Sister Diana Miller, OP  
1919-2017

“One does not get too far from one’s dream”

Sister Diana, baptized Mary Agatha Miller, was born in Royal Oak, Michigan, on February 10, 1919. She was the third of seven children born to William and Lucy (MacArthur) Miller. Her two older brothers, Jerry and Blake, were born in Detroit. Her four younger siblings – Edward, Jane, Philip, and Grace – were born in Royal Oak.

In her autobiography, Sister Diana shared the following details about her family and her attraction to foreign missions.

My father and mother met in Michigan and their courtship lasted for three years. Finally in January 1912 William and Lucy were married and my mother embraced Catholicism. During the Great Depression they lost all the worldly things they had. This forced us to move closer to [St. Mary] School which delighted us because now we could go home for lunch. We lived on the east side of Royal Oak with plenty of space: trees, wild flowers in the woods, vegetable gardens, fruit trees, berry bushes and three kinds of grapes.

I went to St. Mary for grade and high school. One time in the thirties, a missionary priest came to the school and talked about his work in Hunan, China. I believe this priest was Father William Westhovan. It was then that my thoughts about China began. Dad and Mother were always behind me, listening, suggesting and helping.

I entered Adrian in the fall of 1937 and at that time there was talk in the community of opening a place in Hunan, China. However, Japan invaded China and we were on the brink of World War II. Adrian was advised not to pursue the mission fields in the Orient. My yearning and desire to work with His little ones has never ceased.

On April 20, 1938, Sister Diana received the habit and began her canonical year of formation. On April 26, 1939, she made first profession and continued her studies at Siena Heights College until August, when she received her first teaching assignment: St. Paul School in Owosso, Michigan. Startled by the reality of this responsibility when she arrived in Owosso, Sister Diana said her thoughts were, “What am I doing here? I wanted the night to transport me back to Adrian.”

But she was in good hands. The principal, Sister Mary Hildegarde Brennan, arranged to have Sister Ellenita Boyle come to Owosso to help Diana. Sister Ellenita taught the first week while Sister Diana observed. The second week, Sister Diana taught and Sister Ellenita supervised. Sister Diana said, “What a blessing! As a result, I had four unforgettable years” at St. Paul.

In 1943, Sister Diana was sent to Chicago, where she taught at St. Nicholas of Tolentine for the next eight years. These were war years and many of the Sisters teaching there had family members serving in the military. It was also during this period that Sister Diana and Sister John Loretto Bowery made final profession in the convent chapel in 1944.

From 1951 to 1970, Sister Diana was assigned to teach in seven parish schools in Michigan: St. Joseph in Adrian for two years, Our Lady Gate of Heaven in Detroit for one year, St. John in Ubly for
six years, Guardian Angels in Clawson for three years, St. Joseph in Belding for three years, St. Pius X in Southgate for one year and Precious Blood in Detroit for three years. When Sister Diana reflected on these nineteen years of teaching in the state of Michigan she wrote, “When I taught I learned, and teaching was serious business. No two days were ever alike.”

The 70s, however, were a whole new world! Among the many changes and challenges was the option of open placement. Sister Diana found a teaching position at St. Mary School in Delano, California. This agricultural area in the San Joaquin Valley had just gone through a series of strikes and strife over wages and working conditions. Sister Diana described it as “brother against brother and hearts torn asunder.”

But there were also changes in the Congregation. In her autobiography, Sister Diana wrote:

> After Vatican II I was stymied and bewildered at the exodus of so many of our women. Mystery of life and life has to go on. I was getting excited about the whole thing because of the way the world and politics were going. For sure I thought the church would be going underground and live as the early Christians did. Another issue that came to light was sisters across the width and breath of the country would join together and be one. Today we have LCWR and NAWR that are uniting religious and giving a new look to the eighties.

St. Mary symbolized what was happening. During Sister Diana’s six years, enrollment declined and the school was closed in 1976. She wrote, “I left St. Mary in the hands of a very good layman to carry on the work that [the Sisters] began in September 1948.”

In 1976, Sister Geraldine McNamara, the new principal at Junipero Serra School in Carmel, California, was looking for new faculty members. Sister Diana was among the several sisters who were invited to teach there. According to Sister Diana, the school had been on the verge of closing in 1975. She wrote:

> The final signing of contracts was to take place in the spring of 1975 for the next school year. Three Adrians were hired. The following year another Adrian came and three more sisters joined our staff that year. By the fifth year our sisters were also teaching at San Carlos in Monterey, California.

Sister Diana continued to teach at Junipero Serra Mission School until June 1982. When she returned to Chicago, she taught for two years at St. Denis School. From 1984 to 1985 she enrolled in a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program and then returned to Maria, where she served as a driver and shopper for sisters living in the Dominican Life Center.

But the West called to her again, and in 1986 she returned to California for another thirteen years of ministry. Sister Diana served as tutor and special education coordinator at St. Philip Neri School in Alameda for four years before retiring and living at Villa Serra Retirement Center in Salinas for nine years. She and the six other Adrian Dominicans were among the first to live in this new facility. In her annals, Sister Diana described her various ministries.

> I work at Dorothy’s Kitchen which helps me be part of the poor living in Salinas. I work with Hispanics in the Headstart Program four hours a day five days a week. Sometimes I talk with battered women. I also volunteer in a women’s prison with infants and toddlers. As a retired old lady, I get up early, get out, and enjoy every minute of every day.
Sister Diana returned to Adrian in 1999 and lived in the Dominican Life Center until she died on April 14, 2017, at the age of ninety-eight.

During the wake service, Sister Maria Goretti Browne, Vicaress, of the Adrian Dominican Vicariate, shared the following stories.

This morning after Mass, the sisters met to share stories about Sister Diana. These are some of the words I heard: caring, good teacher, strong, not judgmental, a pillar, hospitable, joyous, kind. Of course, her wink was mentioned. That was her trademark: she’d wink! She took care to keep the greenhouse clean. She also loved animals and was known to take an apple from the dining room often and go out to the cemetery and feed the deer.

Sister Adrienne Piennette, OP, emailed this remembrance.

I was principal of St. Philip Neri School in Alameda, California, which was Diana’s last mission. She tutored children and did yard duty. When she was on duty no one got away with anything. She loved the children, but was strict, which they came to appreciate later. I could always count on her to fill in when a situation arose. I know that she struggled as memory loss began to take over. May she rest in peace.

In her homily Trudy McSorley, Associate, reflected on the readings Diana selected for her funeral liturgy. Here are excerpts of her message.

These last days we have pondered Mary suffering through the agony and death of her Son and yet today we hear once again the invitation from the angel that God had chosen her to be Mother of the Holy One. Think about that: Mary at prayer, an ordinary day we can assume and all of a sudden Mary got something she did not expect….!

How much like that it is for us in prayer, as we live this life of our own “yes” we so often get something we do not expect. And so it was with our dear Diana, as she lived her life of “yes.” As teacher, principal, student, chaplain, tutor, driver, in all of it, Diana, by the grace of our good God, daily got something she did not expect!

In 1980 Diana, when writing her Catherine of Siena letter, shared her experience of prayer: “I will be with you all days,” and as she, along with the Congregation, was entering a new time Diana found herself recommitting to this new time, the new challenges; willing to be led into the desert: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your Word.” As those enactments occurred and new structures developed Diana (and the Congregation) got something she (they) did not expect!

It is that way with God, the God who waits patiently, is faithful at all times and is always willing to reveal the immense love that never ceases to amaze us.

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1 Isaiah 43:1-4a, Luke 1: 26-38
LEFT: Gathering in Gagetown, Michigan in January 1959 are, from left, Sisters Karen Marie (Marlene) Ptaszynski, Diana Miller, and Joan Annette Rudolph.

LEFT: Sister Diana with a fawn, June 1966. RIGHT: The Miller Siblings – back row, from left, Edward, Phil, and Blake, and front row, from left, Grace and Sister Diana, summer 1999
RIGHT: At the 1988 Chapter Assembly, from left: Sisters Catherine Riegel, Jovanna Stein, Diana Miller, Mary Jo Martinez, and Monica Kim;

LEFT: Gathered at a 1990 Chapter Assembly, from left, are Sisters Diana Miller, Joanne O’Connor, Richard Marie Riegel, and Cathryn Deutsch. RIGHT: Sister Diana tours a mine shaft, April 1967.
Members of the 1988 Diamond (60-year) Jubilarian class are: seated, from left, Sisters Thomas Ellen McGowan and John Loretto Bowery; middle row, from left, Sisters Virginia Rose Heroux, Dorothy Hemmert, Frances Ellen Bowery, and Charles Christine Uhnavy; and back row, from left, Sisters Helen Duggan, Marie Bentz, Evangeline Davis, Julie Ann Burns, Virginia Hafey-Wells, and Diana Miller. Not pictured are Sisters Mary Creighton, Kathleen Donnelly, Sabina Jabour, Joanne O’Connor, and Mary Frances White.