



Eulogy of Sister Otilie Sana, BVM
Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, June 1, 2022

Good morning. It is good to be together to celebrate the life of our Sister Otilie Sana.

Otilie Frances Sana was born July 26, 1935, in Chicago, the first child of Vaclav “James” and Otilie (Barczuk) Sana. Otilie was very proud of her Czech heritage. Her mother was born in Chicago, but the family returned to their Czechoslovakian homeland a few years later. Her mother returned to Chicago at age 18. Her father was born in Czechoslovakia. He and his family immigrated to Chicago when he was an adult. He worked as a compositor at the Czech newspaper translating articles from the *Chicago Daily News* into Czech. Since he worked nights, he slept during the day. Occasionally, he would become irate at the daytime noise outside of the home. “My mother was a patient, wonderful woman,” commented Otilie. “I remember her going around closing windows.” While still in Chicago, her first brother, Vaclav, was born, but tragically died of convulsions in 1937.

The Sana family moved to Cicero, Ill., in 1939. Otilie’s maternal grandmother came to live with them after she escaped Czechoslovakia, leaving everything behind, shortly before the Germans closed the borders. The family’s small apartment soon was filled with the sounds of Otilie’s brothers John and Joseph. To help make ends meet, Otilie’s mother cleaned houses. Her father called his mother-in-law a saint for being a wonderful help with the children yet never interfering in family matters.

Otilie quickly became acquainted with the BVMs in Cicero since the Sanas lived across the street from the convent. “Groups of us helped the sisters get the rooms ready, pass books and decorate. The sisters always seemed happy and occasionally rewarded us with candy,” she recalled. When Otilie entered Mary Queen of Heaven grade school, she had only been speaking English for one year. “I am sincerely grateful for the language instructions the sisters gave me, while at the same time encouraging me in the study of my native language and culture.”

When Otilie was seven, she became very ill with fevers and developed a stiff arm. Her parents spared no expense on weeks of physical therapy without significant improvement. Surgery helped to restore movement to her fingers, but not to her wrist. Years later, a doctor suggested that Otilie’s earlier illness may have been undetected polio.

Otilie’s religious vocation “grew slowly” until high school. “One day a sister asked me quite simply, ‘Did you ever think of being a BVM?’ That question upset my plans and started me on the way to becoming a BVM, because it, quite suddenly, seemed exactly what God wanted.” Otilie graduated from St. Mary High School in June 1954 and entered the congregation on Sept. 8, 1954. She was received on March 19, 1955, professed first vows on March 19, 1957, and lived 67 years as a BVM.

Otilie was part of the first group sent to the Scholasticate in Chicago. She earned a bachelor’s degree in biology from Mundelein College. She later completed a master’s degree in elementary education at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Ill.

Otilie ministered as an elementary teacher for 35 years. She was missioned at Holy Family in Mason City, Iowa; St. Paul in Burlington, Iowa; St. Thomas the Apostle in West Hempstead, N. Y.; and St. Vincent, Annunciation, Holy Name, Our Lady of the Angels, St. Genevieve, and St. Josaphat, all in Chicago. "Children are my favorite people," wrote Otilie. "I have found that I like to work with poor children, some of whose parents have come quite recently to this country. I feel I must use all my creativity, talents, and energies to bring the Good News of Christ to them and to their families."

Through a renewal grant in the mid-1980's, Otilie attended the Loyola University Institute of Pastoral Studies in Chicago and ministered with mentally challenged adults at Misericordia. She traveled to the Deep South to volunteer in school and prison ministries and to observe differences in racial relationships as compared to her northern experiences. She had a taste of rural ministry and its special problems during time spent in Alabama and in Montana. "My [years] of religious life . . . have challenged me to go to places I wouldn't have wanted to go and to do things I'd never dreamed of doing," she shared. "The push behind these changes has been the Lord who many times gently called, but could also get very insistent." Through all, Otilie trusted God knowing, as St. Paul wrote, that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." (Romans 8: 28).

After leaving the traditional classroom, Otilie worked for the Westside Employment Education Center (WEEC) in Chicago providing GED preparation. She also ministered at the Holy Family Parish food pantry, visited the elderly, and brought Communion to the homebound. This was her favorite mission. "The families were more 'my kind of people' – hardworking people who appreciated and supported education. I have always been comfortable teaching poorer people."

In her Five Wishes, Otilie wrote, "I had a blessed life growing up loved, as a happy religious, [a] beloved of God, a friend to others, and a sometime 'bossy' sister to my brothers John and Joe."

In a reflection for Otilie's Golden Jubilee, Sister Marion Murphy said, "She was blessed with parents who showered her and her brothers with love. In this supportive family environment, she found that being a person of faith, being hospitable, caring for others were important values. . . Through her ministry as an educator, she found she could bring hope and joy and a sense of dignity to others. And she did so by using her gifts and talents to bring out the best in each student she encountered . . . She found that opening doors for some and helping others open doors for themselves would be a vital part of her ministry . . . She found that doors that are open wide means that we go out those doors to seek and to find. I believe that she [carried] on more ministry in the alley next to our home than anyone I know! She [extended] God's mercy – God's love – to so many who [passed] through there . . . And it [was] all done in her quiet way."

We rejoice for and with Otilie confident that, as she opened doors for others, Jesus opened the doors of heaven for her with the greeting, "Well done, good and faithful servant." (Matthew 25:21).