



“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.”

– Luke 1:38

SISTER M. BERNITA HESSE, SSND

December 7, 1917

July 20, 1942

December 16, 2010



Just nine days after her 93rd birthday, our beloved Sister M. Bernita Hesse died peacefully at 8:00 a.m. on Thursday, December 16, 2010 at Good Counsel Provincial House, Mankato. Sister Jana Roberts and her classmate, Sister M. Eva Manney, were with her when she died. Her sister, Mary Ann Joos, and niece, Carol Hesse, had also been daily visitors for the past week. Over these last weeks, Sister Bernita had become weaker and longed for the day when she could be united with her God.

The funeral Mass for Sister Bernita, with Father Don Rauscher, SJ, as presider, will be Monday, December 20, at 10:30 a.m., in Good Counsel Chapel, Mankato, followed by burial in our cemetery. The vigil service will be at 6:30 p.m. on December 19. Loving sympathy to her sister, Mary Ann Joos, her sisters-in-law, Philomena and Muriel Hesse, her nieces and nephews and their families, her former students and colleagues, and her sisters in community, the School Sisters of Notre Dame. She was preceded in death by her parents, Bernard and Anna (Meuleners) Hesse, her brothers Rev. Harold, Louis, Bernard, Arthur and George; and sisters, Sister M. Florence Hesse, SSND, Lucille Davison, Margaret Steinhagen and Wilhelmina Hesse.

Sister Bernita, the “eighth of eleven babies to occupy the family cradle,” was born on the eve of the Immaculate Conception, December 7, 1917, in Cologne, Minnesota, and baptized Helen Beatrice a few days later at St. Bernard Church in Cologne. Her father owned the local grocery store, and her mother had experience as a milliner.

At the age of six, Helen started school at St. Bernard Catholic School with School Sisters of Notre Dame as her teachers. In her autobiography she wrote that her First Communion Day was the happiest day of her life. She graduated from eighth grade in 1932, the same year that the two-year high school was discontinued in Cologne, much to her parents’ great sorrow. After prayer and thought, her father, a former teacher, allowed Helen to attend Central Public High School in Norwood. Sister Bernita wrote about this experience: “I spent my four years of high school at Central High, and graduated May 28, 1936, thinking my school days were over forever. The good Lord had planned differently. I’ve always traced my call to the religious life to a 40 Hours Devotion at St. Bernard Church after I had graduated.” She had earlier felt the call to be a sister when her older sister, Dorothy (Sister M. Florence), left home to join the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Helen did not know how to break the news to her parents because she felt she was needed at home and in the store. “I kept my secret for three years and then felt as if I couldn’t keep it any longer.”

Her brother Harold was ordained a priest on June 4, 1938, an extremely happy occasion for the entire family. Two days later, Helen told him of her plans and how she couldn’t seem to let her parents know. “He told me not to worry and said that he would fix it all up. Mother and Dad were both very happy about it and gave their consent.” She began to look forward to her entrance into the candidature later that summer. However her mother became seriously ill and was hospitalized, and Helen said she would stay home another year.

Helen finally entered the candidature on August 27, 1939. One month later, her mother was again hospitalized. Helen was torn between going home to help and wanting to stay in the candidature; her dilemma was solved when her mother

recovered in about a month's time, and Helen was able to stay at Good Counsel. As a second year candidate, she taught 30 first and second graders at Mater Dolorosa in Madelia, Minnesota. She became Novice Mary Bernita on July 18, 1941, and professed first vows on July 20, 1942.

Sister Bernita's first mission was St. Mary, New England, North Dakota, where she taught third and fourth grades. She commented, "I always thought I would have liked to work with orphans and this was the next best thing, for here we had a boarding school. Here I spent two happy years." (1942-44) Even as a beginning teacher, Sister Bernita was known for showing special concern and compassion for students who struggled academically and in other ways. She started the 1944 school year in New England, but in November received word that she was to go to Immaculate Conception, Lonsdale, Minnesota, as third and fourth grade teacher. She finished the school year there, and then was missioned to St. Michael, Madison, as first and second grade teacher. This was the beginning of her 32 years as a primary teacher in several more Minnesota schools: SS. Cyril and Methodius, Minneapolis (1947-49); St. Mary, New Trier (1949-54 and 1968-70); St. Mark, Shakopee (1954-61); John Ireland, St. Peter (1961-68); St. Peter, Hokah (1970-76); Silver Lake Catholic School (1976-81); and St. Michael, Morgan (1981-89). In addition to teaching, she also took care of the sacristy in many of these parishes. She earned her B.A. in education from Mount Mary College in 1955.

During the summers from 1956 through 1983, Sister Bernita exchanged her teacher's black habit for the white one of a health-care worker. She volunteered in the Infirmary, providing care for sisters, and willingly performed any of the other tasks of the health-care staff in those days, including cleaning sisters' habits and waxing and sealing the floors. With her love of fun and laughter, she brought a special spirit.

Sister Bernita came to Good Counsel in 1989, giving community service in a variety of ways. She took care of the St. Joseph Hall dining room for several years, did laundry and ironing for health care, and helped with mending and patching. A special sewing project involved cutting and hemming patches for use in quilts. The gradual diminishing of her eyesight forced her to give this up in her later years. An avid reader, she enjoyed it immensely when others read to her after she was no longer able to read.

The Hesse family was musical. Many of Sister Bernita's brothers and sisters played instruments. She joined in the singing at the family music-making sessions. She also loved dancing, and enjoyed dancing with family members and guests at various celebrations. Sister Bernita had a special love for her family, and looked forward to home visits and the times when her family visited at Good Counsel. Affectionate, with a twinkle in her eye, she also counted many sisters as good friends.

In the early years of her retirement, she was known as the "cookie sister," who daily walked around the provincial house with a cookie tin, offering cookies to both sisters and staff. There was always a candy dish in her room, where her visitors could satisfy their sweet tooth.

In many ways, Sister Bernita exemplified simplicity of life. She asked for the Scripture readings of the day for her funeral liturgy – and most fittingly, the Gospel for December 20 concludes with "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord," – Sister Bernita's prayerful attitude throughout her 93 years of life. May she now dance an eternal dance with Jesus, her Lord and Savior.