



Sister Dorita Wotiska, OP 1935-2018

She had the Dominican charism. That was the foundation of everything in her life.

The connection between retired Diocese of Lansing Bishop Carl Mengeling, who spoke those words, and Sister Dorita Wotiska, to whom he was referring, stretched back more than twenty years. In November 1995, he was new to the diocese, and after the press conference introducing him, the diocesan staff lined up to meet him. One of those present was Sister Dorita, who by that time had already been superintendent of schools for the diocese for nine years and associate superintendent for four years before that. And the new bishop quickly discovered her ability, as he put it, to “tell it like it is.”

“She looked right at me, and looked at me right in the eyes ... and she said, ‘I’m from the Chicago area too, and I don’t want you to disappoint us, because I’ll be watching you,’” the bishop told those gathered for Sister Dorita’s memorial Mass on February 2, 2018.

Sister Dorita was born Dorothy Ann Wotiska in Evanston, Illinois, on September 1, 1935, to William and Helen (Bohacek) Wotiska. William worked as a hardware assembler and Helen was a homemaker. Dorothy had one older sister, Rosemarie.

Dorothy attended Swift Elementary School on Chicago’s north side, near the family home on Magnolia Avenue. The family was part of nearby St. Ita Parish.

Her high school years were spent at Immaculata High School, after which she enrolled at Wright Junior College, a branch of Chicago Teachers College. Her second cousin, Veronica Wortiska (a slight variation in surname), was the Adrian Dominicans’ Sister Mary Adele, and during a visit to Adrian, Dorothy had been introduced to Mother Gerald Barry. In November 1953, while in her first semester of college, she wrote to Mother Gerald asking to enter the Adrian Dominican Congregation.

She became a postulant the next January and, as happened so often in those days, was immediately sent out to teach. She spent the rest of the school year at Precious Blood in Detroit. Then, on August 4, 1954, she received the novice’s veil and her religious name, Sister Dorita.

Seventeen years in elementary classrooms followed: four years at St. Clement, Romeo, Michigan; a year at Christ the King, Des Moines, Iowa; two years each at St. Alphonsus, Deerfield, Michigan, St. Andrew, Rochester, Michigan, and St. Pius X, Southgate, Michigan; and six years teaching at St. Stephen, Saginaw, Michigan. Then in 1972, she became assistant principal at St. Stephen – the largest elementary school in the Diocese of Saginaw – for a year, followed by six years there as principal. While she was there, she was named by the state board of education to a twenty-four-member statewide task force to study issues concerning middle and junior high teaching and strategies for educating early adolescent students.

In the course of time, she earned her bachelor’s degree in history from Siena Heights College (University) in 1960 and her master’s degree in secondary education from Michigan State University in 1972. She earned a Ph.D. in college administration from Michigan State in 1980.

In 1979, she was hired by the Diocese of Gaylord (Michigan) as assistant superintendent of schools, a position she held until 1982, when she went to the Diocese of Lansing (Michigan) to serve as associate superintendent and then, beginning in 1986, as superintendent. During her years in Lansing, she also became chairperson of the diocesan Department of Education and Catechesis.

Her reputation when it came to educational issues earned her wide recognition over the years, as the following examples show:

- While she was the Diocese of Lansing's associate superintendent, she was chosen by the state board of education to serve on the Bureau of Planning and School Management Advisory Council.
- The National Catholic Educational Association honored her as a Distinguished Diocesan Leader in 1990.
- She was asked by the U.S. Department of Education to serve as a member of the National Review Panel for the 1991-92 Blue Ribbon Schools Program.
- In 1993, the board of the Michigan State University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa chose her as one of its Educator of the Year recipients.
- In 2001 she was chosen to be one of forty people from across the country and Australia who became members of an educational think tank convened by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops educational division and the University of San Francisco.
- In 2006, she was honored with the Ivan E. Zylstra Award by the Michigan Association of Non-Public Schools, an award given to an individual member of the association exhibiting outstanding leadership in the non-public school arena in particular.

Supervising the schools in a diocese the size of Lansing was no small task. The diocese covers a 10-county area over more than 6,000 square miles, and in her annals for 2007-2008, Sister Dorita made note of the fact that she worked with forty elementary schools and four high schools, in addition to overseeing seven departments.

After thirty years of diocesan educational administration, twenty-seven of those years in the Diocese of Lansing, Sister Dorita retired in 2009. The occasion was marked by U.S. Rep. Dale Kildee, who honored her with remarks on the floor of the House that were published in the Congressional Record on June 17, 2009. His remarks concluded with this:

Madam Speaker, Sister Dorita Wotiska has spent her life focused on enhancing the Catholic education system and experience. She has used the talents given to her by God to advance educational and spiritual ideals and through her ministry she has imprinted the message of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, into the hearts of countless students. I have valued her input, her dedication and her vision of a vibrant educational system, and I pray this new phase of her life contains only the best.

Sister Dorita spent her retirement years living in Lansing and participating actively with her mission group. She volunteered at her parish, St. Gerard, and stayed connected with some of the educational associations of which she was a part. She also provided assistance and a "listening ear" to the many people among her circle of friends, in the educational community, and in her apartment building, who sought out her counsel. "Now that I am retired, and have 'free time,' many people request my

assistance in a variety of ways. In the spirit of St. Dominic and the gifts God has given me, I try my best to help them,” she wrote in her 2012-13 annals.

In January 2018, in the last stages of a battle with pancreatic cancer, Sister Dorita returned to Adrian, where she died on January 26. Her cremains share the final resting place of her cousin, Sister Mary Adele, in the Congregation cemetery.

She was “quintessentially Dominican,” said Father Jim Hug, SJ, the Congregation’s chaplain, at her memorial Mass, noting her commitment to contemplation and study and the way she shared the Dominican charism through preaching and teaching. “She lived it in front of us.”

Father Hug took note of the Mass’s readings – Ephesians 3:7-9 and Luke 10: 25-37 – as being especially evocative of Sister Dorita’s life. Paul, he said, “acknowledges that being called to preach and to teach is a sacred trust,” he said, while the parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke was “appropriate to convey the revelation that Dorita gave us with her words, her works, her life.”

He observed that the evening before the Mass, family members had recalled her presence with them at a particularly difficult time, and summed up her life as one devoted to the principle “Love God and be neighbor.”

“Dorita really knew and embodied being neighbor,” he said, to family as well as to children, teachers, administrators, and diocesan officials, and was someone who “never said no to anyone in need who came to her.”

In his remarks at the end of the Mass, Bishop Mengeling conveyed the “respect and profound gratitude” of Lansing Bishop Earl Boyea and the diocese as a whole for Sister Dorita’s ministry. “In (the Bishop’s) name, I say, thank you all,” he said.

After recalling the story, told above, of his first encounter with Sister Dorita, Bishop Mengeling described her as a happy, down to earth woman who “told it like it is,” someone who told him off when he needed it, but never in a nasty way. He also remembered her as being like Catherine of Siena in her fire and zeal, and as someone who was a team player, never wishing to advance herself at others’ expense.

“I liked her and I respected her, because of her Dominican charism and because she was ecclesial,” he said. “She loved being the church of Lansing together with all of us.”



Right: First Holy Communion, 1944



Left: Dorothy (Sister Dorita), right, with her sister Rosemarie. Center: Sister Dorita at St. Andrew, Rochester, Michigan, in April 1964



Left: Members of the 2014 Diamond Jubilee August Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Ana Feliz, Susan Mary Parker, Joyce Hibbert, and Patricia McCarty; middle row, from left, Sisters Diane Weifenbach, Barbara Gentry, Dorita Wotiska, Mary Trzasko, Dorothy Dempsey, Beth Ellen Butler, and Phyllis Kreiner; and front row, from left, Sisters Jeanine Boivin, Anele Heiges, Yolanda Pomante, and Ruth Anne Kelly.