



Theresa O'Brien, CSJ
September 21, 1927 ~ December 13, 2018

This life-long learner, advocate for the newcomer and woman of genuine goodness, was born on the beautiful Prince Edward Island in Canada, September 21, 1927. She died peacefully on December 13, 2018 at Carondelet Village in St. Paul.

In 1947 Theresa joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, and in 1959 she earned a BA in Sociology, Education and History from the College of St. Catherine. Further study awarded her certificates in innovative education, theology, ESL, Asian history and the Hmong language. Theresa's vocational work first began as a teacher in many Twin City elementary school communities including: Holy Spirit, St. Therese, St. John, and Transformation in St. Paul, and St. Helena in Minneapolis, and Nativity of Mary in Bloomington, MN.

After more than 20 years of teaching, Theresa was invited to join the pastoral team at The Church of St. Mary in downtown St. Paul where she immersed herself in outreach to the growing Hmong community. She worked tirelessly to obtain affordable housing, citizenship, and education, to provide crisis intervention and advocacy, all while giving dignity, gaining trust and offering love. In 1990, Theresa was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation from the Hmong-American National Catholic Association for her passionate efforts and deep concern for the well-being of the community. This passion later led her to work at three ministries of the Sisters of St. Joseph: St. Mary's Clinic, Sisters Care, and Learning in Style, where she continued to encounter the Hmong community she grew so fond of.

Offered by Rita Quigley, CSJC

Prince Edward Island, Canada sent more than 100 of its daughters into religious life. Mother Seraphine Ireland, CSJ visited the Island in the 1890's to recruit young women; 77 came over the years and 66 remained Sisters of St. Joseph. The O'Brien family sent 5: Sisters Zoe, Camillus, Herbert, Bertille and Alexandrius.

The Gavin's sent Sisters Prudentia and Anselm. The draw was so strong that a young Josephine Gavin came to Minnesota sent by her fiancé Herbert O'Brien to test her vocation and be sure of her choice. She decided it was not for her and returned to PEI to marry Herbert. They had 7 children and 3 of their 4 daughters chose to join their aunts and cousins as Sisters of St. Joseph.

Theresa was born in 1927 and, like many farm children who needed to 'board out' to complete their education, she lived with relatives for middle school and boarded at a convent school 4 years to obtain a high school diploma. Discovering that her Canadian credits would not transfer, she spent a year at St. Joseph's Academy and graduated a second time in the spring of 1947. She returned to PEI and in the fall of that same year she and her older sister Rita made the trip back to St. Paul where they both entered the novitiate. Three years later the middle sister Mary joined them.

Sister Frances Rita, as Theresa was known, began teaching in Twin City area parishes including Holy Spirit, St. Therese, St. John's, Nativity of Mary, Guardian Angels in Hastings, St. Luke's, St. John Baptist in Excelsior, St. John's in Little Canada, St. Helena's, and Transfiguration. She pursued various degrees and certificates starting with a BA in Education, Sociology and History from St. Kate's in 1959 and then further studies in theology, innovations in education, ESL, and Asian history. During the year of 1986 she studied the Hmong language.

After more than 20 years of teaching 2nd through 4th graders, Theresa was invited to join the pastoral team at the Church of St. Mary in downtown St. Paul. As an immigrant herself she had a heart for the growing Hmong community. She worked tirelessly to obtain affordable housing, citizenship and education, to provide crisis intervention and advocacy, all the while honoring the culture, gaining trust and offering loving welcome. In 1990, Theresa was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation from the Hmong-American National Catholic Association for the passion and deep concern she showed for the community. A more personal honor was her adoption into the Vang family and the conferral of a name, Pa Der, which means Little White Flower. This passion later led her to work at three CSJ ministries: St. Mary's Clinic, Sisters Care and Learning in Style where she could maintain contact with her many friends in the Hmong community.

Theresa is preceded in death by parents Josephine (Gavin) and Herbert O'Brien; sister Rita O'Brien, CSJ; brothers Alfred Zeno, Camillus, and Gerard O'Brien. She is survived by sisters Mary O'Brien, CSJ and Bernetta Rankin, countless friends; and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet and Consociates.

Mass of Christian Burial was Friday, December 21, 2018, at 11:00 AM, in Our Lady of the Presentation Chapel, 1884 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul, MN, with Visitation at 10:00 AM preceding Mass, and burial at Resurrection Cemetery in Mendota Heights, MN.

Sister Theresa, rest in love and peace.