



Sister Anella Salber, OSB

February 20, 1920 - November 28, 2006,

On Tuesday, November 28, at 8:15 a.m., our dear Sister Anella Salber died very peace-fully, 86 years of age, with nearly the whole community present. There were signs of approaching death just when a group of sisters had finished praying the rosary in her sickroom, so the bell was sounded for us to gather. We sang the Ave Maria, the Suscipe and Salve Regina, continuing in prayer until Sister Anella had drawn her last breath.

For the past six years Sister Anella had patiently endured her failing health. Throughout her life we knew her as a compassionate, self-giving and humble person. As her strength declined, Sister Anella continued to be thoughtful and attentive towards others, with a sincere gratitude for the least little service, and a striking tranquility in her suffering.

Florence Salber was born on February 20, 1920, the second of eleven children of George and Anna Salber (Schmitt). When asked about the size of their family, they often said, "We were five and a half-dozen!" Florence was baptized at St. Bonaventure Church in Raeville, Nebraska. Her father was a farmer and a handyman who also built their own house just before Florence's birth, as well as other structures. Her mother did all the baking, gardening, canning food, sewing, and raising chickens for the family during the severe depression years, 1929 into the 1930's. "Our home life," Sister Anella wrote, "was happy even though we had to forego many things and spent most of the time in our home surroundings."

Florence attended St. John Berchmans grade school in Raeville, Nebraska. The family did not have the means for tuition and clothes for her to attend high school. One day a close friend of hers was having a farewell party before entering the Missionary Benedictine Sisters. Florence decided then and there to go with her. She wrote: "For the next two weeks I made myself ready to enter on September 1, 1935."

Her first year of monastic formation was spent at our Sacred Heart Hospital in Lynch, Nebraska, mainly under the direction of Sisters Dolores Kunkel and Consolata Bohrer. In 1936 the novitiate was continued in Raeville. She made her first profession there in 1937. Sr. Anella was very happy in the convent: "I knew that this was what I wanted the rest of my life." As a junior sister she attended high school in Raeville, and in 1940 experienced the move of the priory community to Norfolk. After her final profession in 1941, Sr. Anella worked in the business office of Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Norfolk for two years, then was asked if she was interested in nurse's training. Yes!

In 1946 Sister Anella graduated from Creighton Memorial St. Joseph Hospital School of Nursing in Omaha. A very full career in health care began. For the next ten years she was supervisor of obstetrics and then of surgery at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Norfolk. Not only her hospital life was full. In 1948 at age 28, Sister Anella was chosen as subprioress by Mother Mathilde Hirsch. She helped with the planning of the new Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital and the moving to the new building in 1950. As subprioress under Mother Consolata, Sister Anella helped plan Assumption Academy, a boarding high school for girls, which opened in 1956. The following year she was appointed novice directress, and in 1961 directress of the junior sisters. Off and on Sr. Anella did secretarial work for Mother Consolata as well.

From 1962 to 1972 Sister Anella served as prioress. During those years she traveled to Europe for two General Chapters and a meeting of prioresses. Two sisters having been sent to Brazil from the Norfolk priory in the early 1960's, Mother Anella was invited to visit our Brazilian priories in 1969-70. She felt honored to meet Dom Helder Camara, the renowned bishop and human rights activist, while at Olinda.

During her term as prioress Sister Anella facilitated many projects in the Norfolk priory: Our Sisters staffing the newly-opened St. Isidore's School in Columbus in 1965; the building of the new Holy Trinity Hospital in Graceville, Minnesota in 1965, the addition of the west wing of Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in 1967; and the opening of St. Joseph Nursing Home in Norfolk in 1968. In 1971 Sister Anella began negotiations for building a new hospital in Wayne, Nebraska, which opened in 1975; she also sent some sisters to explore several locations in the eastern USA, which led to our sisters' mountain ministry to the poor people in and around Jackson, Kentucky, from 1973 to 1993.

However, the largest enterprise of Sister Anella's service as prioress was the planning, building and opening of Immaculata Convent in Norfolk from 1964 to 1966. It meant a great step forward for the monastic life of the community. We now had a chapel large enough for solemn celebrations with many guests, chapter and community rooms, a big refectory and guest cafeteria, an infirmary and library and sufficient individual rooms for all the sisters with ample space for the then flourishing novitiate and juniorate. Since our beginnings at Norfolk in 1935, the sisters had had to sleep in various buildings, night and day nurses sometimes needing to use the same bed at different hours. The dedication of the new Immaculata Convent on August, 1966 was a great day of rejoicing for Mother Anella and all the sisters.

Sister Anella was humble, recognizing and engaging the talents of younger sisters, perhaps because she also had been entrusted with large tasks at an early age. Always open to learning and attending courses and workshops with us to hone her skills and to gain greater knowledge, she taught us Benedictine ideals more by example than by words.

Though modest in her own eyes and respectfully mild in manner, Mother Anella could be quite firm, even towards clergymen, in defending the rights of her sisters who worked in adverse conditions. One priest asked the superior of our Missionary Benedictine brethren at Schuyler to "make that stubborn prioress in Norfolk" do as he wanted, only to be told that he had no such authority.

In her memoirs Sister Anella recalled also some difficult decisions that had to be made. She wrote: "In 1971 Sacred Heart Hospital [at Lynch, no longer meeting Nebraska safety standards] had to be closed and a new one [Niobrara Valley Hospital] was built by the local community. Our sisters were asked to continue staffing it for a few [actually, ten] years. Also our school at Raeville had to close because of the loss of sisters and the lack of new vocations" [after Vatican Council II].

After serving as prioress for ten years, Sister Anella in 1973 took up nursing again, first at Lynch, then from 1975-1977 as staff nurse in Wayne, and finally once more in Norfolk. She worked at Our Lady of Lourdes in nursing and medical records and for several years served as the assistant administrator.

When her strength began to fail, Sister Anella dedicated herself to the monastery's mission room where, with great diligence, she accepted, sorted and packed medication and clothing for the poor in our home and foreign missions.

Gradually Sister Anella had to let go of all these activities as she became weaker and needed a "walker" to get around. However she kept her motherly heart for other people. She patiently endured the suffering and finally immobility due to several strokes.

Throughout her religious life she was close to her large family. In 1997 she celebrated her 60th anniversary of profession with her younger sister, Sister Agnes, celebrating her golden jubilee.

We are deeply grateful to God for the rich years of Sister Anella's earthly life, for her prayerful presence and her example of humble, loving service to the sick and needy, in and beyond the community. May she now sing the mercies of God forever!

Sister Kevin Hermsen, OSB, Prioress
and the Sisters of the Norfolk Priory