:

It marks, quite likely, the first time ever that two women, both full-time members of a religious order and practicing design professionals too, have been officially honored by the industry for an installation reflective of such eloquent simplicity and beauty.

This award brought national and international attention and the two artists began receiving inquiries and proposals from many groups.

In 2009, Sisters Barb and Rita presented the Congregation with a 17-foot fabric-appliqued tapestry of St. Catherine of Siena for the wall of St. Catherine Chapel.

During the 40th Anniversary of INAI Studio on June 2, 2013, Sisters Barb and Rita offered a visual presentation of their sacred space designs. Included in the presentation were the churches, hospital and monastery chapels, and other liturgical creations that
had earned them many awards. In addition to the Dominican Chapel of the Plains, in Great Bend, Kansas, their creations included the Oratory at Jubilee Centre in Rome; Carmelite Monastery Chapel in Baltimore, Maryland; and the Chapel of Hope at Holland Community Hospital in Holland, Michigan. Sisters Barb and Rita also served as consultants for the design and construction of the Monastery and Basilica at Prouilhe, Fanjeux, France.

During the wake service, Sister Carol Jean Kesterke, Chapter Prioress of Great Lakes Dominican Mission Chapter, shared a remembrance from Sister Barbara Schwarz, Director of the Dominican Institute for the Arts (DIA) who wrote,

We celebrate that all the chapels and churches Barbara built with Rita, were not just buildings but projects whose life force built and sustained communities brought together in the process. People gathered to make the hangings they designed.

Her pride was not in the awards but in the communities that found God in the process.

Sister Barbara Chenicek, OP, died on October 13, 2015, at the age of eighty-two and in the sixty-first year of her religious profession.

Sister Barbara Cervenka shared the following remembrance during the wake:

When I entered in 1957 and all through the novitiate, I saw only two pieces of contemporary art: the Nativity set made by Sister Helene and a painting of Mary – in somber tones of blue and grey, with strong angles and a fierce energy painted by Sister George Patrice. Everything she did had amazing energy.

As an artist and as a person, I am so deeply indebted to Barb; we are all so much richer for the beauty and strength of the ways she is with us
  o Her spirit of seeing beauty in ordinary things
  o Her awareness of light and its power to illuminate and focus our experience
  o Her belief in community and her steadfast faithfulness to it and to us
  o Her deep friendship and collaboration with Rita which bore such amazing fruit of creativity and artmaking
  o Her strong faith and sensitivity to the presence of God, immanent in our world.

Sister Judith Lindell, Dominican Sister of Peace, Great Bend, Kansas, wrote:

I have known Barb and Rita since the early 1980s when they started working on the renovation of our Chapel. I have so admired their whole process of education and explanations during the renovation. After all these years it is still a place of Peace for us, and for the many who come to share that space with us.
Berticia Garcia, a former art student at St. Dominic College, wrote,

I still paint and draw and still feel that the images that appear before me are a gift from God. It was not until many years later that I came to comprehend the role that Barbara and Rita played in my life.

Jonathan Scalone, former pastor of St. Philip the Apostle Church in Lewisville, Texas, wrote:

I met Barbara and Rita on the feast of the Annunciation. That was the beginning of a unique and profound interior experience of amazing grace for me. Barb and Rita are God’s presence to me then and now. They changed my life to the core of my being.

Father Jim Hug, SJ, ended the funeral liturgy with this colloquy:

Barbara,^2
Barbara,
wild-winged cry of the
One who loves,
be in our roads, our skies
our passage
Home
For you now, all is spent, unlocked unbent. You are wakening to unutterable rising fresh and untracked way: in wing of unleashed Spirit,
stir and soar and sing

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^2 Based on, CATHERINE, The Catherine Tapestry
Left: Sister Barbara with her brother Don. Right: Sister Barbara with her brother, Don Chenicek, and their mother, Patricia Chenicek.

Left: Sister Barbara poses with Sister Rita Schiltz (seated in front); her brother and sister-in-law, Don and Sharon; and her niece and nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews.

Left: Sister Barbara and Rita in St. Catherine Chapel on August 6, 2009, for the dedication of The Catherine Tapestry that they created.
**Left:** From left, Sisters Barbara, Irene LeDuc, and Rita participate in the 1998 Palm Sunday procession. **Right:** The Catherine Tapestry created by Sister Barb Chenicek and Sister Rita Schiltz.