



**Birth**  
Jan. 4, 1925

**Baptism**  
June 28, 1925

**First Profession**  
July 15, 1947

**Death**  
Aug. 31, 2016

**Burial**  
Our Lady of Good  
Counsel Cemetery  
Mankato, Minnesota

*Precious and blessed is  
the death of the faithful  
before God... for  
they die in union with  
their dear Jesus, in the  
grace of God, in peace.*

Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger  
Foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame  
Letter 11, September 10, 1831

## *In Loving Memory*

### Sister M. Cabrini Bongiovanni, SSND

Sister M. Cabrini Bongiovanni, 91, died Wednesday, Aug. 31, 2016, in Notre Dame Health Care, Our Lady of Good Counsel, Mankato, Minnesota. A decline in her condition caused her to enter Hospice about two weeks prior to her death. Sisters had been keeping vigil with her for several days.

Sister Cabrini was born in St. Paul on Jan. 4, 1925 to Italian immigrant parents. In the Italian custom, she was christened Francisca after her grandmother on June 28 at Holy Redeemer Church. Frances, as she was known, was joined by her brother, Nick, two years later, and her sister, Laura, in another three years.

In 2011, Sister Cabrini published the story of her life and ministry entitled "A Song of Joy, of Love, Life and Laughter." In it, she described her childhood, "I loved to dance and sing! I was a happy child and loved to make up my own tap dances and rhythms to the jazzy music on our player piano or on the radio. My folks often marveled at the precision of the dance steps." Frances attended Jefferson School, a short distance from their home, until the family moved to a home that her Uncle Nick had built on a five-acre farm. There she attended a one-room school with one teacher for all eight grades. Frances found this a difficult change. Frances worked in her uncle's restaurant when she was in high school, earning the name "Little Miss Sunshine" for her cheerful disposition. She attended Murray Public High School, and it was toward the end of her senior year when she began to experience the call to religious life.

She attended a spirit-filled retreat at Corpus Christi Parish, their family church. A priest asked her if she wanted to become a nun. Her emphatic response was, "Oh, no, Father. I'm not good enough to be a nun." Shortly before graduation, she met a former classmate, who was then attending Good Counsel Academy in Mankato as an aspirant. In conversation, Frances again adamantly stated that she did not want to be a nun. She wrote, "I had always wanted to be a singer, a dancer, and a movie star, anything but a nun!" And yet, she told her friend that she would visit the sisters at St. Andrew's convent with her the next day. Frances had almost no experience with sisters, but found them to be gentle and understanding. Soon after, she was invited to go to SSND reception and profession ceremonies with her friend. She accepted the invitation, but was hesitant to go. Her attendance at the ceremonies convinced her, however, that she should give religious life a try. She entered the SSND candidature in August 1944 and attended college classes, including an art class, where she discovered her artistic talent. She was received into the novitiate in July 1946 and given the name Sister M. Cabrini, taken from the newly canonized Italian-born American saint, Frances Xavier Cabrini.

Following profession of first vows in 1947, Sister Cabrini began a 30-year teaching ministry. She taught primary grades at St. Anthony, Lismore; St. Mark, Shakopee; St. Francis de Sales, St. Matthew and Holy Childhood,

*continued*

# In Loving Memory



*Sister Cabrini Bongiovanni*



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**School Sisters  
of Notre Dame**  
Central Pacific Province

TRANSFORMING THE WORLD  
THROUGH EDUCATION

St. Paul; Holy Rosary, North Mankato; Immaculate Conception, Gilbertville, Iowa; Blessed Sacrament, Waterloo, Iowa; SS. Peter & Paul, Strasburg, North Dakota; St. Bartholomew, Wayzata; St. Anne, Wabasso; and St. Mathias, Wanda. She earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education from St. Catherine's College, St. Paul, Minnesota in 1958.

A very creative teacher, Sister Cabrini used a variety of means to enhance her classes. She became fascinated with ventriloquism after seeing Shari Lewis and her puppets on television. Using a library book as a resource, Sister Cabrini began practicing in the convent. She wrote, "I was richly rewarded one day at school when I was using a moving mouth puppet to say good-bye to the children. One youngster said in amazement, 'Gee, Sister! It looks like he's really talking!'" Using another book, she found that it was possible to make her own ventriloquist figure. She had been given a piece of basswood and used borrowed scout knives to carve Jerry, her own little boy figure, complete with moving mouth and eyes.

She gave a performance at a parish picnic and later reflected, "I think it was at that time that God planted a little seed of longing inside of me. It was unusual, to say the least, for a nun to become a performer. The longing persisted. Why couldn't I bring the message of God's love to everyone, young and old, through a ministry of entertainment?" She pursued the idea with Mankato Province leadership and it was decided that she would be freed from classroom teaching for a year to explore this ministry. She began an arrangement with Ed and Thelma Mahowald, whom she knew from her days at St. Matthew Convent. Ed was a master jack-of-all-trades who assisted Sister Cabrini in many ways, and served as her driver. Thelma was the "business wizard", who set up the engagements. Sister Cabrini expanded her repertoire to include magic, original music and chalk art, and the year-long experiment became an almost 30-year ministry. She prepared programs that could be adapted to any type of audience "from 2 to 92." A blurb in the (Minneapolis) Star Tribune stated: "She appears before all types of audiences – public and parochial schools, Sunday Schools, homes for the elderly, colleges, Scout banquets, hospitals . . . 'I have always been a ham,' she said. 'As a kid, I loved to dance, sing and write poetry. I thought I had given all that up when I entered the convent. But the Lord turned right around and gave it all back to me.'"

Sister Cabrini retired from the entertainment ministry in 2003 but continued to write and paint. In 2010, she moved to Good Counsel where, whenever she had the opportunity, she continued to entertain – with no coaxing needed.

The funeral Mass, with Father Eugene Stenzel as presider, was held Sept. 6, in Our Lady of Good Counsel Chapel. A prayer service of remembrance was held prior to the Mass. Sister Cabrini is survived by her sister, Laura Roiger, her extended family, and her sisters in community, the School Sisters of Notre Dame. She was preceded in death by her parents, Lorenzo Bongiovanni and Antoinetta (Labalestra) Gasparro, and her brother, Nick.

*By Sister Mary Kay Ash, SSND*