



SISTER MARTHA WILKE, OLVM

Sister Martha slipped into the loving embrace of God at 7:30 p.m. on February 11, 2014 at Victory Noll. The sisters had been going in and praying with her throughout the day.

Sister Martha was born in St. Rose, Illinois on July 21, 1921, the eldest child of Stephen Edward and Mary Agnes (Tebbe) Wilke. She was baptized Martha Catherine on July 22, 1921, at St. Rose Parish in St. Rose Illinois.

Sister Martha was preceded in death by her parents and her two brothers, Raymond and Andrew Wilke. She was also preceded in death by two of her five sisters, Sister Henrietta Wilke, OLVM, and Sister Priscilla Wilke, OLVM, with whom she shared community life as well as family life. She is survived by her three youngest sisters; Mary Ann Hempen and Bertha Klumke of Breese, Illinois, and Irma Korte of Highland, Illinois.

Sister Martha entered the Congregation of Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters on October 28, 1939, and made first vows on August 5, 1942. Her first mission was Indiana Harbor, Indiana. She then moved to Brighton, Colorado, where she helped to open the Brighton mission. She also served in El Paso, Texas; Brawley, California; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Durant, Oklahoma; Reed City, Michigan; and Kendallville, Indiana. In 1967, she was missioned in Mathis, Texas. For the next 33 years she lived in Texas, most of which was in west Texas in the dioceses of San Angelo and Lubbock. She retired in 2000 to Victory Noll where she started a ministry of writing a monthly letter to prisoners and also to be a pastoral care volunteer.

Sister Martha's first mission at Indiana Harbor, Indiana, introduced her to extreme poverty. She referred to it as a culture shock. It was the beginning of her realization of the depth of her calling to come and follow me, even to places where you will be challenged. It was these challenges that gave Sister Martha her greatest joy.

Sister Martha was first and foremost a catechist and used her gifts and talents to bring the gospel to those with whom she came in contact, whether they were children being taught in make shift classrooms, adults who were learning to be catechists, or prisoners needing encouragement. She never lost her desire to share her faith, to be inspired by the beauty around her or to bring joy and hope to a needy world.

As a young student in grade school, Sister Martha decided she wanted to be a missionary in a foreign country like China. Although she entered a religious community that did not have foreign missions, she thought she might get her chance and inquired about going to Bolivia. Bolivia was the mission the congregation opened at the request of the Holy See after the Second Vatican Council. So in the summer of 1967 she asked the Superior General if she could go to Bolivia in South America. The answer was "no." So she asked to go to Texas, which she considered to be a substitute for Bolivia. She was granted this request and remained there until her retirement.

Sister Martha spent many years in a “circuit rider” ministry, going to a variety of mission parishes to teach as she did in Colorado, and also in New Mexico. In New Mexico, she wrote about the privilege of teaching in Watrus, Ocate, Wagon Mound, and Anton Chico — the places our first pioneer sisters ministered. She would continue this “circuit rider” ministry even after 1971 when she started catechist training for the Diocese of San Angelo. She traveled from parish to parish training catechists, helping to organize religious education programs, and supporting the volunteers given the task of coordinating programs. In the 11 years of this ministry, she had three station wagons filled with books. Books were sold to raise funds or given to the poorer parishes. Tape recorders and filmstrip projectors were provided to help in teaching and all other needed supplies were procured. She traveled 10,000 miles per year, visiting 55 parishes and missions once a year. She taught in churches or halls and stayed with families or in sacristies. It was the ministry that she truly loved and fulfilled her missionary calling. In her own words, “This ministry was the most rewarding, because this was like a dream come true.”

In 1982, she moved to Lubbock, leaving her ministry in the Diocese of San Angelo with mixed feelings. She became the director of religious education for St. Patrick's parish, a ministry that she continued for the next 18 years until she retired to Victory Noll. In her retirement she didn't give up her “circuit rider” ministry. She just changed vehicles, going from a station wagon to the United States postal service. She began to write to prisoners a monthly letter of encouragement, spirituality and a little humor. She continued this ministry until 2013 when she could no longer keep up with the correspondence. In her last letter she wrote, “You will still be in my heart and I will pray for you every day.”

Two of her sisters, Irma and Bertha, and Irma's son Tim, were able to join the community for Sister Martha's wake on Monday February 17, 2014, and also her funeral on February 18, 2014. Father Dale Bauman was the celebrant for the Eucharistic Liturgy.

Sister Martha always asked herself, “Did I accomplish what I was called to do?” In faith she would continue, “As always, I leave what I do in God's hands.”

We commend you into God's hands now, knowing that you served his people with love and devotion, may you now enjoy God's loving and eternal embrace.

In peace and gratitude,



Sister Ginger Downey, O.L.V.M.

