



Obituary

Sr Petra Keller OP

17.03.1928 - 11.08.2024



*Praise the Lord with the harp.
Make music to him with ten strings.
Sing to him a new song.
Play skillfully with a shout of joy.*
(Psalm 33: 2,3)

Gertrud Maria Keller was born in Ratibor, Silesia, Southern Poland, Archdiocese of Gnesen-Posen, on 17 March 1928 to Joseph and Hedwig Keller. She entered the Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of Oakford, Natal, in Neustadt, Germany, on 1 September 1946. On 1 July 1947 she was clothed and received the name Sr. Petra. Sr. Petra made her first profession on 15 August 1948. On 24 October 1949 she travelled by ship to South Africa.

Sr Petra's experience of being a refugee during World War II remained in her memory and her heart all her life. When War broke out she was ten years old. Only two churches remained open, one for Germans, one for Poles, and her father was in constant danger of being sent to a concentration camp. She, her siblings and her mother went to live with relatives while her father remained in Posen. When Breslau fell into Russian hands in January 1945, the family and other refugees were taken to Slovakia, surviving three attacks on the train. Families lived thirty people to a room in a school. When news came that Germany had lost the War, the people of the village turned against the refugees. Instead of returning to Silesia, the Keller family decided to go to Bavaria where friends were living, walking first to Linz, afraid of being caught by German soldiers. When Linz was handed over to the Russians, they had again to flee, finally arriving in Würzburg in November 1945, nearly a year after they had first left the home of their relatives. While her brother was killed in Russia in 1944, her father was finally reunited with the family at Pentecost in 1946.

Sr Petra's education was interrupted by the outbreak of War but over time she completed 8 years of education, enrolling at the Music Conservatory when she was in her final year of school. In South Africa she completed her matric, as well as teacher's diplomas in music through Trinity College, London, and the University of South Africa. Known in her younger years as "the girl with the violin", Sr Petra had a life-long passion for the music having carried her own precious violin with her throughout the War, for

church music and for classical music. She taught music, piano and violin, at Oakford, in Greytown, in Virginia, in Manzini, and in Empangeni. Some of her pupils later became committed musicians themselves. She was recognized as one of the best musicians in the Congregation. In her final years at Villa Siena in Pietermaritzburg she however showed no interest in some of the less than harmonious sing-a-longs that took place from time to time!

Sr Petra became a South African citizen in 1966, going on to serve in leadership as Prioress in Empangeni, as Regional Councillor in South Africa, and as General Councillor. She participated in sabbaticals: "Fons Vitae", Johannesburg; Leadership Course, Spokane, USA; Biblical studies plus renewal, Jerusalem.

Everyone knew that Sr Petra liked sweet things, and often preferred them to meat and vegetables. One story told was that she gave a visiting priest her meat in return for his dessert! She never lost her sense of humour. "Always there, always a lady" is how many Sisters and friends remember her. She made her own clothes and always looked smart. Her loyalty and commitment to people especially in Empangeni, to St Catherine's and to the parish was total. She worked hard and gave her all. She loved teaching religion classes to the matriculants at St Catherine's and leading their retreats. She did some vocation promotion among the girls, wondering whether one of them had a call to religious life. The girl in question said, "Actually Sister, the call hasn't come!" Sisters in the community found her fair, newcomers and younger Sisters were taken under her wing, often with coffee and a chocolate added. Her spirituality, her devotion to Our Lady and to her own mother, remained with her to the end. She was often in the chapel or in her own room praying.

Sr Petra retired to Villa Siena in 2014 after the closing of the convent in Empangeni, maintaining her love for St Catherine's and everything associated with it for the rest of her life. In the last months of her life, when travel was no longer possible, she kept asking for a lift to her beloved Empangeni. Her Oakford Sisters in South Africa were able to bid her farewell a couple of days before she died peacefully in her room, ready to meet the One she had loved and served over many years. May she become a new intercessor for the Congregation!

Rest in peace, Sr Petra!

*"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
and my spirit exults in God my saviour
because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid.
Yes, from this day forward all generations will call me blessed,
for the Almighty has done great things for me."*

(Lk 1:46-49)