

HER LIFE  
+ faith

Sister Adela Gross, left, a Franciscan nun from Little Falls, performs a baptism in 1975. Contributed



## Brief but Spectacular Moments FROM A LONG LIFE

BY JANET KURTZ

What do Mario Andretti (race car driver), Cesar Chavez (founder of the United Farm Workers Union) and Bello Nock (renowned Ringling Brothers circus clown), have in common? Give up?

Meet Sister Adela Gross — a Franciscan nun from Little Falls, now celebrating her 75th jubilee of service. Her “brief but spectacular moments” range from working among the Aymara Indians in Peru, joining mission efforts in China, teaching catechism to migrant workers in the Rio Grande Valley, and working among the circus, carnival, gypsy and race track circuit populations.

“I’ve had nuns in my life ever since grade

school at St. Joseph in Pierz,” Sister Adela recalls.

“Many girls wanted to become nuns then. I liked helping the Sisters by cleaning blackboards after class. In high school, I rode the school bus from Pierz to St. Francis High School in Little Falls, where I met the Franciscan Sisters. In my senior year, I decided to join them. The two years after graduation were spent in the novitiate, learning scripture, prayers and the Franciscan way of life,” she said.

Her novitiate was followed by a ceremony of profession of the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience for a three-year period, after which she professed

perpetual vows. “Our future ministry,” Sister Adela explained, “was determined by the superiors according to the strengths and talents they had observed during our training.”

After two years of college, Sister Adela was assigned to teach in the elementary schools of the St. Cloud Dioceses. “Many parishes were opening Catholic schools so the need for teachers was great,” Sister Adela remembered. “Of my 16 years as an elementary teacher, a most memorable year was when I had a class of 52 seventh and eighth graders at St. Mary’s Cathedral School in St. Cloud, before the opening of The Holy Spirit School. I had to go up three flights of stairs many times a day,

usually with a very noisy group following behind. I got pneumonia that year. The heat didn't go up that far. The kids would stand around the thermostat blowing on it, thinking that would change the temperature!"

In 1966, Sister Adela became a student herself at a Spanish Language Institute associated with the Catholic University in Ponce, Puerto Rico. After five months of immersion, she was commissioned to start work in Peru. She arrived in Yunguyo, Peru, a small town located on the shores of Lake Titicaca.

"We lived in the village, but the parish consisted of over 30 small communities scattered all over the altiplano," she began. "Some Sisters were nurses, traveling out to homes or working in the one-room clinic. I taught catechetics and trained indigenous pastoral leaders. And, because of a shortage of priests, we performed many rites including baptisms, weddings and funerals."

The Aymara beliefs are a syncretic mix of indigenous traditions and Catholicism. They believe the devil was released on Good Friday when Jesus died. To protect themselves, they place large rocks on the roads entering their villages to block the devil's access.

"One Good Friday," Sister Adela shared, "after attending the Way of the Cross in the plazas, Sister Donna Zeta and I drove off to attend a prayer service in another community in the campo. The road was situated between the mountain's wall and a steep precipice. It was getting dark when, up ahead, we saw a large rock in the middle of the road. It was impossible to move," she recounted, "but Donna surveyed the situation and announced she'd squeeze around it and it was my job to pray! We made it, but I couldn't concentrate during the service, wondering how we'd get back. Miraculously, on our return, the (Easter) rock had been moved aside!"

Sister Adela also worked coordinating the Sisters in Venezuela, Peru and Colombia, often crossing into Bolivia and Chile. "My passport had so many tack-ons, it looked like an accordion!" she quipped. "But, after 11 years, it was time to go home. I took a sabbatical and traveled with my sister, Marie, to Germany to follow our mother, Anna Weidenbach's, roots."

Next, Sister Ramona, a nurse from Peru



Sister Adela traveled all over the world during her years of service and said her "passport had so many tack-ons, it looked like an accordion." Contributed

days, invited Sister Adela to join her in the Rio Grande Valley. They lived in a mobile home, Ramona tending the sick and delivering babies, while Sister Adela continued religious teachings in three small communities. Some people had small ranches, but most were migrants working in the fields harvesting vegetables and picking fruits.

It was after four years of community leadership in Little Falls and time with factory workers in Lufkin, Texas, that she embarked on a completely new direction. She began her new ministry in Washington, D.C., working with Catholic Missionaries around the world. It was during this time she became involved with groups fostering relationships between the Catholic church of the United States and China.

"A highlight of this ministry was a trip to China during which I visited with Chinese bishops, priests and nuns," she added, "all of whom had suffered persecution and many imprisonments under the communist regime. Their heroic sacrifices inspired me. I felt like I was in the presence of living saints."

Sister Adela moved on to the Catholic Bishop's Conference where she became the Coordinator of Pastoral Care to People on the Move. One afternoon, she showed me a photo of circus clowns and their chaplains. Sister Adela smiled, "Once, the auxiliary Bishop of Boston was going to administer the sacraments during the Ringling Brothers performances at the old Boston Gardens. My nephew and I attended, but left the performance early to find the area where the Bishop would preside. While heading down a long corridor, we heard a thunderous movement behind us. Someone shouted, 'The elephants are coming!' We broke into a run, but the elephants were gaining. Up

ahead, a huge ladder was perched along the wall, so we wedged behind it while the elephants, some 30 of them, stampeded by. Another miracle!"

This ministry took her in many different directions including attendance at auto races where she met Mario Andretti and his family. Her main focus, however, was migrant workers. This took her to California where she had the opportunity to visit with Cesar Chavez. "This was a difficult time for him," Sister Adela reported, "as he was facing a court trial over the lettuce boycott. He looked extremely tired and died the night before he was to appear in court at Yuma."

In a recent conversation about the tragedy at Uvalde's Robb Elementary School, Sister Adela asked if I was familiar with the migrant camp at Brooten, Minnesota. "Many migrants from Uvalde go there in the summers to help with the harvest. Sadly, I discovered a grandniece of one of the women working there for 25 years, was killed on that day, as well as other family members from that camp."

Connections of love, empathy, joy, and yes, sorrow. We are connected through our stories. Thanks to Sister Adela's stories, there are now only three degrees of separation between you, Mario, Cesar, and Bello among myriad others.

Sister Adela, we celebrate your journey and your connections. We wish you a joyous and blessed 75th jubilee!



**Janet Kurtz's** book, *Northern Shores/Southern Borders: Revelations of a Bilingual Life*, is available at local stores as well as online with Amazon and Barnes and Noble. It just became available as an e-book, so read away!