



“God is faithful.”

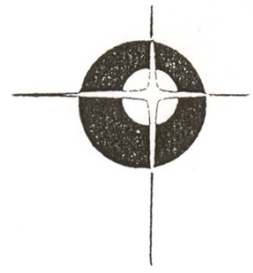
– 1 Corinthians 1:9

SISTER M. CELINE KOKTAN, SSND

March 28, 1912

August 9, 1933

November 25, 2010



Our beloved Sister M. Celine Koktan, 98, died peacefully at 2:40 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day, Thursday, November 25, 2010, in Immanuel-St. Joseph Hospital in Mankato. Sister Jana Roberts was with her when she died, and others had visited her shortly before she died. She had fallen earlier in the month, and never recovered.

The funeral Mass for Sister Celine, with Father Andrew Olsem as presider, will be on Wednesday, December 1, at 10:30 a.m., in Good Counsel Chapel, Mankato, followed by burial in our cemetery. The vigil service will be at 7:00 p.m. on November 30. Loving sympathy to her brother Bernard, 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, John and Anne (Portele) Koktan, her sisters Sisters M. DeLourdes (Helen) and M. Bernard Ann (Martha) Koktan, and her brother John.

Sister Celine, the oldest of five children, was born March 28, 1912, on a farm about three miles south of Silver Lake, Minnesota, and baptized Adeline a few weeks later at St. Joseph Church. At a young age, she already loved nature (no doubt a precursor to her biology-teaching days), and enjoyed roaming through the meadows collecting wild flowers. One morning, accompanied by the family dog, she wandered too far from home and was missed by her parents. The dog's barking enabled Adeline's father to find her.

Adeline attended a country school close to her home and received religious instructions from her parents. At the age of eight, she began taking piano lessons from the sisters stationed at the neighboring parish. This was her first contact with School Sisters of Notre Dame. When she was ten, she joined catechetical classes taught by her pastor in preparation for her First Solemn Communion. She completed her education in the country school and attended Silver Lake High School.

One summer during her high school years, her reverend uncle visited the family. When talking with her, he said, “Adeline, you are going to be a sister someday.” She found the words startling, because the thought had never entered her mind. She reflected about that time, “Somehow these words always remained. From that time on, the word ‘Sister’ always had some special attraction about it. No one knew of this except my uncle and myself.” By the time of her graduation in 1930, she did have a strong desire to be a sister.

Adeline had not decided which order of sisters to join and was considering the Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Paul. She visited their convent but did not feel that it was the place for her. She described her SSND visit this way: “Two days later I had the opportunity of attending the reception ceremonies at Good Counsel. These ceremonies were so thrilling and made an almost indelible impression upon me. Here it was that I made my final decision and asked for admittance. I cannot express the joy that filled my heart when I was told that I could return in August.” Her parents supported her decision, and she prepared for entrance.

She entered on August 27, 1930, and during her first weeks faced the challenge of severe homesickness. That challenge was soon overcome, and she adjusted to the life of an SSND candidate. The next August, she did practice teaching with first graders at St. Francis de Sales in St. Paul – her first experience in a Catholic school classroom. This increased her desire to be a School Sister of Notre Dame. She was received into the novitiate in 1932 and given the name Sister M. Celine. On August 9, 1933, she professed first vows.

Sister Celine's first two teaching assignments reflected her Bohemian heritage. From 1933 to 1937, she taught first and second grades at Immaculate Conception, Lonsdale. She wrote, “It was a pleasure to work with these little people, especially in the beginning of the school

year when the majority of the first grade could not speak a word of English.” At Lonsdale, she also was “interpreter” for her classmate, Sister Florence Hesse, who had no knowledge of the Bohemian language. Sister Celine commented on this, “Evidently, I must have been successful in this line, because in four years, Obedience called the two of us to another Bohemian mission out in the western prairies of New Hradec, North Dakota.” Sister Celine stayed there for eleven years, eventually becoming both superior and school principal. She earned her BA from Loras College (1943), an MA from Catholic University (1952) and a Catechetical Diploma from Notre Dame Institute, Middleburg, VA (1977). She also received three National Science Foundation grants and three Social Science grants.

In 1948, Sister Celine was transferred to Strasburg, North Dakota, just as the anti-garb law took effect. In North Dakota during the 1930s and 40s, some Catholic schools were operated as public schools. Sisters still staffed the schools, with some restrictions on public prayer and teaching of religion. In 1948, the Committee for Separation of Church and State succeeded in passing an "anti-garb" initiative, which targeted the Sisters who taught in these public schools, saying that the wearing of the religious habit had a religious influence on students. Sister Celine was interviewed by a Loras College publication about her life during this time. She commented, “We sisters when rising in the morning dress in our secular garb - a dull suit - because time does not permit a change of clothes before school hours. In compliance with the law, we wear this civilian dress throughout the teaching hours, but immediately upon dismissal return to our convent to put on the religious habit that is sacred to every sister.” Later in the article, she commented, “One does not fully realize what the religious habit means until it is taken away.”

Sister Celine taught at Notre Dame High School, Cresco, Iowa, during the 1954-55 school year, and at St. Felix, Wabasha, during the 1955-56 school year. In 1956, she became the assistant aspirant director at Good Counsel Academy, where she also taught biology and religion. She worked primarily with freshmen and sophomores in the aspiranture, introducing them to SSND life. She continued in this position until 1964. Sister Celine spent the next six years at St. Mary’s in New England, North Dakota, and the 1970-71 school year again at Notre Dame High School in Cresco.

In 1971, Sister Celine began an extended stay at St. Agnes High School in St. Paul. For many years she taught biology, religion and English. In the mid-90s she became the school librarian. When she retired at the age of 90 in 2002, she was the sole SSND at the school, and said that this may have postponed her retirement. In 1999, she was featured in the *International Who’s Who of Professionals*: “Dedicated in shaping young minds for more than 65 years, Sister Celine has served as a primary teacher for 15 years and secondary teacher, principal, counselor, and librarian for 50 years. . . . Sister Celine possesses an extensive educational background and a lifetime of experience in the educational system.” When she celebrated her 90th birthday, two St. Agnes juniors composed a poem that read in part: “Your smiling face can be found in the library. In you we find the virtues of Mary. Thank you for your many years of devotion to Christ. The love that you give us cannot be priced.” After her retirement in December 2002, she was featured in an article in the *Pioneer Press* which stated, “She was most gratified to hear students talk of pursuing careers in biology and medicine after taking courses from her.” She also received a letter from Mayor Randy Kelly, thanking her for her 30 plus years of service to St. Agnes. In 2006, she became the first person to receive the St. Agnes President’s Award for Extraordinary Service.

Her commitment to education did not stop with her retirement. She used her library skills in the Good Counsel Learning Center until 2008. When she celebrated her 75th Jubilee in 2008, she wrote, “No words can truly express my greatest appreciation of the many wonderful opportunities I experienced within these 75 years as an SSND teacher.”

How fitting that Sister Celine should die on Thanksgiving, she who was always so gracious and appreciative for God’s faithfulness in her life. May she now experience everlasting joy!