Sister Ruth Rabideau, OP
1926-2020

The fertile farm territory of Michigan’s “Thumb” region was for many years also fertile in a very different way for the Adrian Dominican Sisters: as a source of vocations.

One of the many young women to enter the Congregation from the Thumb was Ruth Rabideau, who was born in Unionville, a small town located near Gagetown, which was the site of St. Agatha Parish where the Adrian Dominicans taught. Ruth was known to often refer to St. Agatha’s as “the cathedral in a cornfield.”

Born on October 1, 1926, Ruth was the fifth of six children of Francis and Josephine (LaFave) Rabideau. Her siblings were Vernice, Thomas, Robert, Richard, and Joan. The family lived in a large farmhouse along with Francis’ parents, and at times, especially during the Great Depression, aunts and uncles lived there as well. “This all seemed very natural to me since everyone was accepted and loved as an important member of the family,” she wrote in her life story. “It was my first experience of true community living.”

Rural life gave Ruth and her brothers and sisters plenty of places to play and make new discoveries. Summers were times to visit aunts and uncles who lived in other parts of the state and to go with them to the Detroit Zoo, Greenfield Village, and Detroit Tigers baseball games.

Francis, besides owning the farm, worked in a factory in Flint for some time and then decided he wanted to own his own business. He bought a tavern, which for Ruth “proved to be an active, interesting spot, especially during the World War II years. How I enjoyed playing all the popular songs on the jukebox and making good use of the dance floor!”

She began kindergarten at age four at Frenchtown School, a one-room schoolhouse about two miles from home. Serious illness in the form of appendicitis came her way after just a few weeks, however – in fact, it was feared she might die – and it took two years for her to be well enough to begin first grade.

Her first encounter with the Adrian Dominican Sisters came in the spring of third grade, when she and Richard were excused from their regular classes to attend St. Agatha School in order to prepare for First Communion.

But it was not until her sophomore year at Gagetown High that she began thinking about religious life. She had read an article about Sisters who spent their lives doing good for others, and she was so inspired by the story she decided she wanted to do the same.

With no contact of her own with Sisters, however, she had no idea what to do next. She told her sister Joan, who attended St. Agatha School, about her desire, and Joan passed that wish on to Sisters Rose Norine Gauthier and Leonita Noetzel, who were at the school for teacher supervision. The two told Joan to have her sister come to the school and talk with Sister Margaret Joseph Schweihofner, the superior at St. Agatha. Joan was so excited to bear the good news to her older sister that she ran to the high school at lunchtime to tell her.

Much to Ruth’s surprise, when she spoke with her mother about her decision, Josephine told her that she had always prayed that one of her daughters would become a nun. Sister Ruth wrote in her life
story that both her parents were always supportive of her decision even though it meant that four of the siblings left home within a short period of time, she to go to the convent and her brothers to serve in World War II. Vernice, the oldest, had already left home to marry.

Ruth entered the Congregation after her junior year of high school, completing her secondary education at St. Joseph Academy. She was received as a novice in January 1945 and given the religious name Sister Joan Francis. Her canonical novitiate year was complete in January 1946, and that April she was sent for the remainder of the school year to St. Mary School in Royal Oak, Michigan. It was the beginning of what would be more than thirty years in elementary education.


Although she enjoyed teaching very much, as she was completing her master’s degree in guidance and counseling at Siena Heights in 1979 she began to feel drawn to pastoral ministry. Her interest in divorced Catholics led her to write a paper for one of her classes titled “The Pastoral Counselor and the Divorced Catholic” in which she wrote about her newfound call to minister to this particular population. She went on to serve in that capacity at St. Helen Parish, Vero Beach, Florida (1979-1981) and St. Joseph Parish, Stuart, Florida (1981-1990), before going to Rosarian Academy in West Palm Beach, Florida, to serve as librarian and substitute teacher in 1990-1991. Her final role in active ministry was as a pastoral minister at St. Juliana Parish in West Palm Beach.

Sister Rosemary Asaro, Holy Rosary Chapter Assistant, in her eulogy for Sister Ruth, said this about this time in Sister Ruth’s life: “She loved being with people and assisting them in whatever way she could. Her comment [in her life story] was, ‘I found parish ministry very fulfilling,’ and, according to her many friends, her kind, gentle ways helped her to be successful.”

After retiring in 1996, Sister Ruth continued to live in Florida for several more years, volunteering as a tutor and at St. Mark Parish in Fort Pierce and St. Ann Parish in West Palm Beach before returning to Adrian in 2004 to live at the Dominican Life Center.

She found a new ministry all her own in Adrian. Said Sister Rosemary:

> Here in Adrian one of the things she particularly enjoyed was visiting the Sisters in Maria. She would go from room to room paying special attention to those who had few visitors. She found the “older Sisters” to be an inspiration in their prayerfulness and participation.

> … Ruth, we will miss your lobby ministry and your witty remarks but most of all we will miss your prayerful presence among us.

Sister Ruth died on March 12, 2020, at the Dominican Life Center. She was ninety-three years of age and in her seventy-fifth year as an Adrian Dominican.
One of the remembrances at her wake service came from her longtime friend Sister Janet Stankowski, who recalled being assigned to St. Sabina School in 1972

… and Sister Ruth Rabideau was the first person I met. I said I had to go to the Motherhouse the next morning for vow renewal. Sister Ruth was up and dressed to a T and said, “I am going with you.” I was pleasantly shocked and surprised because Sister Rosemary [Ferguson, the Prioress] didn’t say I should bring anyone with me. … Little did I know at the time that Ruth didn’t need an invite to my vow renewal. She was following the Dominican Spirit of inclusion, hospitality and celebration. She was filled with the SPIRIT and I felt supported and welcomed.

… Ruth responded to gifts and challenges in her life with prayer and thanksgiving. … She would say, “I never thought I would live this long,” followed by “Old age is not for sissies.” She loved birthdays but stopped counting after her eighty-sixth year. As I was getting older she was staying the same, eighty-six.

In her homily for Sister Ruth’s funeral Mass, Sister Kitty Bethea recalled that long-ago day when Sister Ruth read that magazine article on Sisters spending their lives “doing good for others.” Sister Ruth, she said, was

… a teacher, a counselor, a listening ear, and an advocate for persons seeking an annulment. She did become like the Sisters she had read about, who spent their lives doing good for others. Ruth too became one of those who spent their life doing good for others, with great joy, and love and prayer. Yes indeed, Ruth did it, with great love, compassion, joy, and prayer. And yes, we too were touched and blessed by her decision to say yes to the call she heard from God.

From left: Sister Ruth Rabideau with her father at SS. Peter and Paul Church. From left, Sisters Joan Francis Rabideau, Charles Annine Fitzmaurice, Michael Bridget Ward, Marlene Winter, and Anale Baustian at St. Mary in Elgin, Illinois.
From left, Sisters Ruth Rabideau, Mary Ellen Brodeur, and Gloria Kelly in the lobby of Madden Hall, Adrian.

From left, Sisters Peg Donohue, Marcella LaKoske, Ruth Rabideau, and Anne Marie Snyder at the Old Casa, West Palm Beach, Florida.

From left: Sister Ruth sits at her desk at St. Joseph Parish in Stuart, Florida, where she served as pastoral minister. Members of the 1995 Golden Jubilee Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Catherine Riegel, Helen Walsh, Dolores LaVoy, Alma Marie Messing, Marjorie Ann McEntee, Mary J. Beaubien, and Barbara Hengesbach; second row, from left, Sisters Francis Elizabeth McDonnell and Mary Reilly; third row, from left, Sisters Marie Immaculata Hebestreit, Jean Annette Rudolph, Patricia O’Reilly, Barbara Gass, Gloria Kelly, Joan Murphy, June Marie Howard, and Irene LeDuc; fourth row, from left, Sisters Shirley Ruder, Madeleine Sophie McLeod, Anne Gallagher, Mary Therese Golden, and Christine Hoffman; fifth row, from left, Sisters Connie Kelly, Lois Spear, Margaret Mehigan, Nadine Foley, Marilyn Brown, Margaret Flores, and Adrianna Emery; and front row, from left, Sisters Dorothy Jehle, Joellen Reis, Catherine Henry Schmid, Therese Mary Foote, Mary Ellen Brodeur, Ruth Rabideau, Kathryn Lumbrezer, Mary T. Meegan, and Colette Madden.