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Sr. Rita Mary Olszewski

LDN STAFF -

Thursday, March 26, 2009

Sister Rita Mary Olszewski, RSM

June 5, 1948 - March 21, 2009

photo

Sister Rita Mary Olszewski, RSM, had a love of teaching, a concern for the poor and disadvantaged and a passion for peace and justice work. Before her death, Saturday, March 21 at the age of 60, she had managed to make her mark in each of those areas. She entered the Sisters of Mercy in Detroit Province and was a Sister of Mercy for 43 years.

Sister Rita Mary was born to Theodore and Helen (Charles) Olszewski on June 5, 1948. She was baptized and educated in her home parish, St. Anthony's, Temperance. She graduated from Notre Dame Academy in Toledo, Ohio, in 1966 and joined the Sisters of Mercy, Province of Detroit on August 22 of that same year. After several years of religious and professional preparation she made perpetual vows on August 20, 1972.

Sister Rita Mary earned a bachelor of arts degree in history from Mercy College of Detroit and a master of arts degree in history from the University of Detroit. For nineteen years, she taught in Michigan's parochial schools in Pontiac, Holland, Ludington, Howell, Cadillac, Royal Oak, Berkley and Auburn Hills. She truly enjoyed teaching and said, "I wanted to teach until I couldn't hear or see the kids anymore." In 1983, however, she became acquainted with Pax Christi, an international peace organization, and although she continued to teach, she was increasingly drawn to work with organizations for peace and justice.

Sister Rita Mary became an administrative assistant for Peace Action of Michigan in 1990 and also served as a substitute teacher at Hamtramck Adult Education Center and at Roeper Country and Day School, Bloomfield Hills. In addition, she initiated a summer Children's Peace School at St. Leo's Parish in downtown Detroit. In 1994, she served as executive secretary for the Cranbrook Peace Foundation and the next year assumed a similar position for the Catholic Caucus of Southeast Michigan. She continued her work with the Catholic Caucus from 1997 to 2005.

These ministries led her to meet and work with many others in the peace movement, most notably Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, who served as Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Detroit from 1968 to 2006 and as pastor of St. Leo's Parish for nearly 25 years. In her capacity as assistant to Bishop Gumbleton, she worked with him in planning his extensive responsibilities as a bishop, as pastor of St. Leo's and as a leader in local, national and international peace efforts.

During her life, Sister Rita Mary participated in a number of peace organizations including Pax Christi, SANE/FREEZE, Michigan Alliance Against Losing the Safety Net and the Sisters of Mercy Justice Committee. She participated in local, state and national conferences, continuing to learn more about what it meant to be a peace activist. In 1996, Peace Action of Michigan recognized her with the Doug Lent Peacebuilder Award. She was actively opposed to the United States' sanctions on Iraq because of the hardships she perceived this brought to the Iraqi people. In December 1999, she became part of a peace delegation to Iraq. When war was initiated in Iraq, she joined a protest outside the federal building in downtown Detroit and was arrested along with 21 other persons. The judge sentenced her to eight months of community service, a sentence which writers Cokie and Steve Roberts viewed as ironic for a Sister of Mercy as that "is what they do best."

Sister Rita Mary is remembered by her friends and family as a person with a positive attitude, always willing to help out and often initiating ways to improve a situation. Her great concern and compassion for the poor and disadvantaged were evident in her actions and her prayer life. Because of her interest and knowledge of history she often enjoyed serving as an interpreter at the Henry Ford Museum.

She is survived by her mother, Helen; a sister, Monica (Larry) Kesting; two brothers, Jerry (Laura) and Jim (Cheryl); several nieces and nephews, the Sisters of Mercy and many friends.