Sister Anastasia McNichols, OP
1928-2020

“We gather this morning to remember a good and a kind and a loving woman who reminded us to live life fully even as her full life began to diminish.”

These words came near the beginning of Sister Mary Sue Kennedy’s homily for Sister Anastasia McNichols, a woman who Sister Mary Sue called “a preacher with her life.”

Anastasia Catherine McNichols was born on November 24, 1928, in Chicago to Leo John and Stasia (Ryan) McNichols. She was the couple’s only child. Leo, who worked as a contractor, died in an accident when Anastasia was just nine months old. Although she never knew her father, she said in her 2016 “A Sister’s Story” video that she grew up hearing stories about what a fine man he was. Her grandparents, with whom Stasia and her young daughter went to live, helped raise – and, by her own admission, spoil – the little girl for the first eight years of her life.

“I was very blessed with a very good family,” she said, not only her grandparents but her uncles and aunts and cousins.

Her academic career did not start out especially auspiciously. She was enrolled at Our Lady of Sorrows School and two older neighbor children who were also at that school took her to school with them on her first day and left her at the first grade room. As she stood there looking around her, she came to the conclusion that it was not for her, and left and walked back home.

“I rang the doorbell, my mother answered, and she almost fainted to see me standing there,” she said.

Next came a short stint at St. Patrick’s Academy in Chicago, which only lasted until second grade because she disliked school intensely, and then a stay at Sacred Heart, a boarding school in nearby Kankakee. “There was a prison in Kankakee as well, so my uncles always kidded me about going to Kankakee,” she said in her “Sister’s Story.”

Her high school years were spent at Trinity High School in River Forest, Illinois, where she was educated by the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters. When it came time for college in 1947, the girls at Trinity were expected to attend Rosary College (now Dominican University), just a few blocks away and also operated by the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters, but she and several of her friends learned about Barry College (now University) through a home movie one of the parents took of the college during a trip to Florida and all asked to go there. It was a hardship for Stasia, but she agreed to let her daughter apply.

Anastasia greatly enjoyed her time at Barry but ended up only spending one year there before entering the Congregation in February 1949. When she was received as a novice that August, she asked for and was given the religious name Sister John Leo in honor of her father.

After completing her canonical novitiate year, she was sent to St. Scholastica School in Detroit, where she spent five years (1950-1955) and during that time completed her bachelor’s degree in English from Siena Heights College (University). She went on to earn a Master of Teaching degree in education from Siena Heights in 1963.
Her subsequent teaching ministries took place at St. William, Walled Lake, Michigan (1955-1959); St. Anthony, Fort Lauderdale, Florida (1959-1960); Sacred Heart, Tucson, Arizona (1960-1963); St. Daniel the Prophet, Scottsdale, Arizona (1963-1967); and Queen of Heaven, Albuquerque, New Mexico (1967-1970), where she served as principal and assisted Sister Jeanne O’Laughlin, who supervised the Congregation’s schools in the West, with her work.

A whole new area of ministry opened up to her at that point. Sister Anastasia went to work for the Archdiocese of San Francisco (1970-1973) as a consultant in the area of educational media, followed by service (1973-1974) as the program director for the educational TV center in Menlo Park, California. From there, she went to Phoenix, Arizona, to serve as director of an interfaith media resource center for two years.

At that point, 1976, she was named a Co-Provincial for the Holy Cross Province, based in Oakland, California, serving with Sisters Fran Lombaer and Iva Gregory. She served in that ministry for three years.

Sister Fran remembered those days in her remarks at Sister Anastasia’s wake service: “Iva and I knew we were blessed to be with An during our time together on the Provincial Team. She had a happy disposition, an opening, listening posture. … She had a joyous outlook on life.”

Sister Fran went on to recall how the “co-pros” took to the road right after their term in office began, traveling the province – throughout California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and Colorado – to visit all the houses. “After three weeks and hundreds of miles together in the car, we were still talking to one another and ready for the next three years,” she said.

“I can still hear An cheering as she watched football to relax. I believe the neighbors heard her as well. Her last words to me on March 4 [2020] were, ‘We had some good times, didn’t we?’ She’s now in a place of good times forever. Thanks, An.”

Sister Iva sent in her own memories of those days: “I shall always be grateful that Anastasia was on our provincial team. … She was fun, practical, level-headed, generous, and very caring of all she met and she made everyone feel comfortable in her presence.”

When the team’s term was up in 1979, Sister Anastasia returned to her home state of Illinois, where she spent the rest of her ministerial life. She was a pastoral minister at St. Patrick Parish in St. Charles until being elected Chapter Prioress of the Upper Midwest Chapter in 1985 for a six-year term. Then, after a sabbatical year, she became administrator of the convent at Regina Dominican High School in Wilmette, working with the older Sisters who resided there.

After a year there, she became campus minister at Marist High School in Chicago, and spent 1993 to 1997 there followed by two years in grief ministry for the Parkside Funeral Home in Chicago, two years as a group facilitator for the elderly residents at Peace Memorial Village in Palos Park, and seven years from 2001 to 2008 as a volunteer in the information office at Little Company of Mary Hospital in Evergreen Park.

After leaving that position she continued to live in her home in Oak Lawn, Illinois, for eight more years until becoming a resident of the Dominican Life Center in 2016.

“I have been very happy and blessed as an Adrian Dominican Sister and grateful for the opportunity to minister in some beautiful parts of this country,” she said near the end of her written life story. “… I thank God for the wonderful communities in which I have lived. Because of this, many deep friendships have evolved over the years. For this, I am indeed blessed!”
Sister Anastasia died on March 4, 2020, at the age of ninety-one. She had been an Adrian Dominican Sister for seventy years.

At the memorial Mass held after Sister Anastasia's “green” burial, Sister Mary Sue, who had walked with Sister Anastasia as her spiritual director the last years of her life, reflected in her homily on the long connection the two had shared and how it began. Almost fifty years prior, Sister Mary Sue was teaching in Oakland and Sister Anastasia came to supervise her.

"I had been teaching for nine years and had never had a supervisor. I was petrified of having one in my class while I was teaching. I was told she would be in my room for a half an hour. She arrived ten minutes late so, bold young thing that I was, I told her she only had twenty minutes left. She looked at me, crooked her head a little to the side, smiled and said, “Okay.” And at the end of twenty minutes she quietly left. … From that time on we touched base at various intervals and shared a great deal over the years.

… While these last years were not easy ones as her eyes dimmed, her movement was limited and her hearing had diminished, An still had complete trust and a strong faith in her God whom she loved with all of her heart. She didn't complain and, through it all, kept her great sense of humor which helped keep all in perspective.

Who of us present at last year’s Halloween party can forget An arriving on her motorized wheelchair as a cherub dressed in a white robe, wings, halo and a pink feathery scarf wrapped around her neck? It was an image not soon forgotten and one received with great warmth and laughter.

Today we say farewell to you, An. It is now time to be free of your wheelchair and to enjoy dancing with the angels. We send you forth into the loving arms of our God whom you so loved."
Left: The young Anastasia with her parents

From left: Sister Anastasia’s high school photo, Trinity High School, River Forest, Illinois, Class of 1947. Sister Anastasia (Sister John Leo) in her classroom, 1952
From left: Sister Anastasia checks out the broadcast log in the transmission control room of the Educational Television Center of the Archdiocese of San Francisco. Sister Anastasia spends time in Monument Valley, Arizona, during her 1991 sabbatical.

From left: As Chapter Prioress, Sister Anastasia makes a visit in 1990 to Sister Joan Schroeder at Villa St. John, Downingtown, Pennsylvania. From left, Sisters Jeanne O’Laughlin, Peg Albert, and Anastasia McNichols
From left: Sister Anastasia, left, with Sister Sharon Weber. Sisters Carolyn Nelson, Joan Marie Weithman, and Anastasia McNichols.

From left: Sister Anastasia serves as photographer during Transformations ‘89. Members of the 2009 Diamond Jubilee Crowd are, back row, from left, Sisters Aileen McClain, Geraldine Megel, Mary Elizabeth Crimmins, Grace Flowers, Jean Jeziolkowski, and Madeline Mary Dervin and front row, from left, Sisters Thomas James Burns, Anastasia McNichols, Frances Barfield, Jane Irene Hutton, and Donna Markham (Priress).