



Eulogy of Sister Gayle Brabec, BVM (Luellen)

Marian Hall Chapel, June 4, 2018

Good morning and welcome to the celebration of life of our Sister Gayle Brabec.

Gayle Marie Brabec entered this world on Sept. 21, 1928, in Perham, Minn., joining a sister Virginia as the only children of Paul and Lucy Frimml Brabec. The family moved to Iowa in 1943. Gayle completed high school at St. Joseph Academy in Des Moines and attended Webster College in Webster Groves, Mo., for one year before answering the call to religious life.

Gayle entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1947, received the name Luellen upon her reception on March 19, 1948, professed her first vows on March 19, 1950, and lived 70 years as a BVM. She taught primary grades at St. Gertrude in Chicago; Sacred Heart in Boulder, Colo.; and St. Catherine in Kauai, Hawaii. She was principal at St. Joseph in Butte, Mont., and St. John in Des Moines. She was the audiovisual coordinator at St. Thomas the Apostle in West Hempstead and at Our Lady of Loretto in Hempstead, both in New York.

At St. Thomas the Apostle, Gayle met Sister Helen Maher Garvey, BVM, who was the principal at that time. A deep friendship formed between them that changed, but did not end, with Helen's death last August. They had lived together for over 30 years.

Pope Francis wrote, "In the words of [his] beautiful canticle, St. Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. 'Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.'" Gayle passionately loved the earth and was committed its care long before it became a popular cause and Pope Francis penned *Laudato Si'*.

For 30 years, she served in rural life ministries in both Iowa and Kentucky. She began in 1976 by working for the Diocese of Davenport in the Social Action Office. "The farm crisis hadn't started then," Gayle said in an interview. "But there was a concern that farms were getting larger and younger farmers couldn't get started unless they had help from their parents." After seven years as a BVM Regional Representative and in general services at Marian Hall, she returned to rural ministry in the midst of the actual farm crisis. While working for the Diocese of Sioux City in the Rural Life Office, Gayle implemented the Rural Family Development and Support Program, which coordinated services for rural families undergoing the grief and pain of losing their livelihood.

In 1987, she was among 19 individuals arrested for protesting the sale of a family farm. "The experience taught me clearly again," she wrote, "that what I view as a witness for justice is perceived very differently by others . . . [Civil] disobedience raises consciousness of injustice but must be accompanied by consistent, if tedious, political involvement. Scripture does not tell us that Jesus tired of seeking justice for the poor or marginal."

The following year, Gayle became the Director of the Rural Life Office for the Archdiocese of Louisville in Kentucky. She worked endlessly to help people realize that urban and rural interdependence is necessary for our survival. Teaming up with a director of religious education, Gayle started a summer program where area young people raised a variety of crops later harvested to feed the needy. She hoped that by working the farmland

themselves, the youth would gain a greater appreciation of how rural people depended upon farming for their livelihood.

After resigning as director, Gayle used her involvement in the County Literacy Program as an opportunity to combine her love of nature and rural life with her love of teaching to promote organic gardening. Although her “garden” did not take off, she learned an important lesson. “[It] reminded me,” she wrote, “of the importance of flexibility – serving the real needs of the people, not my idea of their needs.”

This awakening resulted in the birth of The Life Center whose mission was to nurture sustainable economic development through continued efforts at literacy, gardening, and other projects that encouraged care of the environment. Gayle started out in a basement office, but eventually purchased property on which she built a small office and a classroom with plenty of room left for a community garden. She established a local program with Heifer International that helped families obtain livestock to generate greater income, part of which was paid forward to help the next family.

Gayle tutored children in the local school system and adults in the community, as well as inmates in the GED program at a regional prison. Whether children or adults, she stressed the importance of meeting individual needs in order to help them develop the necessary math and reading skills to find a good job and to expand their worldview.

Because of her interest in the environment, Gayle researched and then built an addition to The Life Center with walls made of straw bales and covered on the outside by stucco and the inside by plaster. This addition required minimal heating and cooling. Gayle served as director of The Life Center for 17 years before moving to Mount Carmel in 2013.

In the book of Wisdom we read, “Wisdom, the artisan of all, taught me” (Wisdom 7:22). Gayle was a student of Wisdom. If we listen carefully to Wisdom’s attributes in the first reading we will find that so many describe Gayle: unique, agile, never harmful, loving the good, beneficent, kindly, and tranquil. Her two great joys were her relationships and the enjoyment of nature. On the day of her accident, she was where she always wanted to be – outdoors, reveling in and caring for God’s creation.

Even as we miss her, we rejoice for Gayle. Her deep bond with Helen has changed again and they are together forever. We, too, look forward to the day of our reunion with Gayle and all our deceased loved ones. Until then we pray: rest in peace, Farmer Gayle.