Sister Donna Wencel, OP  
1928-2017

Sister Donna Wencel, known as Sister Frederick Mary, was born on a farm near Wayne, Michigan, on December 30, 1928. She was the seventh of nine children born to Frederick and Martha (Klebbba) Wencel. Their first-born child, a girl, died at the age of two. In her autobiography, Sister Donna wrote the following about her family:

Our family was poor but rich in love. My parents were always ready to help those who were less fortunate than we were. Many times the walls of our home were stretched to the utmost. I remember when I was in 4th grade, we came home from school and my Mother told my sister and me not to go to our bedroom because we would be sleeping upstairs in the large room with my older sisters. It seems that a family in the area had lost their home due to the husband’s illness and they had nowhere to go so my Mother and Father took the family in. That family consisted of a mother, father and two daughters. They stayed with us for a year and a half.

Sister Donna started school at St. Mary, which was staffed by the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters from Monroe, Michigan. The school had ten grades and all of her older brothers and sisters went to that school for ten years. But when Donna was ready for ninth grade the school had become so crowded that they eliminated the ninth and ten grades. As a result, Sister Donna attended the public high school, which she found very difficult.

From an early age, Sister Donna and her younger brother had planned on being dairy farmers, but that all changed after Sister Donna and her family attended the reception ceremony in Adrian for Mary Ann Gardulski (known as Sister Marie Pierre) who was her cousin. Sister Donna was only thirteen at the time and was too young to enter the congregation – or so she thought. She wrote:

The Prep school started in June 1943. I finished my freshman year in the public school and the decision was made that I would become one of the Preps. On the morning of September 8, 1943 the feast of our Lady, my dad, brother and I were up early, about five in the morning. We were taking my pigs and seven heifers to the stockyard to be sold so I would have the needed tuition for the two years of Preparatory School. That afternoon my dad loaded my trunk and suitcase along with my Mom, my sister Pearl, my brother Bill and me, and we started our trip to Adrian. At the time I didn’t think of the Gospel story of selling all you have and follow Christ, but that’s just what I did. The monies from my livestock paid not only my tuition but my dowry as well.

During her two years in the Prep Program, Sister Donna finished high school by studying at St. Joseph Academy during the regular school year and taking courses during the summer at Innisfail. She entered the postulate on June 29, 1945 and six months later received her religious name, Sister Frederick Mary. Following first profession on January 5, 1947, she stayed in Adrian to study at Siena Heights College until August, when she received her first teaching assignment at St. Matthew School in Chicago. Traveling alone to Chicago gave Sister Donna some lasting memories. She wrote,

This was my first train ride and I was very frightened to be off by myself on an unfamiliar journey. On arriving at Chicago’s 12th Street Station, I expected that someone would meet me because I had sent a message telling them the time of arrival. However the message was not
delivered and I was on my own. I must have looked very lost and forlorn for a porter came up to me and asked what he could do for me. He took me to the transportation area and put me in a cab and paid the driver to take me to St. Matthew’s on the west side. The cab driver turned and asked if I was sure I had the correct address. Then he said, “Boy, they sure sent you to a heck of a place, didn’t they?”

Sister Donna’s first thirty years of ministry were in the Midwest, where she taught in eight parish elementary schools. Two of those assignments reflected an effort to assign her closer to her family because of her father’s illness. Her father died in 1969.

At her last assignment, Sister Donna had the dual responsibility of teaching and being principal for five years at St. John in Ubly, Michigan. Those years were especially challenging for her because school enrollments throughout the state were declining in the 70s and when the pastor at St. John was assigned to another parish, it took several months before the new pastor was assigned to St. John. In her autobiography, Sister Donna wrote:

This was the beginning of the end. Unbeknown to us [the new pastor] had been sent to close the school. In the ten years I was in the thumb area of Michigan, the bishop had closed two high schools and eight elementary schools. In April of that year, I received a phone call from the Superintendent of Schools asking why I had not followed Diocesan regulations on closing schools. I told him I didn’t know the school was closing. All he said was, oops! And he hung up.

Shortly after Sister Donna left St. John School in June 1977, she received a call from Sister Kathleen Clausen in La Jolla, California. Sister Kathleen had just accepted the position of principal at All Hallows Academy and wanted to know if Sister Donna would be interested in teaching first grade. Her “yes” to Sister Kathy resulted in Sister Donna ministering at All Hallows Academy for twenty-one years. In her autobiography, she wrote the following about the Academy’s Learning Center.

I taught first grade and was in charge of the reading program for the school. Sister Kathleen and I had a deep interest in learning problems. A Learning Center was set up. Teachers were trained to recognize problems in the classroom and get parental permission for testing. If reading was a problem, the child would go to the Learning Center for a [special] class. The success of the program was seen in the self esteem that grew in each child. Learning disabilities cannot be cured; they can only be [off-set] by acquiring other skills. I have a learning disability: dyslexia. I didn’t know this until I was tested and the problem was diagnosed. Because of this disability, I have to be very careful with numbers and writing. Computers are a Godsend when it comes to writing.

Sister Donna retired in 1998 and after a sabbatical year to prepare for a new ministry, she and Sister Kathy moved to San Diego, where Sister Donna tutored teens with reading disabilities in Juvenile Hall. She also began making baby quilts for poor families in Mexico. In her annals she wrote, “I started a quilting group in 2000 and to date [2004] we have made over 350 quilts for the poor of Tijuana, Mexico and San Diego. All the ladies in the group are very faithful to our weekly gathering.”

During her retirement years, Sister Donna had several operations and replacements and suffered with a series of ongoing health issues related to high blood pressure and arthritis. As a result, she and Sister Kathy made the decision to return to Adrian, where Sister Donna died on March 3, 2017, at the age of eighty-eight.
During the wake/remembrance service, Sister Kathleen Clausen shared the following remembrance of her dear friend.

*My friend, Sister Donna Wencel, is truly my soul sister, a total gift from God to me. We shared our soul’s deepest spiritual longings in prayer, in conversation, and always in our presence to one another. She exuded love and was contagious in sharing that love. Donna always was positive and loved life. She never complained and would often admonish me if my attitude would be less than positive. She would say, “Give it up, let it go, all will be well,” and of course, it was.*

*My memories of life with her are embedded in my heart. Together we ministered to God’s people, we enjoyed every moment of life. We travelled, partied, laughed and cried, lived through her many illnesses and surgeries that made her a bionic woman! Her last surgery of a Trans aortic valve replacement, gave evidence of her indomitable spirit. To her doctors she said, “You do your job and I will do mine and all will be well!” And so it was.*

*I was so privileged to witness this last week with her, though very difficult, it was the most holy time of her life. God was there with us each day, while we waited for God to welcome her home. At one point last week, she said to me, it is taking a long time!*

*Donna loved her family, the Wencel Clan, very much. She is happy to have all of you here to celebrate her life with you and her new life in heaven. The visits this week of many of you truly made her happy. She is with you now as your special intercessor in Heaven with all her siblings and mother and father.*

*Donna’s Dominican Family, the Clausen Clan, Dominican Associates, Mission Groups, the families in La Jolla and San Diego, her extended family in Mexico who received her many baby quilts, her family in Denmark and Ireland and all over the country were total delight to her and she loved each one of them.*

*Donna is my best friend, my soul sister, and always will be. She remains in my heart forever.*

*The reality is we are all just walking each other home. I have given her back to God who gifted her to me for a short while, just about 40 years.*

*Until we meet again, Donna, may you totally be embraced by the God who loves you. And may you have peace and joy in the home you have always longed for. I love you, my sweet Donna.*
LEFT: Sisters Kathleen Clausen (left) and Donna prepare for a 2003 trip to Copenhagen, provided by their parish.

LEFT: Sisters Kathleen Clausen (left) and Donna Wencel. RIGHT: Members of the Veritas Mission Group are, back row, from left, Sisters Maureen Keeler and Barbara Mason and Myrna Colbert, Associate, and front row, from left, Sisters Donna Wencel, Joan Dwyer, Margaret Reardon, and Kathleen Clausen.
LEFT: Sister Donna works on one of her quilts. RIGHT: Sister Donna with her father and her horse Topper during her first home visit.
Sister Donna’s first mission, St. Matthew, Chicago, in 1949. Shown are: back row, from left, Sisters Marie Alexius Ruder, Mary Celine Nemshak, Frederick Mary (Donna) Wencel, Marie Michel Allain, and Raymond Marie Scanlon, and front row, from left, Sisters Amie Marie Holthoefer and Marie Carmelita Brown.