

Sister Mary Ada, CSC

(Theresa Agnes Dennis)

October 24, 1929 – October 4, 2023

These memories were prepared by **Sister Mary Ada, CSC**; edited by **Sister Suzanne Patterson, CSC**, with additional comments from **Thomas Smith, Peter Kane and Linda Diltz**. **Sister Suzanne** read them at **Sister Mary Ada's funeral on October 12, 2023**.

Sister Mary Ada wrote her own memento, both to have it done correctly and to make sure no one else had to do it. She wrote the facts, but interspersed throughout her narrative, we have included stories from one of her former students and a couple of staff members to give flavor to her almost 94 years.

Sister Mary Ada wrote:

“It was a good day and a bad day. The good was that in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on October 24, 1929, a baby girl named Theresa Agnes was born to Isadore and Agnes (Dochat) Dennis. The bad was that the stock market crashed that day, causing pain and sorrow to millions of people.

“The youngest in the family, I grew up with four older siblings and a 13-year-old half-brother whose mother died from influenza in 1918. We lived in a row of attached houses and, in those four homes, there were 24 or 25 children of all ages. A half a block away was a park with a baseball diamond, a children's pool, a slide, swings and a jungle gym. Needless to say, growing up was fun even in the midst of deep poverty.

“We were poor, but we children never knew it. Whenever a poor person came to our door asking for something to eat, my mother would give him a washcloth and soap and tell him to refresh himself at the outdoor faucet and come sit at our table. Our guests always sat next to me. If it was not mealtime, she would fix a sandwich or two and give him five cents for coffee.

“When I was about 18 months old I had a lengthy bout with diphtheria, which is usually deadly to the young. A few years later when I was almost 5, I was hit by a car. I was just tall enough to break the headlight, causing a deep cut near my eye. The doctor said that if the cut were ‘a hair’s thickness higher’ total blindness would have resulted. It seems like my guardian angel was kept busy protecting me, and that God had plans for my life.

“In the second grade I had a Franciscan sister teacher, and it was then that I knew I wanted to be like her. This desire for religious life followed me through the years, but it was at Lancaster Catholic High School, where there were four religious communities of women teaching, that I realized it was to Holy Cross that I was being called. During my senior year the commitment was made, papers signed and then I told my family. It was a big surprise. One aunt gave me a week, another was more generous and said a month, while all the others said I’d be home within a year.

“Meanwhile, many jobs came my way, like going to Penn’s Dairy to pick up ice thrown off trucks carrying milk to be pasteurized. The ice was needed since we had an icebox that needed to be filled each day to keep the food cold. During the summer before 10th grade I helped a mother with eight children, ages 12 years to 10-month-old twins. The hours were 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and the pay was \$4 per week! As a junior I found babysitting jobs with several doctors’ families. The following summer I worked at Consumer’s Cold Packing company and at Woolworth’s 5 & 10 Cent store on Saturdays and during the Christmas season.

“In community, First Vows were made on August 15, 1950. All of Our Lady of Fatima Band went out on mission, but I remained at the Saint Mary’s to teach at the Campus School— the first scholastic to do so. My mentor was Sister St. Bridget, who was my lifeline to teaching. We taught second graders in the recreation room in Bertrand Hall. It proved to be a most wonderful year! My first five years teaching were in primary grades followed by 20 years of intermediate grades in the East.

“In 1956 I spent four months in Austin, Texas. During that time Sister Basil was a jolly mentor who taught me all about leatherwork and having the

children make gifts for their families. For the next 20 years, my classes had the opportunity to make and display their work. Rainy days were especially good to bring out the barrel of leather and choose colors, use tools and have the wonderful satisfaction of making a gift for someone.”

When Sister Mary Ada was at St. Mary’s in Batavia, New York, she taught Sister Jean Ann (Smith)’s brother, Thomas Smith. Tom wrote about his experience as a 5th grader in Sister Mary Ada’s class in September 1958:

“Imagine my surprise (and thrill) of watching my newest nun-teacher running on the playground participating in a kick ball game! There she was, hiking up the skirt of her habit, running toward the pitched/rolled ball and booting it high in the air! Wow — this was going to be an interesting year! What made it so? On that same playground, Sister Mary Ada noticed a grass/dirt stain on my school uniform pants — something my mom never wanted to see — and she got down on her hands and knees to show me the ‘Holy Stain Remover’: saliva/spit onto that stain! Generously applied, rubbed in and PRESTO, the green stain DISAPPEARED! To this day, I use it for many cleaning options.”

“Sister Mary Ada had many extra-curricular classes. She started a Stamp Collecting Club and a few of us would meet after school. Sister Mary Ada would show us new stamp releases, how to put these in albums and chronologically ‘save’ them. One Saturday morning Sister Mary Ada walked us to the Batavia Post Office — quite a trek — to purchase a four-pane of stamps new release. Another after school option was leather working. She purchased skeins of leather in various colors — white, black, blue, red, green — and spools of lacing in many colors as well. She then made many samples of leather goods, like a coin purse, satchel bags, pen and pencil holder worn on your belt, beaded belts. All were very cool and things that we could make! I made several coin purses, but my favorite was the pen and pencil belt carrier. I made one for my best friend as a Christmas gift.

“Sister Mary Ada engaged every student and wanted to know what each one’s interests and hobbies were. She encouraged us to bring it to school

and show it. When it came to the ‘real schoolwork,’ she had a way of challenging each of us to improve our ‘easy’ subjects, as well as those that were tougher for us. Reading, spelling and writing came easy to me, but she didn’t let that me ‘rest’ on those. Several times during a spelling test, she would ask me a word not on our study list and then help me figure out how to spell it. So, although I needed her help, I always could spell it. That really built up my confidence. Math was my tougher class and she worked with me during and after class so I could improve my skills.

“One more experience that stuck with me as a life lesson was when Sister Mary Ada turned a negative thing I did into a positive. I scored poorly on a test (rare for me and Sister Mary Ada knew it) and she asked me to take the test home, show it to my parents and get a signature to prove I did it. I thought, how is this going to go well? Of course, I took it home; but didn’t do anything. After several days, Sister Mary Ada asked me to return the signed test TOMORROW. My plan: I could easily copy mom’s signature and bring it back. I practiced a couple times (not on the test itself—I’m not THAT dumb)—then jotted onto the test paper. I turned it in and figured ‘that was that.’ The following morning, before class, Sister Mary Ada took me into the hall and asked, ‘Who signed that test you returned? I know it couldn’t have been your mother. Her penmanship is beautiful and that was NOT her handwriting!’ So, I confessed. Her response was two options: She could call my mother and tell her what happened OR I could take the test home, do the explaining and get the real John Hancock. I did the latter; and it turned out neither mom nor dad had a major fit—it was all about doing the right thing. Interestingly enough, before I even arrived home with the test, Sister Mary Ada had called my mom and told her I would be bringing the test home! From that experience I learned to start with the truth.

“That school year with Sister Mary Ada as my teacher was my favorite classroom of learning! She set the bar high, and few other instructors did as well as she did during my years of education. She set me up well for LIFE!”

Sister Mary Ada continues her story:

“After 25 years in the classroom, other jobs followed. For 15 years, I worked in community services/social work for Kimberly Quality Care Nursing Services. This included numerous activities funded by the lottery through the Office of Aging; no client money paid for my services. I did laundry, went grocery shopping, spent four hours in respite attendance to give caregivers a chance to go out, took clients to doctor’s appointments or to the store. The recipients of these services were so satisfied that after Kimberly lost the contract to another agency, some clients called me and asked if I could continue my services for pay. Most of these people lived in government housing so I told them to pay whatever they could afford and that money was sent biweekly to Saint Mary’s.

“Over the years I have learned that one has to be herself, not trying to be what someone else thinks one ought to be. Each individual should try to go about doing good in whatever form it takes for that person. Here I am now at the last stage of my journey. This life was a daily gift from God, now my final gift is to return this life to him.”

During this final stage of her journey at Saint Mary’s, Sister Mary Ada volunteered in the Activities Department and the Copy and Mail Center. While collecting mail to distribute in Rosary Convent, Sister Mary Ada learned that her fondness for going to the casino was shared by Peter Kane in the Copy and Mail Center. On Monday mornings, Sister Mary Ada made a point of visiting Peter to find out if he had had a profitable weekend gambling adventure. She told the story about how she once hit a big slot machine jackpot. Before the casino people could come to her ringing machine, she made sure her older sister was in place on the stool. She didn’t want the people at the casino to know a Catholic nun was gambling, so she let them believe her sister was the winner.

After she retired from the Communications Department, Linda Diltz visited with Sister Mary Ada every Wednesday until the pandemic. Each week

Sister Mary Ada had treats to share — Hammond pretzels, Dollar Store ginger snaps, prayer cards, menthol Chips lozenges, etc. Linda said she always had goodies to eat there and then a bag to go. Not only did Sister Mary Ada share snacks with sisters and staff, she also had prayer cards she distributed. Linda said, “Sister Mary Ada told me about her devotion to the Archangel Raphael and gave me cards with prayers and novenas for his intercession in restoring health. She also gave me a prayer she had by Sister St. Bridget and a couple of others she said every day.” Linda continued, “Sister was pretty sly with her prayers though. When I’d teasingly invite her to pray for me, she’d tell me that she prayed every day for everyone who had ever touched her life and for the people who touched the lives of all of those people. And I was supposed to be happy I was lumped in with those multitudes.”

Let us conclude with one of Sister Mary Ada’s favorite prayers:

Glory to the Father

who creates us
and gives us life.

Glory to the Son

who redeems and saves us
and gives us Eternal Life.

Glory to the Holy Spirit

who sanctifies us and gives us gifts
that will lead us on the journey
to walk in the footsteps of Jesus,
and continues with Him leading us
to the entrance of Life Eternal
and the Presence of the Blessed Trinity.

Sister Mary Ada, may your words be brought back to you as you give glory to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.