

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER BERNADINE LAUER

June 8, 1925—August 16, 2015



Yesterday, at Sister Therese Burns' suggestion, I listened to the oral history that Sister Marie Corona recorded with Sr. Bernadine on April 26, 2013. It was good to hear Sister Bernadine's voice and listen to her talking about her family and her life as a Sister of Charity.

The third daughter of Thomas and Grace Dumm Lauer was born in Pine Flats, Indiana County, on June 8, 1925. Christened at Saint John the Baptist Church in Heilwood, PA, June 13, 1925, her Latin baptismal certificate bears the name, Edna

Bernadine. Bernadine, as she was known, was the seventh of nine children; Donald and Jane soon followed. Jane is the only surviving member of the family.

Thomas Lauer worked on the railroad, but like many men of the time, lost his job during the Depression. He moved his family to Ebensburg, where his widowed mother was managing the family farm. The following year, 1936, he bought a 160 acre farm. The farm house on the property lacked the amenities of the Lauer home in Pine Flats—no running hot and cold water, no heat, and no indoor plumbing. The father ingeniously installed an electrical system and, with his older sons, ran copper piping from a nearby spring to provide the family with fresh water. Sister Bernadine said that when the house was inspected, her father's grade was 100%.

However, the family in Ebensburg did not follow the plot of the *Little House on the Prairie*. The year that they moved, 1936, Grace Lauer became ill with pneumonia. There were no antibiotics and infectious diseases were a leading cause of morbidity and mortality. The two older girls, Mary and Helen, came home to care for their mother and their father hired a private duty nurse. However, Grace died within the month. She was 48. Thomas Lauer, farmer and part time musician with the Lauer family band, was a single parent of nine children. Bernadine was 11, Donald was 8, and Jane was 5.

Bernadine graduated from Ebensburg High School, counting among her accomplishments an academic transcript, cheerleading experience, and membership in the Tri-Hi-Y. She was also the drum major of the Ebensburg High School band.

Bernadine went to Rhode Island to live with her sister Helen and her husband, Norman, who got Bernadine a job with a crystal company, a military contractor. The following year, 1944, Bernadine enrolled as a cadet nursing student at The Pittsburgh Hospital School of Nursing. Here, the seeds of faith, responsibility, and concern for others, planted by her parents, flourished. She recalls being impressed with the prayer life of the hospital sisters and their compassion and concern for their patients, especially those who could not pay for their care. She graduated in 1947 and entered the Sisters of Charity in January, 1948.

In her oral history, she laughingly describes an atypical novitiate. Unlike her group, she and fellow novice Sister Camillus Erb, RN, were not engaged in the cleaning of Seton Hill or helping out in the diet kitchen or dining rooms. Each was assigned to be a private duty nurse for one of our sick sisters. Sister Bernadine cared for Sister Mary Cecilia Brown. After she made vows in 1951, she was sent to her first mission, Roselia Foundling, where she cared for at risk babies, supervising their care in the isolation nursery. Three years later, she was assigned to be medical surgical nursing supervisor at Providence Hospital in Beaver Falls; three years later, she continued the now familiar rotation to Pittsburgh Hospital where she supervised the women's ward. She then was missioned to Providence Hospital as operating room (OR) supervisor. Along the way, she and Sister Patty Aierhart commuted after work from Beaver Falls to Pittsburgh where she earned a BSN from Duquesne University in 1963. Immediately after graduation, she was missioned to Pittsburgh Hospital to head the state of the art Operating Room in the new East wing. She also began part time graduate study in nursing administration at the University of Pittsburgh. She was 53 years old and three credits away from completing her master's study when she became ill with colon cancer. The morning after surgery, she experienced a respiratory arrest. Fortunately, Sister Agnes Joseph was making routine rounds and found her. She awakened much later that day in the ICU surrounded by her very concerned family.

When she was missioned to what would be her favorite ministry, Jeannette District Memorial Hospital, she had served three years at Roselia, ten years at Providence Hospital and fifteen years at Pittsburgh Hospital.

Sister Bernadine found new life at Jeannette; she loved the patients, the staff and the physicians. She was evening and then night medical-surgical nursing supervisor from 1978 to 1994. Working the "off shifts," she realized that the night nurses are an invisible group of health professionals. She held annual Christmas parties, designed to honor and thank them. The night nurses assembled at 9:00 p.m., enjoyed a catered dinner, received presents, met Santa Claus, and were celebrated and entertained. The program ended so that those on duty that night would be able to be on time for the 11:00 shift. Sister Bernadine was planner, decorator, supervisor and drum major for the yearly event. Small

photo albums celebrating the annual Christmas Party are among the memorabilia in the Fidelis Conference Room. Upon retirement from JDMH in 1996, she coordinated the care of our sisters at Saint Anne Home while we built Caritas Christi. She was also the volunteer sacristan at Mercy Jeannette Hospital (1994-2010). She said that this experience seven days a week, 365 days a year, brought her closer to God. In 2009, she was honored as one of the top ten volunteers. She moved to Doran Hall in 1999, and came to live at Caritas Christi in July 2010.

Grace Dumm Lauer died at 48; her third daughter died shortly after her 90th birthday. During her professional career and her ministry as a Sister of Charity, she saw each of the institutions where she served close. However, she had learned from her parents to see each experience in life as a gift from God.

No one who prayed, exercised, ate with, or talked to Sister Bernadine the last week of her life anticipated the startling report from the night nurse as the shift changed on Sunday, August 16. As one of the sisters who cried in the dining room last Sunday morning, I also experienced a sense of victory and exhilaration. Bernie, our elegant, gracious, and beautiful lady, was spared a long, messy terminal illness. She died alone, quickly, and very peacefully. Among her legacy, she left sets of directions to help the planners of her wake and funeral liturgy. Our queen of organization wrote her “change of shift” report. Among the hand written notes was some advice to those she left behind. May I read an excerpt?

Miss me, but let me go. When I come to the end of the road and the sun has set for me, I want no rites in a gloom filled room. Why cry for a soul set free? . . . For this is a journey that we all must take. And each must go alone. It's all a part of God's plan, a step on the road to home. And bury your sorrows in doing good deeds. Miss me, but let me go.

Well done Bernie. Rejoice with the angels. You have a seat at the great banquet; enjoy eternal life.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Rosemary Donley
August 20, 2015*