

Sister M. Barbara Jeanne (Fehr), CSC

(Barbara Jeanne Fehr)

October 15, 1924–December 16, 2020

These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sisters Frances B. O'Connor, CSC, and Margaret Ann Shield, CSC. They were read by Sister Catherine Osimo, CSC, at Sister Barbara Jeanne's funeral on May 6, 2021.

As we gather to remember Sister Barbara Jeanne and celebrate her life, many of us are dealing with mixed emotions, especially great sadness when we learned of her death last December 16. Sadness not for Barbara, because Barbara is in a far better place, but sadness because we lost another dearly loved sister. Sister Margaret Shield and I spoke over the telephone when Barbara was dying and shared some of our memories of our shared times with Barb when we both served with her as missionaries in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. As we began to gather our thoughts about Barbara, we were reminded that it is her life that speaks, not her death. And it is her hope and belief in the goodness of all people that speaks, not our sense of loss. Almost five months ago, we wrote this memento to lift up the life of Barbara, our friend. These words still stand.

What can be said about Sister Barbara Jeanne? So many things. Even people who did not know her well recognized her holiness. During these last few years of failing health, Barbara struggled for breath, depending more and more on oxygen. Although she confided in some of her close friends her fear of what was to come, she knew that Jesus was with her. This simple statement is a beautiful summary of her life: a rich life of 96 years lived with Jesus and for Jesus. Seventy years were spent in our Congregation.

How many wonderful examples Barbara gave us. Faith, simplicity, humility and joy. These are only some of the qualities and virtues that

our Sister Barbara Jeanne lived, but they are among the hallmarks of her remarkable life. She always had a smile for everyone and a warm greeting for you.

Above all, she was a woman steeped in love for Christ, to whom her entire being—everything she was and did—was directed. When sisters visited her, she kept them informed of all that was happening to stay connected.

She loved to spend time immersing herself in prayer. She always had a litany of prayer intentions: for the poor, for those suffering alone, for vocations, and on and on. She was a voracious reader and always had a book for me to read whenever I visited her. She read most, if not all, of the books I taught to my adult class in theology.

Sister Barbara never needed to be in the forefront nor was she a shrinking violet. She was truly a woman of joy. Barbara loved to hear stories but also liked to tell stories that made herself and others laugh.

Looking at her early life prior to coming to Holy Cross, Miss Barbara Jeanne Fehr would not have been considered a good candidate for the missions by most superiors. She and her older sister Joan were educated in a private boarding school for girls in Switzerland. Hardly the preparation for the missions, one might think. However, she explained that her father was born in Switzerland and she only spent eighth grade at the school just prior to the beginning of World War II. In a short profile on herself in the 1980s, Sister Barbara Jeanne wrote that, “My family had broad interests and concern for people of other lands.” Her father, Joseph Conrad Fehr, was a military officer involved in diplomatic missions.

Yes, Sister Barbara Jeanne was truly a missionary during her 15 years in Bangladesh, 1956–1971. In the fall of 1956, she set out with Sister Joseph Mary (Hoess), CSC, to assume her ministry in what was then East Pakistan. However, they were diverted through the Suez Canal due to some political unrest. Sister Barbara Jeanne’s main ministry was teaching at Holy Cross College in Dhaka, but music was her passion, having inherited from her mother, Imogene Keenan

Fehr, a love of music and the arts. Barbara loved the summer school in Hindustani music in Naukuchiatal, India. The young orphans under her direction in Tejgaon achieved one accomplishment, the musical production of Tagore's *The Land of Cards*, based on his stories, poems and plays for children.

In our early days in Bangladesh there was no choir in the church except for the Sisters of the Holy Cross. Barbara was the choir mistress. In the 1950s, there were no pews in the churches, and the parishioners sat on the floor as was their custom. In the very back of the church were a few pews where we American sisters sat as choir members.

While the rest of us were running around organizing children in our orphanage and schools, preparing liturgies and programs, Sister Barbara Jeanne was sitting still in her office, listening. Her heart was open. Her ears were open. She was listening to people with problems.

We learned another lesson from her. Simplicity was her way of life. She lived simply. She didn't have much. There was no clutter in her room. She managed without many clothes and they were always clean and neat. The woman herself appeared very dignified but humble.

Perhaps the best way to close is by referencing the Irish proverb, "Death leaves a heartache no one can heal, love leaves a memory no one can steal."

Sister Barbara Jeanne, all these months later we say goodbye again, not to your spirit or your good works. You were a model of love. We look to the Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, who reminds us that, "Death is not extinguishing the light. It is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come."

Jesus is with you.