



Eulogy of Sister Barbara Cerny, BVM
Marian Hall Chapel, Aug. 23, 2018

Good morning and welcome to the celebration of life of our Sister Barbara Cerny.

Phyllis Catherine Cerny was born in a small Bohemian neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago in 1926. Because she was born on July 5, she often referred to herself as a “leftover firecracker.” Phyllis was the eldest child of John and Catherine Simonich Cerny, with siblings John Noel, Mary Ann, and Lawrence following over the next 15 years. The family lived with her paternal mother who emigrated from Czechoslovakia and only spoke Bohemian. Her maternal grandparents emigrated from Austria and Yugoslavia, married and made their home in Michigan. Summer trips to Michigan to visit them were always a special treat.

Phyllis attended the public grade school across the street from her home. She loved school and all the activities and even was elected mayor of the school’s student council in eighth grade. In seventh grade, she received scholarships to attend classes at the Art Institute of Chicago for three years. Despite the lack of art classes, Phyllis attended St. Mary HS and continued to draw and paint on her own. While at St. Mary’s, she met BVM teachers who greatly influenced her life. “I was attracted to religious life as I witnessed the caring ministry of the sisters,” she wrote. “My sophomore homeroom teacher became a friend and a counselor. Sister Laurella (Margaret Hindelang) guided me in discerning my vocation – always listening carefully and questioning, but leaving the final decision to me.”

Phyllis entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1944, and received the name Barbara upon her reception on March 19, 1945. She professed her first vows on March 19, 1947, and was sent to study at Clarke College and student teach at St. Anthony ES. In an interview, Barbara said, “To my joy, I was assigned to take a private art class from Sister Mary James Ann [Walsh]. What a delight! I got up the courage to ask her if all artists had to ‘be strange.’ She laughed . . . A friend once told me I was ‘the most normal artist’ she knew.”

Barbara ministered in education for 47 of her 73 years as a BVM. She taught elementary students at St. Callistus in Chicago and St. Mary’s in Emmetsburg, Iowa. While at St. Mary’s, she also taught art at Emmetsburg Catholic HS. She returned to Dubuque to teach art and history at Wahlert HS where she remained for eighteen years. During this time, she was, in her words, “privileged . . . to serve as the Diocesan Coordinator of Art for the Catholic Schools and to present art workshops for the elementary teachers.” Every mission held a special memory for Barbara. At St. Callistus, it was the warm Italian families and the festival where sisters were charged with the making the garlicky meatballs. Afterward, the Superior walked through the whole house with incense to improve the smell! In Emmetsburg, it was the peacefulness of the countryside and the country students teaching her about farm animals while she was teaching them about genetics. At Wahlert, it was her dream-come-true art room.

From 1977 until 1982, Barbara served as a Regional Representative for Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin and as the layout editor for *Salt* magazine. In June of 1981, Barbara and Sister Eloise Thomas, along with 22 other North Americans, embarked on a study tour of Mexico, Cuba, and several Central American countries. Barbara sketched contour drawings of leaders in the fight for social justice while listening to their presentations on the political situations in their respective countries. Her pictorial journal was printed in both *Salt* and a Detroit newspaper.

After completing her term as Regional, Barbara moved to San Antonio, Texas, where she studied Spanish at the Mexican American Cultural Center and took classes in pastoral theology to prepare for a ministry with Hispanics. She returned to Chicago to be near her elderly mother and taught elementary students at St. Margaret Mary, located in a Hispanic neighborhood. However, after her mother's death, her love for the western landscape beckoned her to California where she taught art at Our Lady of Lourdes in Tujunga.

After leaving full-time teaching, Barbara volunteered as a teacher aide at St. Bernard in Los Angeles. She later moved to Albuquerque, N.M., with the intent to *completely* retire. When not ministering, Barbara enjoyed trips to Spain, Hungary, Austria and the Czech Republic, reading, especially mysteries, corresponding, jigsaw puzzles and cheering on the Notre Dame Football team, if they were winning.

However, the paintbrush and easel were always calling her. "Since childhood, the visual arts have always been an essential part of my ministerial life," she wrote. "Now that I am retired from active ministry, one of my joys is to have, at last, time in my life to do watercolor paintings." Still, she did find time to serve as a Eucharistic minister at Lovelace Hospital and as a retreat team member at the Dominican Center for Renewal where her teaching, storytelling, and art captivated the retreatants.

No matter the school, Barbara's students greatly appreciated her good nature, humor, and her artistic talent. Many former students and colleagues visited her through the years, some as far back as her first mission. "Sister Barbara has the ability to see the potential in her students, and she knows how to nourish that potential," commented a former student. "Everyone excelled in her classroom because she let us be ourselves."

As Jesus gave sight to the blind Bartimaeus, Barbara, too, helped others to see. Yes, her students to see their potential, but also viewers of her art to see "the importance of our ordinary, everyday world. . . To reach inward and outward at once . . . [where] soul and body, spirit and world find their true whole and holy form" ("Seasonings, *SALT*, Summer 2007).

Barbara, you lived joyfully and gratefully in the beauty of God's creation. Your artistic presence at Mount Carmel is evident in over 40 works of art currently on display, along with your design for the sanctuary in the Motherhouse Chapel. Your art truly is your gift to us. In deep love and gratitude, we rejoice that you now enjoy the fullness of eternal beauty and life in God's presence.