



“I have loved you with an everlasting love.”

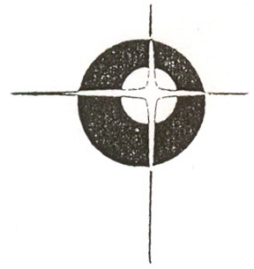
– Jeremiah 31:3

SISTER MARIA (MARIE JOSEPH) EXNER, SSND

January 13, 1926

July 21, 1946

November 18, 2010



Our beloved Sister Maria Exner, 84, died at 10:00 p.m. on Thursday, November 18, 2010, in a peaceful ending to her long journey home. Her frequent prayer “to be whole again” is now answered. Sister Janice Koziolk, her community member for many years, was present at her death, as were Sisters Jana Roberts, Irene Komor and Mary Bertrand.

The funeral Mass for Sister Maria, with Father Ted Hottinger, SJ, as presider, will be on Tuesday, November 23, 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 22. Loving sympathy to her sisters, Helen (Bob) Olson and Theresa Exner, her sisters-in-law Ceil and Alice, 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, Joseph and Marie (Zeiss) Exner, brothers John, Joseph and Bernard, and sisters Bernadette Exner and Rita Heaton.

Sister Maria, the oldest of eight children, was born January 13, 1926, in St. Paul and given the name Maria Theresa at her baptism at St. Agnes Church a few weeks later. Her parents were Austrian immigrants who met each other in St. Paul. When Maria was about four, the family moved to an area closer to St. Francis de Sales Parish, and it was there that she started school. She wrote, “Sister had quite a time with me, for I spoke no English.”

Sister Maria’s account of her early vocation was very brief: “In May of 1933, I received my First Holy Communion. It was at this time that I manifested the desire to become a religious. I could hardly wait until I could go to Mankato, Minnesota.”

After eighth grade, Maria entered the aspiranture in Mankato, but toward the end of her freshman year, her mother became seriously ill, and was completely paralyzed on her left side. Specialists were consulted but the result was always the same – nothing could be done for her. In desperation, Maria’s father decided to take her mother to Rochester. Sister Maria continued the story, “Here, too, the doctors gave no hope for her recovery, but said they would operate and take a chance – ‘one in a thousand!’ It was at this time that I was called home to be both father and mother to my seven younger brothers and sisters.” Following the operation, “beyond all expectations and to the amazement of the doctors,” her mother was cured, and Maria was able to return to the aspiranture the next fall. She completed her sophomore and junior years there.

Because of poor health, Maria was advised to remain home for her senior year. She spent her senior year at St. Joseph’s Academy in St. Paul, where her teachers were Sisters of St. Joseph. She was undecided about her vocation when she graduated in June 1943, “although the stricter enclosure of the School Sisters of Notre Dame appealed to me more than ever.”

The mystery of God’s call unfolded during the next several months. Maria applied for entrance into the Order of St. Benedict that summer and wrote, “Why I took the next step, I cannot explain, save that it was the design of God that it should be so.” She entered the Benedictine aspiranture in September but realized almost immediately that it wasn’t God’s will for her to be there. However, she felt that it was only fair that she give it a try. In December, when she became a Benedictine postulant, she asked Our Lady of Good Counsel’s guidance, and shortly thereafter, received permission to enter the candidature of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. On January 5, 1944, she arrived at Good Counsel.

The following September, she taught third and fourth grades at New Trier, and remarked, "Being a city-bred child, I found country life delightful and inspiring." On July 20, 1945, she was received into the Novitiate, and given the name Sister Marie Joseph after both her mother and father. (She later returned to her baptismal name, Maria.) She professed first vows on July 21, 1946, and began a 30-year middle and upper grade teaching ministry in several Minnesota Catholic Schools: St. Dominic, Northfield (1946-47); Sacred Heart, St. Paul (1947-52 and 1968-74); Holy Rosary, North Mankato (1952-53); SS. Peter & Paul, Mankato (1953-57); John Ireland, St. Peter (1957-63); All Saints, Madison Lake, where she was also principal (1963-66); St. Stanislaus, Winona (1966-68); and St. Matthew, St. Paul (1974-75). During this time, she earned her BA in English from Mount Mary College and an MA in Sacred Doctrine from St. Mary College, Notre Dame, Indiana.

In the 1975-76 school year, she took classes at St. Joseph Hospital in St. Paul and later worked in parish ministry in the state of Washington. She returned to Minnesota in the summer of 1976, hoping to resume work here. At a session of a Eucharistic Congress-themed mini workshop, Sister Maria was inspired by the need for missionaries in "No Priestland, USA." Sister Janice was beginning ministry in Grayson, Kentucky, and Sister Maria received permission to join her for 30 days. During that time, she edited articles for the magazine *Glenmary Challenge* (their pastor, Father Pat O'Donnell, was editor), taught adult Bible classes, and visited parishioners' homes. When the 30-day experience came to a close, Father Pat requested that she continue her stay – and Sister Maria's 30 days in Appalachia extended to a 30-year commitment! The sisters stayed in Grayson for two years.

Father John Garvey asked Sisters Maria and Janice to join him in a new ministry in 1978. After prayerful discernment, they decided to move to Scott County in the southwestern corner of Virginia. They settled in Dungannon, a small, isolated town, and lived in a trailer next to St. Patrick's church. Sister Janice tells of Sister Maria's impact on the area: "Soon after our arrival, Maria was invited to help at the newly opened health clinic. Our trailer was a hospitality center where women came to do crafts or just to visit. Maria's great love for teaching led her to see that tutoring was a great need. Many people could not read or write; others had not completed grade or high school. Her student body grew rapidly. When the president of the community college at Big Stone Gap heard of Maria's work, he personally came and invited her to be an adjunct staff member of the college. The Dungannon Depot, which had been moved from the railroad tracks, became her classroom. Maria taught there for nearly 15 years. Her dedication to learning encouraged and challenged her students to work for their GED and go on to college." Sister Maria also managed a thrift shop, "Maria's Shoppe." She was well-known and loved and twice elected president of the Women's Club. When there was no Glenmary priest available for Dungannon, Sister Maria was appointed Pastoral Coordinator.

On January 29, 1994, Sister Maria, then an office assistant at the Job Corps Center, was coming home on a windy stretch of mountain road, sometimes called "suicide trail." Her car suddenly crossed the left lane and wedged against a tree, and her left arm was crushed. Doctors were unable to save the arm because of the extent of the injury, and it was amputated above the elbow. Following the many weeks needed for the arm to heal, she was fitted with a prosthetic arm that, in Sister Janice's words, was "painful, heavy, and its adaptation required super strength." She eventually abandoned its use. It was beginning at this time that Sister Maria often prayed to be whole again. She continued her work in Appalachia with one healthy arm for another twelve years.

In July 2006, Sisters Maria and Janice returned to Good Counsel, where Maria soon entered health care. One of her favorite prayers was based on the Exsultet: "The light of God surrounds us; the love of God enfolds us; the power of God protects us; the presence of God watches over us. Wherever we are, God is, and all is well." The everlasting love of God now enfolds her, all is well, and she is whole again!