Dear Friends,

Music is our emotional memory. Among people in their eighties and nineties, we often hear the murmured lament, “I’m getting so forgetful lately.” But just turn on a medley of songs popular fifty or seventy years ago and they will remember every detail. The three sisters featured in these pages entered the Caldwell congregation in 1948. Bring them together in 2019 and, as soon as Sister Catherine Gerard strums her guitar, Sister Mary Ann O’Connor will remember the top songs on the 1948’s Hit Parade, while Sister Margaret Lucille’s feet will begin tapping as she remembers dancing to them.

One of the best places to experience music is our Motherhouse Chapel. Its acoustics magnify volume without distorting the reverence of liturgical prayer. Thank God the chapel escaped damage from the recent flood that dismantle our offices, hallways, Lumen Center and Heritage Rooms.

Your generosity to appeals from our development office will help to defray the expense of restoring these spaces. More than that, every donation magnifies the capacity of the Sisters of Saint Dominic to continue to make music with and for God’s people.

Gratefully,

Sister Patrice Werner, OP
Priorress

In the beginning...

ENTRANCE DAY
AUGUST 30, 1948

FIRST STEP TO THE
VOWED LIFE:
POSTULANCY

Mary Ann O’Connor, Post.
Margaret Peterson, Post. and
Catherine Kirchner, Post.
“Turning 90 – How does it feel?”
Sister Catherine Gerard Kirchener
answers this question eagerly: “It’s been a great trip!” Eyes twinkling, she adds “But it gets you thinking, ‘You’d better start shaping up!’”

“My family gave me a very nice party,” says this hospitable woman who has hosted some great family parties herself throughout her seventy years as a Dominican. Kirchener parties always include music. “We are a very musical family,” she explains. “My mother could play by ear—anything. Just hum it and she could play it. And Loretta was the same way. And Rita too. I can play the piano by ear too, but not as well.” Her joyful voice turns wistful as she continues “All my siblings are gone now. But I’m very blessed with both my families.” Looking back, she observes that her first family prepared her for an essential aspect of Dominican life: community. Two other dimensions of religious life for which she is most thankful are the “opportunity to grow in closeness to God” and her varied ministries. She defines ministry as “the opportunity to be in people’s lives. . . How they trust you! It’s a sacred privilege to hear their stories and give them comfort — God’s comfort, not yours.”
eventually in Nutley, Roseland, and finally for her last 10 years in active ministry, in Saint Joseph Parish, in Bogota. From Bogota a prayer group comes to Caldwell every month.

In 2010, serious surgery persuaded Sister Catherine to retire to a completely volunteer ministry with the “older sisters.” In retirement she assumes many roles in which her patience in attending to small problems is often apparent. Although she has had no special technical training, she is one of the few sisters to whom anyone can go when having a problem with a computer or some other “new-fangled” gadget. “If it’s not working, I’m not afraid to try something. Let’s see what happens,” she says. I’m a risk taker. I don’t know how the computer feels about that.”

Always meticulous about timing, Sister Catherine Gerard thinks it’s time to begin preparing for her final transition. Artificial Intelligence has not yet devised a reliable way to predict a date for that. So with characteristic humor Sister Catherine Gerard issues a general invitation:

“Don’t miss my funeral. It’s going to be something wonderful! My very musical family will have all the guitars here and we’re going to really celebrate my life!”
For many years, Dominican jubilee celebrations have known Sister Margaret Lucille Peterson as a confident, graceful dancer. Today, as she completes her eighties and braces herself for her ninetieth birthday, she admits that old age has become “the time when everything you used to take for granted, like dancing, would take a miracle.” However, a recent episode hints at what that miracle might feel like.

For the past ten years, Sister Margaret Lucille’s tall, slender figure could be seen bent over a rollator, walking with painful difficulty. Reluctantly accepting this as her “new normal,” she seldom dared to pray for relief. So it was a pleasant shock last spring when, without any medical intervention, she suddenly stood erect, discarded the rollator, and walked steadily down the hall. “God is alive!” she announced, grateful for a little unsolicited miracle. Retaining her walker now mainly as insurance Sister Margaret Lucille focuses on securing whatever independence still lies under her control.

This positive attitude was evident throughout a recent interview:

Sure, I have a lot wrong with me, but I can walk, I can talk, I can read, I can write, I can cook.

You can still cook?

Yes, I love to cook. I can’t say that I’m in good health, but I won’t say I’m in bad health. After all, I go to about seven doctors. It’s annoying, but it’s not destructive. With all that, I have to say, I’m good.

During this conversation, we reviewed a ministry history in which she served successively as parochial school teacher and administrator, director of religious education, pastoral associate, managing director of senior housing, personnel director, and elected congregational councilor. For Sister Margaret Lucille, as for many sisters, it was not uncommon to carry several roles simultaneously.
Of the elderly with whom she spent her last five years in active ministry:

_They were very nice to me. They could see I was almost as old as they were. And they let me know it! But it was all good. Fortunately, I really did like every job I had. Even the parish where the pastor used to send curt instructions through the janitor – the people and the school were still lovely._

As Sister Margaret Lucille commented on her varied assignments, a unifying theme emerged: Each ministry was another “learning experience.” Settings as different as Lacordaire Academy, Upper Montclair, from inner-city Newark, and roles as different as pastoral associate in Our Lady of Holy Angels parish, Little Falls, from director of Lincoln Hill, a senior housing complex in West Milford. Each demanded a different skill set.

As Sister Margaret Lucille recalled each assignment, she repeated one refrain: “They taught me so much I loved it there… I learned a lot.”

Sister illustrated one “learning experience” with impressive candor. She had just completed fifteen years as principal at Lacordaire when she received a call from Sister Vivien asking her to consider being principal at St. Antoninus. “On my own, I would have stayed away from the challenge. So I learned to face each day by being strict, but not unkind, by being a person who really cared for them. For me personally, that was a very, very, good experience.”

_That last sentence could be repeated by everyone – sister, student, parent, pastor, parishioner, elder – who ever shared life with Sister Margaret Lucille._
Music’s blessing is a gift, first of all, not to the audience, but to the singer. Sister Mary Ann O’Connor has appreciated this gift most deeply, she tells us, when planning and singing in liturgical celebrations. These events, ranging from first Communion to first Mass, from weddings to funerals, have given her the opportunity, not to enjoy moments of solo triumph, but to minister to people at times of loss when deep and conflicting emotions open everyone to singular grace.

Many sisters remember with fond appreciation Mary Ann’s generous response – sometimes at great inconvenience – to help alleviate a family’s sense of loss by making the funeral of a loved one uniquely and personally unforgettable. At the same time, sisters in Sister Mary Ann’s Caldwell community treasure another gift, a contrast from her talent for celebratory funerals, and that gift is her signature wit, spontaneous, topical, and often ironic – beyond imitation or paraphrase. Sister Mary Ann began creating music in Saint John’s School in Jersey City with kindergarten children, and in a way, she has never left them – or rather, they have never left her. She has said that fond memories of working with children continued to inspire her when, after years of making music with children at two Dominican academies, she created music for children in the Disney concerts she produced with the music department at Caldwell University. Children are among her favorite visitors now. Among them are seven-year-olds who educate her by proudly performing on their self-produced videos. One forty-two-year-old “boy” with Down Syndrome who calls twice a week knows her as “Sister Mary Ann, my best friend.”
Some musicians exhibit the virtues we ascribe to the art of music itself. One gift that music seems to have given to Sister Mary Ann is the power to transform a group of vocalists into a singing community. In her decades-long career as a musician she has directed them under all titles: choir, chorus, glee club, scholar cantorum. At every level from kindergarten through college and adulthood – those who made music with Sister Mary Ann O’Connor have bonded – often for a lifetime. No wonder, then, that she spontaneously describes her “retirement world” in terms of a “new community.”

When Sister Mary Ann retired as director of music for the parish of St. Catharine, Spring Lake, it took almost three years to hire a replacement. But in no time at all, Mary Ann could describe her life-after-music as “sharing life with a wider community.” This new community now comprises senior swimming partners who have never seen her in a Dominican habit and children like the one who asked her to be her confirmation sponsor who have never seen any nun’s habit at all. Sister Mary Ann’s “gleeful” club no longer assembles in either choir loft or auditorium. Scheduled rehearsals have been superseded by the impromptu hospitality of a home. In her own words, “I am enhancing my Dominican identity and sharing it with others in new and unexpected ways.”

Sister Mary Ann’s most difficult life transition came when she lost her singing voice and she gradually separated from the music ministry. At first, this loss felt like the total erasure of her identity. She is grateful to the good friend whose advice helped rescue her from an uncharacteristic sadness by slowly bringing her to realize that her gifts are not solely or even primarily musical. “The people you meet now never heard you sing. They know you only as this person they just met, the person you are and are still becoming.”

“Each of us is still becoming.”

Mary Ann gives us all something to sing about!
Planned Giving establishes a way for you to provide for your heirs while remembering the sisters. You may be able to leave more to your heirs and make a larger gift to the sisters than you thought possible. A planned gift through a will, estate plan or another type of deferred gift such as one through an IRA or retirement fund, life insurance policy, or charitable trust gives you an opportunity to provide future support for the Caldwell Dominicans as well as opportunities for short and long term tax benefits. We encourage you to consult with a financial advisor, accountant, or attorney about structuring charitable giving in a way that best meets your philanthropic and financial goals.

Please call our development office or see your financial planner for more information.

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