

The life we celebrate today began in Oakland, California on September 29, 1926. Barbara Williams was the first-born of two children in a small and loving family. Barbara's mother, Genevieve Marie Flaherty, was a native of Connecticut, of Irish and French Canadian descent; at age five, Genevieve lost her own mother and subsequently spent several years in the boarding school of the Grey Nuns in Montreal, Quebec. Barbara's father, William Williams, was a native of New York who traced his family back to Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island. Raised in the Methodist tradition, Barbara's father became a Catholic when he married her mother. The young couple moved to Oakland several years before the birth of Barbara. In 1931 they had a second child, a boy, Barbara's beloved brother, Robert. Barbara writes, "I was very proud of him and anxious to assume some responsibility for his care." As to their family life, the Depression, followed by the shortages that were part of World War II, were factors that led to a simple lifestyle which the family shared with others. Barbara writes, "My mother was a real caregiver, and was always open to helping out neighbors with food and presence as needed....our house was always open to homesick servicemen our dad brought home for dinner" from the Naval Air Station where he worked. Barbara's warm and welcoming heart was an inheritance from both her mother and her father.

Barbara's elementary education began at St. Bernard's School in Oakland where she was taught by the Sisters of the Holy Cross whom she described as very good teachers. She writes, "I remember to this day, my 8th grade teacher, Sister Mary Rosina...with love and gratitude, for she was the one who prayed that I would get a scholarship to Holy Names High School." Barbara had visited the High School and felt welcome and at home there, but the tuition was not a possibility at that time. Barbara shared with Sister Rosina how much she wanted to go to the High School but that it was not possible. Sister Rosina promised to pray and her prayers were answered with a scholarship. Barbara spent four happy years at Holy Names High School. It was at that time that Barbara met someone who was to become a life-long friend and mentor, Sister Ruth McCarthy.

By the time she was a senior in high school, Barbara began to think of joining the Sisters of the Holy Names. It was Sister Ruth McCarthy who helped Barbara realize that she could "come and see" if religious life was the path God intended for her. When Barbara asked her father about entering, he asked that she go to college for a while, "to test out if that was what I really wanted to do. I had been with the sisters for twelve years and needed to get a wider view of life. He was a wise man..." Barbara attended the University of California for two years and entered the community in January, 1947. At that time, Holy Names College, the Novitiate and the Provincial Administration were all located on property across from Lake Merritt. Barbara was always grateful for the kindness her Novitiate Director, Sister Mary Ursulina, showed to her father. When Barbara entered, Sister Ursulina called Mr. Williams aside and told him that he should feel free to visit Barbara whenever he was in the area. No doubt a response to Mr. Williams' concern for his only daughter. As Barbara began her novitiate year, she received the name Sister Roberta Marie in honor of her brother.

In 1949, Barbara's brother Bob entered the Jesuits; however, after four years he discerned that this was not his calling and he returned home in 1953. This was shortly before Barbara made final vows. She had hoped that her brother would be a priest, but she accepted his decision as God's will which was "all important in the matter."

Barbara described her first years of religious life as being filled with many changes, lots of activity, and more study, and while they were happy ones for her, she did regret that, given her many different teaching assignments, there was not much time to get to know her Sister companions or the families in the various parishes. She taught elementary school for nineteen years and secondary school for six years. About that time she writes, "Sister Ruth McCarthy remained friend and mentor during those years, and was really a spiritual director for me before the term became popular."

In 1967 Barbara attended the University of Chile on a summer fellowship; upon her return she continued her doctoral studies at UC Berkeley while teaching at Holy Names College. She completed her studies and spent twenty-five years teaching political science at the College.

In 1970 Barbara made a retreat with the Jesuit priest Father Armand Nigro. Barbara identified this event as "Perhaps the most significant turning point in my life." Father Nigro told the retreatants that women should be involved in both retreat and spiritual direction ministries. Barbara experienced a "call within a call" and became part of the California Province Retreat Team for the next twenty-five years of its existence. She speaks of this time as the happiest and most fruitful of her life. In addition to her teaching, she served as spiritual director for men and women religious and laity in the Institute of Spirituality and Worship, and at JSTB in Berkeley. She also worked with the Christian Life Communities and with the Connections program which integrated 19th Annotation Retreats with Justice concerns.

This same period of time, Barbara acknowledged, held what she described as her "biggest sorrows." Her father died in 1971. Her parents had moved to Los Gatos and Mr. Williams' Mass of Resurrection was celebrated in the Holy Names Convent Chapel there, a privilege for which the family was very grateful. The next loss for Barbara was the death of Sister Ruth McCarthy in 1977. In 1980, Barbara's mother died. Two years later, Barbara was diagnosed with cancer and had serious surgery from which she made a complete recovery. In 1988, Barbara's beloved brother Robert was killed in an accident; he was hit by a car while crossing the street. Bob had married and was the father of five children with whom Barbara kept in close touch. In his later years, Bob once more felt called to the priesthood and went to Spokane to Mater Dei Seminary; he was fifty-seven when he died. It was a death that Barbara described as a deeply felt tragedy, and to the end of her life, Robert's portrait had a place of honor in her room.

The light and shadows that are part of life's journey were certainly present for Barbara, but the shadows did not overcome her cheerful, welcoming spirit and her faithful presence to God in all circumstances. In 1992, when she was sixty-six, Barbara asked to retire from Holy Names College to pursue a full-time ministry directing the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life at the San Francisco Theological Seminary and at the First Congregational Church in Berkeley. At that same time she also served as the California Province Retreat Team Coordinator which involved leading the efforts that produced each summer's program of retreats at Villa Maria del Mar in Santa Cruz and at the Los Gatos Villa. In 1994, Barbara had a second bout with cancer; she again recovered and was able to pursue the ministries in spirituality that shaped her life and meant so much to her.

Three years later, Barbara semi-retired to the SNJM community on San Antonio Avenue in Alameda, continuing her spiritual direction and service on the Province Retreat Team. At St. Joseph's Parish, she initiated and directed the program for the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life. Barbara was also involved in other aspects of parish life at St. Joseph's, including leading the weekly Communion service in the church.

Barbara's next move was to Holy Names Convent in Los Gatos in 2012. She became part of the community which moved to Merrill Gardens in November of the next year. There, true to the orientations of her life, she offered a specially adapted course in the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life. The residents who were able to participate continue to express their gratitude for that opportunity and experience. In May, 1996, Sister Barbara had received the Holy Names University Alumni Award for Service to the Community. On that occasion Sister Cynthia Canning, in her introduction of Barbara, said, in part, that Barbara was a person who had "touched people so deeply," a person who was "comfortable, warm, welcoming, with a great heart..." This description fit Barbara to the end of her life. She deeply touched many of the residents at Merrill Gardens; she had shared with them the priceless gift of prayer and the spiritual journey.

As she approached her 90th birthday, Barbara received the diagnosis of a terminal illness which carried a finality which could possibly be postponed by radical treatment but could not be avoided. Barbara chose to allow her illness to run its course without any extreme measures. She was happily surprised to be able to celebrate her 90th birthday. She continued to greet her visitors in her warm welcoming way. Eventually Barbara was at the point of needing the care best supplied by the skilled nursing available at Our Lady of Fatima Villa. Once moved, she declared it was the right choice.

Barbara left copious notes concerning her rich, full life. They contain a litany of the names of people to whom she was especially grateful, friends, teachers, priests, members of her religious community. This spirit of gratitude is pervasive in her reflections on her life, and it must have contributed to her ability to greet each day and each person with a warm welcome. There are so many people who sent personal and beautiful reflections on Barbara's life. One of these described another of her special gifts: "As everyone who knew Barbara could appreciate, she was a woman of keen intellect, spiritual depth, and deep faith. She clearly advocated for significant change in the Church and society, and especially promoted the role of women, but did so in a liberating way which invited men into the transformational process as advocates and partners. Committed to mutuality, she lived it with amazing freedom and creativity."

There is another quality that struck me as I read Barbara's narrative. It is the instinctive affection for God and the things of God. Barbara experienced her life as a journey with God and toward God, all the while responding to the graces her life presented to her, in the Sacraments, in the opportunities for prayer and spiritual development, in the relationships that sustained her and helped her discern her path. All of this she came to understand as something to be joyfully shared in the many ministries that were hers.

As you know, Barbara planned the liturgy we celebrate today. I think of the songs, readings, and prayers as her last message to us until we meet again. The ultimate reason for Barbara's consistently cheerful, welcoming presence might be found in another of her favorite hymns. "Since Love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?" Are we not blessed to have heard her song?

Reflections on the Life of Barbara Williams, SNJM
Mass of Resurrection, Holy Spirit Chapel, Campbell
February 19, 2017