

Sister Claude Feldner, CSA

Sister Claude (Esther Mary) Feldner, CSA, 109, a resident at St. Francis Home, passed away Wednesday April 2, 2008, at her home.

She was born in St. Cloud, Wisconsin, on September 11, 1898, the daughter of the late Peter and Lidwina Bittner Feldner.

Even before she was professed on August 15, 1917, Sister Claude was sent as a teen-ager, a candidate in the Congregation of St. Agnes, to teach in Defiance, Ohio. Her talent as a musician led to a bachelor's degree in music with a major in violin from Ft. Hays State Teachers College (Kansas, 1922) and a masters in music education with continued piano study from DePaul University in Chicago in 1938. From 1917 on Sister Claude taught primarily music and gave private music lessons to pupils in Kansas, Indiana, and Wisconsin.



In 1946, Sister Claude was assigned as novice directress, guiding the young women who came to be Sisters of St. Agnes and preparing them for their first profession of vows, a ministry she held until 1962. Her music abilities during this time enriched community prayer and relaxation as she taught the novices Gregorian chant, or played the organ for church services when needed or entertained with her violin. The following two years Sister Claude returned to teaching music at Marian College and giving private lessons while she continued guiding the first year vowed sisters as their directress. She closed out her last ten years of teaching music, giving private lessons, conducting a girls' choir, and playing the organ for church services at St. Mary's School in Oshkosh, WI.

As an educator and as a mentor, Sister Claude believed not in promoting herself but in drawing the best out of the students she taught and the women she mentored. She challenged without diminishing the other. She developed infinite patience, which she exhibited all her life. Above all, she modeled what she taught.

At 76 years of age, Sister Claude moved to the convent in North Fond du Lac and began a new ministry of telephone reassurance service for the elderly in the Fond du Lac and North Fond du Lac areas. Other services she rendered included taking Holy Communion to shut-ins, volunteering at the North Fond du Lac Senior Center, and doing outreach with the parish mission group. When Sister Claude "retired" in 1982, she spent the first sixteen years at Nazareth Heights playing the organ for Masses and religious services.

In 1998 she relocated to Nazareth Center when the Heights was closed, finishing her retirement years at St. Francis Home. In keeping with her belief that "retirement is a time to be as active as possible, to live life to its fullest, to maintain varied interests and leave the rest to God," Sister Claude was interested in current issues, especially justice issues and those affecting the poor. At times she was moved to write letters to the editor to speak for those unable to speak for themselves. She was often found or heard playing the piano, a musician to the end. Even in recent weeks when she could no

longer play, she sometimes spent time in the early evening visiting one of her sister-friends, recalling fond memories and singing German songs.

With a lifetime spanning three centuries, Sister Claude was a walking history book of the congregation and Fond du Lac as well as of events in the wider world. Sisters, family, and friends loved to hear her stories and recollections of earlier times. Some of these that she has written down include end of school year picnics in the early 1900s; family entertainment before radio, television, or tape recorders; her father's work as a cobbler and his teaching his trade to one of the early Sisters of St. Agnes; the tragedy of World War I; and experiences of the early Sisters of St. Agnes in her hometown of St. Cloud.

Woman religious, musician, spiritual guide and mentor, she did all things well, always seeing herself as God's servant and life as a journey with God. She once wrote, "We come from God and we go to God. What lies between these two poles is what we call the journey of life." She called her retirement home the "vestibule to heaven."

Sister Claude would be the last person to call herself a model religious or an exemplary human being, but she did know the meaning of living life to the fullest. Her love of life was an overflow of her love for God. Her spirit flows through these words written in 1996: "May the glorious spirit of Easter inspire all of us to fresh enthusiasm to walk our way along the Risen Savior's landmarks!"

Survivors include nieces, nephews, other relatives, friends, and the members of the Congregation of Saint Agnes with whom she lived and ministered.

Visitation: Visitation will be held on Saturday, April 5, 9:00 a.m. to 1:45 p.m. at Nazareth Court and Center, 375 Gillett Street, where a prayer service will be held at 11:00 a.m.

Services: A Mass of Christian Burial will be celebrated at 2:00 p.m. Saturday at the St. Francis Home Chapel, 33 Everett Street. Burial will be in St. Joseph's Springs Cemetery, Fond du Lac. Fr. Edward Sippel will officiate.

Memorials may be directed to the Sisters of St. Agnes Development Office, 320 County Road K, Fond du Lac, WI 54935.

The Sisters of St. Agnes are grateful to the nurses and staff at St. Francis Home and Hospice Hope for their care for Sister Claude.