

Sr. Barbara Bireley
March 16, 1935-June 23, 2002

On June 23, 2002 at Oakwood, Barbara Ann Bireley went home to God at the relatively early age of 67. Youthful energy had marked her entire life. Whatever she did, in work, play, or prayer, she did all with boundless exuberance, drawing always from a deep well of spiritual vitality.

She came by her profound inner life from her childhood. Her father John, a staunch Methodist, became a Catholic in his later years, a choice attributable in part to the influence of his second wife, Marian Lee, a staunch Catholic. Barbara and her older brothers, Robert and John, were the children of this marriage. In their home in Evanston, Illinois Thomas a Kempis and the family rosary provided daily spiritual nourishment and Barbara and Robert often accompanied their mother to daily Mass. This early experience bore fruit years later when Barbara entered the Society and Robert became a Jesuit.

In her autobiographical account Barbara writes, "In the fifth grade I came down with polio. Nine months of physical therapy rehabilitated me, but the disease left a weakness that has influenced my life enormously. Always I dreaded gym class and sports. Little did I know that in my late 40s this weakness would begin to slow me down considerably."

Barbara received her education in Catholic schools in Evanston. "Way back in my mind was the thought that maybe some day I would be a nun, but no one must ever know." When the time came to choose a college, she chose Newton College of the Sacred Heart in Newton, Massachusetts, graduating in 1957. "It was there that the Lord revealed how great was the love he had for me, how precious I was to Him. The nuns had a contemplative way of life and spirit that I longed for, and knew I wanted just that, but I put the thought of becoming a nun out of my head, knowing that I could never, ever leave my home and family as was required in the Society at that time."

After graduation Barbara worked for a year in a Chicago investment firm before she and two friends set out on their post-college tour of Europe. While attending Benediction in a church in Yugoslavia, Barbara felt overcome by the call to religious life. She changed her plans for the rest of the tour, came home, informed her family, and entered the Society on September 8, 1958.

For one with Barbara's freedom of spirit and exuberance, life in the noviceship under Mother Marie Louise Schroen was not an easy time. She never tired of telling how she very nearly did not survive. She made her first vows on September 29, 1961. In the following years Barbara taught at Elmhurst in Portsmouth RI, Eden Hall in Philadelphia, and Carrollton in Miami. She went to Probation in Rome in 1967, making her final Profession on February 10, 1968. She returned to Carrollton after her profession and taught there for the next six years. Through these years of energetic ministry, Barbara realized that her gifts and passion did not lie in the classroom.

While at Carrollton she had opportunity to become involved in programs in the local parish. "There I realized the great need for adult Catholics to be educated to understand the great strides being made in Biblical scholarship, the reasons for so much change in the liturgy and why the

Church was in such an upheaval. In 1974 I was freed of teaching in one of our schools to be involved in full-time parish work.”

Her first experience came in the Archdiocese of Detroit at St. Clement of Rome Church in Romeo, a rural town 45 miles north of Detroit. There she spent six happy, fruitful years as Prayer Minister, “teaching prayer to CCD teachers, lectors, Eucharistic ministers and students as well as planning retreats for all groups.” The parishioners of St. Clement still recall her lively spirit, her joy and her creativity. Both high school age young people and seasoned seniors discovered their roots in faith and their need to express their experience in prayer.

In 1978 Barbara was asked to join the staff of Our lady Queen of Hope Church in the inner city of Detroit as Associate Pastor. She continued the prayer ministry among the African-American community “and found myself having to do almost everything else as the pastor had two other full-time positions in the diocese”. During her second year there, “my body and psyche gave out.” This required frequent trips back and forth between Detroit and Chicago to see doctors in a futile effort to find a diagnosis and some relief. She rested in Chicago for a few months and then returned to the parish to finish out the year. For the rest of her life Barbara remained connected to this community, even adorning her walls at Oakwood with pictures of the children she had loved and would never forget.

In 1980 Barbara went to Indiantown, Florida, to join the small community of RSCJ there and to work primarily with the African-American community. “I learned there, how and why injustice must enrage the Heart of God.” The longer she was in Indiantown, the more she realized that physically she was getting no better. “I needed to find out what was happening to me.” Barbara went up to Boston, and in the year that followed, was diagnosed as suffering from post-polio syndrome and chemical depression. It took two years to get her medications balanced during which time Barbara served as part-time Pastoral Minister at Holy Cross Cathedral in Boston. From 1983-1985 she served as a chaplain at Boston University Hospital while completing two quarters of the CPE program there.

In 1986 Barbara moved to Chicago to be closer to her elderly mother and began a new ministry in pastoral care at a nursing home. As the years progressed so, too, did signs of her poor health. She began to show early signs of Parkinson’s disease and dementia. In April 1993 Barbara joined the Oakwood Community and entered into a period of gradual and consistent decline. Throughout her life, and wherever she had found herself, she had loved community and given all the energy she could to helping to build it. That trait did not stop when she arrived at Oakwood. She participated fully and initiated activities that she thought the community would enjoy, but the disease was inexorable. She slowly and gradually lost physical mobility and grew unable to communicate her thoughts and feelings, often to her own evident frustration.

A passage that Barb loved to share from the *Divine Milieu* gives some insight into what her prayer may have been as she approached death. “In all these dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is you who are painfully parting the fiber of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within yours.” On June 23, 2002 Barbara was set free and went rejoicing to the house of the Lord.