

# MARYCREST

Sisters of  St. Francis  
OFFICE OF THE PROVINCIAL

Dear Sisters, Family members, Associates, and Friends,

Sister Marie Therese Archambault, a member of the Teton Lakota nation of the Hunkpapa tribe and a Franciscan sister of the Midwest Sacred Heart province, died on December 4 at the University of Colorado hospital in Denver following a lengthy illness. A wake service was held at Marycrest Convent on December 7, and on December 8 the Rev. Dick Dunphy, S.J., celebrated the Mass of Resurrection at the Archdiocese of Denver Mortuary. Interment was in the Sisters' plot in Mt. Olivet cemetery.

Marie Therese's life as teacher, scholar, spiritual director, writer, editor and Franciscan formation minister flowered from her roots in her Native family and culture and in her profound Christian faith and Franciscan call. Though she was to experience at times "intense inter-cultural, religious conflict and depression" from the intolerance of some Church leaders to Native culture and beliefs, the thrust of her ministry was to incorporate Native religious heritage and traditions into the Church's life, helping Native Americans integrate their Indian and Catholic identities into their spirituality. She would give the witness of a Lakota-Catholic Franciscan woman following a non-violent, contemplative life style.

The eldest of the four children of Charles Archambault and Lillian Halsey, Ida Francis Archambault was born on June 2, 1939, on the Standing Rock reservation, Fort Yates, ND, where she was baptized in 1949. Her early studies were in Catholic mission schools there and on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in SD. Graduating from St. Francis Mission high school, in St. Francis, SD, in 1957, she entered the novitiate of the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity at Marycrest Convent, Denver, bringing her characteristic grace, dignity and good humor as well as a sense of beauty that would enhance celebrations and add joy to her Franciscan sisters' lives. Sisters found her engaging in conversation, with depth and great interest. Always drawn to St. Francis and concerned for the well-being of the sisterhood, she pronounced her final vows in the congregation in 1965.

Prior to that, in 1962, she earned, with magna cum laude honors, a B.A. degree in education and languages from Regis University and began a 15-year stint in secondary schools in NE, CO, SD, and MO. Then came an appointment as director of novices and of the ongoing spiritual and religious formation of the sisters of Sacred Heart province until 1981. In the course of her ministries and research, she was to earn three master's degrees from U.S. universities.

An intensive intellectual challenge of the years 1981-1988 was in Rome, Italy, where in 1984 she was awarded a baccalaureate degree in theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University and, in 1988, a licentiate degree in Sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute. Intensive language studies made her proficient in Italian, German and French. A notable honor for her in Rome was her election by students as English speaking representative to the central student committee and from that group, as representative to the administration of the Biblical Institute.

A less fortunate occurrence of the Roman period was the contraction of cystitis, a recurrent and then chronic disease that was the source of much pain and anxiety to Marie Therese for the remainder of her life.

A new focus of ministry for Sister Marie Therese on her return to Denver in 1988 fulfilled a dream: involvement and presence to Native people. It seems to have marked a deeper entry into the struggles Native people faced, struggles that were increasingly her own. Quoted in an article that appeared in Twin Circle, March 23, 1997, Marie Therese recalled that at the time of her mission schooling of the 1950's, the Church was making no effort to understand Native American religious beliefs or culture. Only after becoming a nun did she discover her identity as both Catholic and Native American, and begin to appreciate the holiness of both traditions. She found within herself a new understanding of who she was in God's eyes. Through contact with Native people around the nation she grew in awareness of their inner struggle, not wanting to deny the sacredness of both traditions and reluctant to let go of either. "I cannot see where they come together except in a place inside the individual where they meet the sacred and holy," she stated.



In the same article she gives us insight into her kinship with nature and her contemplative prayer: Catholic and Native beliefs coincide in these two aspects, she observed, but in Native tradition they are more developed. The connection to the earth or nature is a key element in Native spirituality, but this also has biblical roots. And, in regard to prayer, Native tradition is at home with the sacred, with an intimate and ever-present awareness of God's presence in earth, people and events, and they respond with gratitude. The mystical life is familiar to Native peoples, more so than to many Catholics, she said.

Her pastoral and academic involvements after returning from Rome she described as extended and intensive field work among Native Catholic people of the United States.

It included lay leadership development, founding of the Denver Kateri Community, formation of non-Natives teachers and Native Catholic Adults for the National Tekakwitha Conference; ongoing pastoral ministry to urban Natives, and participation in a healing process with former students and graduates of St. Francis' mission. She also had teaching assignments at Regis University, the Iliff School of Theology, the Catholic Biblical School, and in Native American studies at Metro State college. Again she was named director of novices for Sacred Heart province.

Pastoral involvements led to scholarly pursuits. She wrote articles for publication as well as Native American catechetical materials, and gave talks in the area of inculturation and dialogue. Her book, *A Retreat with Black Elk*, published by St. Anthony Messenger press in 1998, was the text for numerous retreats that she offered. In 2003 she co-edited the book, *The Crossing of Two Roads: Being Catholic and Native in the United States*, Orbis Books. Another co-editor, Christopher Vecsey of Colgate University, recently wrote that she had been a wonderful colleague during preparatory sessions and that she was, indeed, an outstanding human being.

In 1995 Sister Marie Therese took a two-year leave of absence from the community, teaching at the For Yates community college in Ft. Yates and continuing part-time ministry with the Tekakwitha Conference. Also, at Emmaus House in New Jersey from 2000 until 2002 she took part in a program of healing. This period of interior darkness seems to correspond to her sentiments expressed at a convention in Pittsburgh in 1981: "I have discovered that my deepest joy springs from the acceptance of suffering in my life. I have learned to stand in powerlessness with those persons I love and respect, as they hang on the cross. I've been forced to find the power and integrity for my life in relationship and communion with Jesus Crucified."

Sister Marie Therese ministered to her father, Charles, at his death in Hawaii. With her sister Donna Rogers she shared for a decade the care of her mother Lillian, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease, until her death in November, 1999. In this past year, as Sister Marie Therese struggled unsuccessfully to recover from complications arising from surgery and a late diagnosis of cancer, her sister Donna, with many family members and Franciscan sisters, ministered faithfully to her. Survivors, besides Donna, include two brothers: Charles (Teresa) of St. Francis; and David (Betty) of Ft. Yates; brother-in-law Verdell Rogers of Denver, many relatives, her Franciscan sisters, and friends and colleagues from here and abroad.

In a personal greeting written to one of the Sisters in the book, *The Crossing of Two Roads*, Marie Therese wrote in 2003, "At last, maybe Native people are getting a voice in the Church".

Your life, Marie Therese, your journey now completed, is a Native voice being heard in the Church.

Blessing of Peace and All Good,

Sisters of St. Francis, Denver, Colorado