

Diocesan teacher of faith

‘one of the
luckiest people
in the world’



Sister Barbara Cline, F.S.E., stands 5’1” and wears the humble brown habit of the Franciscan Order. It doesn’t take long, though, to see beyond her slight exterior to a powerhouse of faith. Sister Cline exudes warmth and wit as she takes time out from her busy day as director of catechesis for the Diocese of Grand Rapids to discuss her life.

“One of the nice things about getting older is that more faith insights occur. Everything that I’ve done has helped prepare

me for the work I’m doing. I never dreamed I would be doing this kind of work, but I’ve been blessed,” she said of the job she has been at for nearly a year.

Sister Cline was appointed by Bishop Walter A. Hurley to lead the catechetical efforts for the diocese, which she describes as proclamation of the Gospel and bringing people to know Jesus Christ and the fullness of God’s plan as revealed in Jesus. Her new position had been vacant before she stepped in last fall and began working with catechetical staff and volunteers from the 103 diocesan parishes and missions. During the past year, much of her time has been spent working with parishes to develop and enact a certification program for religious education instructors. Several types of catechetical certification are now available as part of a comprehensive certification process. Parish catechists and Catholic school teachers must have knowledge or

experience in four areas: methodology for teaching religion; understanding of the learner; knowledge of the content of their faith; and personal spiritual development. Between 80 and 120 people have been certified to date.

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Today, Sister Cline estimates she works closely with more than half the parishes in the diocese. “The DRE’s (directors of religious education) and PCL’s (parish catechetical leaders) have been more open, responsive and welcoming than I could have imagined. I cannot say enough how much they have meant to me,” she added.

Early days

As a child growing up in Spencer, Iowa, Sister Cline wanted to be a teacher. Her town was small and she didn’t

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attend a Catholic school until she was in the fourth grade. The first teachers in that school were Benedictine sisters who were trained as nurses. These sisters were replaced later by Franciscan sisters trained as educators.

“When I met the teaching sisters, that was when I first considered sisterhood. I realized I could become a teacher and be a missionary as well. I wanted to teach the world who Christ was and wanted to do it in far-flung

places,” she recalls of her decision to enter religious life.

After graduating from high school, Sister Cline entered the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Wisconsin. From there, she committed her personal ministry to working with children with disabilities. Though she began her career as a teacher, strong organizational and leadership skills quickly moved her in the direction of administration. Her assignments have

included working in the public school district of Pontiac as the director of Hawthorne Learning Center, a school for children from birth to age 26 with disabilities; serving on the faculty at the University of New Hampshire; and eight years spent living in the West Bank of Palestine. While in Palestine, she worked in a health education project centering on the health, safety and development of young children. She did some teaching at Bethlehem University in Bethlehem, as well as at the Cairo Institute of Nutrition in Egypt. For three summers, from 2001 to 2003, Sister Cline made trips to West Africa, where she worked at a physiotherapy center in Bafut, Cameroon, serving children with disabilities from many surrounding countries.

In 1971, Sister Cline left the order of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and joined the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist in Meriden,



»» Sister Cline speaks with Rev. Michael Burt (left) parochial vicar at St. Michael Parish, Remus, and Rev. Aaron Ferris (center) parochial vicar at Our Lady of Grace and St. Thomas the Apostle Parishes, Muskegon.



>> Sister Cline cares for a child with disabilities in 1971 in Grand Rapids.



>> Sister is shown working with children with disabilities in 2001 at Saint Joseph's Children and Adult Home (SA-JOCAH), a rehabilitation centre located in Bafut, a village approximately 30 miles north of Bamenda, in Cameroon, West Africa. SAJOCAM provides rehabilitation in the form of physiotherapy and vocational training to individuals with neurological and orthopaedic impairment from all over Cameroon.



>> To obtain a cell phone signal, Sister Cline would climb a half hour higher into the mountains overlooking the northwest section of Cameroon.

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Conn., where she was one of the first sisters to come to Lowell, Mich. for the opening of the Franciscan Life Process Center. Today, she considers Lowell her home base.

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A transition into a new ministry

In 1988, after returning from the West Bank, Sister Cline began working with the Kent Intermediate School District, heading up an initiative that developed into the Early On program. Early On is a program for infants and children, birth to age three, who have a disability or developmental delay, or a health condition which may lead to a developmental delay. As the program grew, so did her responsibilities. She worked as the regional technical assistance coordinator for West and mid-Michigan, before assuming the job as the director of training and technical assistance for the entire state. She was happily employed in that position for eight years. “The most difficult thing about my transition was leaving my last job. I had a partner or co-administrator and we worked together very well,” she said.

Sister Cline’s initial reaction to her current position was surprise. She recalls one night after dinner, when Mother Shaun Vergauwen, mother general of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, discussed a meeting she’d had with Bishop Hurley. At the meeting, the bishop had asked Mother Vergauwen if someone from the order could fill the position of diocesan director of catechesis.

“I recall thinking about different people that



»» Sister Cline gives a welcome and makes opening comments during the 2008 Conference on Catechesis at the Wege Conference Center in Cathedral Square. The event drew more than 400 catechetical leaders, staff, and volunteers from more than 76 parishes throughout the diocese (as seen in photo on left).

I thought might be good in the position,” said Sister Cline. “I must have been looking down when I was thinking because when I looked up, everyone around the table was looking at me! I asked why they were looking at me and they said, ‘from the time we first knew you, all you’ve ever wanted to do was teach people about their faith’,” Sister Cline said.

A life-long Catholic, Sister Cline said she loves the depth of her faith and believes that the reason many people fall away from the church is simply because they don’t understand their faith. She said she has always enjoyed working with people and helping them to understand the beauty of their faith. In the evenings, she continues to counsel individuals and couples who question their faith or want to grow in their faith.

Sister Cline’s daily schedule is a happy combination of farm life, service, and working at the diocesan center. At the farm, her days begin at 4:30 a.m. tending to chores such as caring for the farm’s angora rabbits. After breakfast and group and private

prayer, she drives with fellow Franciscan sisters to Cathedral Square in downtown Grand Rapids, where they attend 7 a.m. Mass at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew. When her workday at the diocese concludes at 4:30 p.m., she returns to the farm and tends to additional chores; she gathers with the sisters for evening prayer and dinner, and fits in one or two faith formation sessions. She tries to get to bed by 10 p.m.

“I’m one of the luckiest people in the world,” Sister Cline said of her life. “I’ve had phenomenal experiences in my life. As long as everything I do is other focused – or Other focused – it doesn’t matter. I’m willing to be used as an instrument in the hands of God and open to everything that comes, knowing that everything is part of a larger plan that I may not always understand.” ☩



»» Sister Cline with her sister Betty Cook in 1991 on the Mississippi River.