Remembering Sister Barbara (Ann Paul) Berg

Barbara’s love for teaching and for the poor is evident from her IHM ministry commitment forms and her page in the IHM Book of Life.

Barbara was born on Oct. 23, 1926, to Emil Ludwig Berg and Eileen Marie Clements. She was the second oldest of three children. Her brother Paul was the oldest of the siblings; her brother Emil the youngest. Barbara claimed her mother’s strong faith and fidelity to the practice of it played an important role in fostering a spirit of Catholicism in their home. In fact, according to Barbara, through the prayers of her, her mother and brother, her father converted to Catholicism. She remembered her father regularly going to Sunday Mass even when he was non-Catholic. He also listened to her catechism when she was in grade school.

Barbara attended St. Theresa, St. Mary of Redford and Sacred Heart Academy for grade school. She returned to St. Mary of Redford for high school, where her classmates soon recognized her acting ability (as a senior she had the lead role in the school play). Her musical talent as a pianist also did not go unnoticed. After graduation from St. Mary of Redford, Barbara entered the congregation in 1944.

During Barbara’s formation years in the congregation, she is remembered as an avid reader and a lover of learning. As opportunities arose, Barbara continued to attend many summer and after-school theology programs. She also took advantage of many theological publications.

Barbara also had a remarkable gift for languages. Her expertise was in French, but she also knew Spanish (she spent summers in Mexico to learn the language) and Creole, which proved invaluable for her Haitian ministry.

From 1947-1997, Barbara taught French, English or religion on a grade school or high school level in Michigan or Haiti.

Her experience in Haiti during her year of renewal was a significant turning point in her life. In 1993, Barbara felt called to join Sister Anne Wisda and Sister Elizabeth Walters to participate in the Pax Christi Delegation, Cry Justice: A Non Violent Presence in Haiti. Sister Anne shares the experience, “With the transitioning to democracy,” violence was not uncommon. In fact, the “pastor of St. George parish where we had been assigned to monitor human rights abuses had been in hiding.”

The parishioners, however, warmly welcomed them in spite of the danger and appreciated their presence. Sister Anne’s and Barbara’s team was instrumental in gaining the freedom of three
women who were unjustly imprisoned. The photographs they took documented repression and beatings.

After encountering the extreme destitution and illiteracy among the people, Barbara resolved to work with the Haitian people in whatever way she could. Spurred on by Article 10 of the IHM Constitutions, “We hear the cry of God’s people, especially the poor and abandoned,” she requested full-time ministry in Haiti working with the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. On one of her IHM ministry commitment forms she stated, “I hope to join with the people of Haiti in their efforts to develop their own spiritual, intellectual and material potential affirming them in their own giftedness and culture.” Helping to train the teachers and the principals for two schools, St. Patrick and St. Charles, writing a teacher guide in French, and translating lessons on how to work a solar computer into French are only a few ways she achieved her goal.

At Barbara’s farewell in 1997, the principal of St. Patrick and St. Charles paid this tribute to her:

“Sister Barbara, a true servant of God, who sacrifices her life in the service of all the people as one of her sisters has never ceased to give us her participation in our different activities. …Today, we wish to thank her wholeheartedly for the time she spent with us…. for her beautiful way of working with us and her presence among us. She never abandoned us for an instant….”

When Barbara returned to the United States in 1997, she continued her ministry to the poor by tutoring in the GEM (Getting Educationally Motivated) program at Holy Redeemer Elementary School in Detroit until 2011. She said, “In teaching/tutoring the children of Holy Redeemer, Detroit, I feel that I am helping poor children to overcome the causes of injustice and oppression in their own lives…and supporting them with knowledge and a sense of their own self-worth.”

In 2011 Barbara retired to the Motherhouse. Always ready to travel, be it to Canada to enjoy Shakespeare in Stratford, or to northern Michigan to visit her 100+ year-old Aunt Nel or her family, Barbara once told Sister Anne she was eager to go back to Haiti with her whenever she made another trip. God, however, had different travel plans for her.

Thank you, Barbara, woman of love, of grace, of truth, of peace for your unwavering faith, mindfulness and enduring commitment to the poor. Your gifts and presence through the years have helped us to remember who we are: Sisters Servants. On your IHM Book of Life page you have this quote: “They who instruct others to justice shall shine as stars for all eternity.” Continue to shine on us, holy woman of God.

Submitted by Mary Ellen Loren, IHM