



**“I have loved you with an everlasting love;
I have called you and you are mine.”**

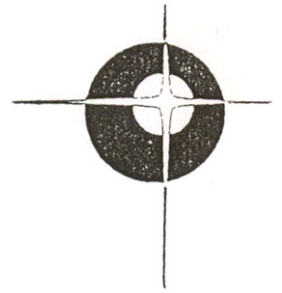
– Jer. 31:3; Is 43:1

SISTER M. LEAH STAEBELL, SSND

March 20, 1914

July 22, 1940

June 2, 2011



Our beloved Sister M. Leah Staebell, 97, died peacefully at 9:10 p.m. on Thursday, June 2, 2011, at Good Counsel Provincial House, Mankato. Although she was 97 years old, her health had been relatively good, and her death was rather sudden. Just the day before, she had enthusiastically enjoyed a provincial house ice cream treat.

The funeral Mass for Sister Leah, with Father Peter Nosbush as presider, will be 10:30 a.m., Tuesday, June 7, in Good Counsel Chapel, followed by cremation. Burial in our cemetery will take place at a later date. The vigil service will be at 7:00 p.m. on June 6. Loving sympathy to her brother Mike and his wife, Mary Jane, her sister-in-law, Clare, 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, Michael and Mary (Nuebel) Staebell, five brothers, William, Joseph, Francis, Paul, and Fr. Vincent, S.V.D., and her sisters, Margaret Corkery, Christine Nemmers, Marie Ehr, Elizabeth Staebell, and Dorothy Meadows.

Sister Leah, the ninth of twelve children and the sixth girl, was born near Dunkerton, in northeastern Iowa. Two days later she was baptized Rita Josephine at St. Francis Church, Barclay, Iowa. At the age of five, she entered first grade at Dunkerton Public School. In her autobiography, she wrote briefly about her First Communion, “During June of 1920, Father Naebbers prepared me for the greatest day in any Catholic child’s life.”

Sister Leah commented extensively on her intermediate grade education, “Although we had a very beautiful, modern consolidated public school, my parents were saddened at the lack of Catholic education. Since my oldest sister lived right next door to Immaculate Conception Catholic School in Fairbank, and she had no family as yet of her own to care for, she agreed to have me stay with her and attend school there. . . . During these three years I learned to love the Presentation Sisters and secretly planned to become a Sister just like Sister Mary Leo, who was my music teacher.” Rita returned to Dunkerton for grades seven and eight, as well as high school, graduating in 1932.

After graduation, Rita attended Mount Mercy Junior College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and earned a teaching degree after two years. She stayed home one year, and then taught for two years in a country school in Independence, Iowa. She felt that her education seemed meager for someone who intended to make teaching her career, so she enrolled at Iowa State Teachers’ College, also in Cedar Rapids. While there, her desire to become a religious grew stronger. She wrote in her autobiography, “Following the advice of my cousin, Sister Mary Austin (Staebell), I visited Good

Counsel before making any decision, and after this visit, plans were made for my entrance on August 27, 1937.”

As a second year candidate, Rita taught thirty primary-grade children at St. Mathias in Hampton, Minnesota. On July 21, 1939, she was received into the novitiate and given the name Sister M. Leah. She wrote at that time, “It had never occurred to me that the religious life could be quite so beautiful.” After first profession in 1940, Sister Leah’s first teaching assignment was primary grades at St. Pius School, St. Pius, North Dakota. She commented, “Upon receiving my obedience in 1940, my sentiments were those of great joy mingled with a bit of trepidation at the thought of a missionary life out on the prairie.” She taught grades three and four, and, for the first year, played the organ occasionally for church services. Her organ workload increased the next two years, as she described, “Father decided to have daily Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. This necessitated a great deal of practice on the organ.” She spent summers at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, working toward her degree in education.

In 1943, Sister Leah became one of eight sisters who were the first SSNDs to teach at St. Benedict School in Strasburg, North Dakota. Her brother Vincent was ordained an S.V.D. priest in the summer of 1944, and she was able to attend his first Mass, a great joy for her. Sister Leah remained in Strasburg until 1948. Her primary and intermediate grade teaching ministry continued in the following schools: St. Clara, Clara City (1948-51); Blessed Sacrament, Waterloo (1951-54); Assumption, St. Paul (1954-57); SS. Peter & Paul, Blue Earth (1957-60); St. Mary, Shakopee (1960-68); SS. Peter & Paul, Mankato (1968-70); Crucifixion, LaCrescent (1970-75); St. Mary, New England, North Dakota (1975-79); St. Agnes, St. Paul (1979-1985); St. John, Vermillion (1985-87) and St. Casimir, Wells (1987-88). In 1988, she came to Good Counsel, where she taught in the Learning Center until 1993. She participated in the Rome Renewal program in 1985, which included travel in Italy and Germany.

In 1993, Sister Leah suffered a life-altering stroke that, among other complications, resulted in partial paralysis. She moved permanently into health care, but remained active, participating in many of the opportunities that were offered. Very congenial and gracious, she loved company and liked being where people were gathered. The nursing staff loved her in return. Family, too, was very important to her, and she to them.

She was known for her love of dance and music. Her brother Mike, with the help of other family members, recorded a CD of several old, “sing-along” style songs. Sister Leah and Sister Francis Clare Schares often sang along with Mike as they listened to the CD.

Sister Leah’s funeral planning sheet reflected her graciousness, as she concluded, “Thank you! I promise to remember you when I get to heaven. God love and bless you for doing this work.”

May Sister Leah, whose 97 years of life and 71 years of religious life were filled with God’s everlasting love, now live her eternal response to God’s call, knowing that she is God’s forever.

Sister Mary Kay Ash