



School Sisters of Notre Dame
Atlantic-Midwest Province

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sister M. Orontia Walsh, SSND
December 29, 1928 – June 3, 2018



Wilton, CONN - Sister Orontia, 89, died peacefully at Villa Notre Dame on the morning of June 3, 2018 following a brief illness. She was a vowed member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame for 69 years and ministered as a teacher in Maryland and Massachusetts for 58 years.

Rita Barbara Walsh was born in Malden, Massachusetts, a few days after Christmas in 1928, and called Bobbie by her family. Her parents, Joseph Henry Walsh and Mary Agnes Cotter, natives of Boston and Malden respectively, had Rita baptized at Immaculate Conception, Malden, their parish church. Eventually the family numbered eight girls and one boy who died at 20 months.

All the sisters attended Immaculate Conception School and Girls' Catholic High School, both staffed by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. In 1940 Rita was confirmed by Archbishop Cushing at a nearby parish. At the end of her junior year, "my very good friend Anna Mae O'Donnell, a senior, told me that she was entering the School Sisters in Baltimore, something I also wanted to do. Anna Mae wrote to my mother telling her of my desire, but my mother said I was too young. She spoke to my grandmother who was more receptive, and who told my mother to let me enter because if it was not the life for me I would soon know it." So, on August 28, 1946, Anna Mae and Rita left for the Candidature.

"Since I had not completed high school and had asked to be a house sister, I spent my first year as a cook in Griffin, Georgia, a newly opened mission. My superiors reviewed my high school transcript and decided that I would be a teacher, so I spent the second

year of candidature completing my high school courses at the Institute of Notre Dame in Baltimore. Maybe my cooking skills were lacking,” she wrote with tongue in cheek, “but I was most happy in Georgia.”

Entering the novitiate on July 16, 1948, Rita became Sister Mary Orontia. First vows followed on August 3, 1949, and final profession on August 3, 1955. At her first mission, St. Ann’s in Baltimore, she taught grades 2, 3 and 4, for 16 years, 1949 to 1965. After school and during summers, she studied Elementary Education at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland. Of these years, she wrote, “It was difficult to be so far away from my family when my father became ill, but I was able to visit him before he died in 1962.”

In 1965, Sister Orontia was missioned to St. Peter School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she completed 40 years, 33 of them as a teacher of math and religion in grades 3 to 6, “two subjects that I thoroughly enjoyed.” For 15 of these years she also taught religious education, and from 1996 to 2004, computer, an interest she picked up when teaching fifth grade.

Of these years, Sister Orontia wrote, “I was always so grateful to be involved in family activities and to be present at our many weddings and parties.” She enjoyed many Red Sox games with her nephew, who was always able to acquire good seats at Fenway Park. One year on Nuns’ Day at the park, her picture appeared on the front page of the *Boston Globe* to her surprise and embarrassment and the delight of family and friends. During her later years at St. Peter’s School, Sister Orontia lived in the convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Medford.

One of Sister Orontia’s treasured possessions is a prayer signed by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, acquired when she met her in Rome on her Jubilee trip. “It is now a relic.”

On March 5, 2005, St. Peter’s School held a Gala Event at which Sister Orontia was guest of honor; it celebrated her 40 years ministering in the school. All sisters who had served at St. Peter’s since it opened its doors 104 years earlier were also honored and thanked. On September 14, 2013, a special Liturgy of Thanksgiving celebrated Sister Orontia’s retirement after 48 years at the school. “This was such a memorable occasion, although a bit overwhelming and humbling for me,” she wrote in her autobiography, the last paragraph of which reads:

After much prayer I made the decision to come to Villa Notre Dame in July 2014. It was a good decision and I have loved being at the Villa and now here in Lourdes with my SSND family. I have enjoyed my life thus, and continue to live it with a spirit of peace and joy.

Sister Elaine Polcari had become friendly with Sister Orontia when she was studying theology and both were living at St. Peter's Convent. Later, Sister Elaine helped with her decision to leave Medford and go to Wilton.

Sister Elaine presided over her wake service on the evening of June 5 in the chapel at Villa Notre Dame. She recalled that when they were all at home, Sister Orontia's mother had assigned an older sister to care for a younger one. Rita looked after Miriam; years later Miriam and her family were very faithful to Sister Orontia as she grew older and needed care. Miriam Murray, Joanne Visconte, and Patricia Comerford were present at the wake and funeral, with many other members of the family. Orontia's devoted nephew, Frank Murray, of the Red Sox tickets, spoke humorously and movingly of his relationship with the aunt to whom his grandmother had assigned his mother.

At the Liturgy of Christian Burial, on June 6, Villa chaplain Tom Elliott, CSC, led the family and community in quietly joyous worship. Burial was in West Roxbury, Massachusetts the next morning, in the SSND section of Mount Benedict Cemetery. Sister Orontia was buried next to her sister, Miriam Joseph Walsh, SSND.

Memorial contributions may be made to the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Atlantic Midwest Province, c/o Development Office, 345 Belden Hill Road, Wilton, Conn. 06897 or online: www.amssnd.org