

by Shari Overdorf

One of A Kind

I knocked on the door of her office. The sound of her familiar “pecking” on the typewriter stopped. “Come in” was her sing-song reply. I entered her office for the fourth time that day in search of the answer to a question. We, as generations before, know her as “Sister B.A.” She has been at Saint Mary’s for almost 50 years, and it’s almost impossible to find someone who has more information about alumnae, faculty, and events, past and present, than Sister Basil Anthony O’Flynn, C.S.C., ’46.

Born Brigid Anne O’Flynn to Irish parents in Washington D.C., she remembers from an early age what influences led her to a life of commitment and dedication to the church. “My father was 20 years older than my mother. He was more like a grandfather figure to me. I idolized him. The big thrill of my life was to go with him to 6 a.m. Mass at Sacred Heart Church in the district. I remember he would look over toward the academy where the Dominican Sisters taught and say how wonderful it was that the holy women of God were there and how wonderful it would be to have a daughter who was one of them.”

If she was her father’s daughter, her brother, now a Jesuit priest, was his mother’s son. He was two years older, and they used to “divie” up everything from desserts to Mother and Father. “We always thought Mother was his buddy and Father was mine,” she recalls. “Whenever we would fuss over something, my mother would say, ‘Now let him have it. You are a little lady, and you should let him have it.’ If I was having a problem with my brother, I would always say, ‘Wait till I tell Daddy.’”

Sister B.A.’s love for education, which her two bachelor of arts degrees in philosophy and theology and two master’s degrees in theology and education verify, also stems from early childhood. “My parents had a tremendous appreciation for education,” she says. “My father was a real scholar. He used to teach Gaelic just as a hobby. He never wanted to be on the highway, never drank or smoked, but he loved his books. If we behaved ourselves and got a good education, that was his great dream.”

“My parents never took a vacation or wanted anything for themselves,” she continues. “My mother sacrificed to see that I had piano lessons for six years, though neither of my parents were musically inclined. I can honestly say there is no sister of the Holy Cross more detached from material things than my mother was.”

Brigid O’Flynn had just finished high school when her mother died. It seemed only natural, because of her devotion to her father, that she stayed home to care for him. Six years later when her father died she knew what she wanted to do with her life.

In 1941, Brigid Anne O’Flynn came to Saint Mary’s College to join the Sisters

of the Holy Cross. By 1942, she was awarded the habit and was on her way to a diversified career which took her around the world, but always led her back to Saint Mary’s College. She has never regretted the decision nor desired another lifestyle.

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Much has been written about Sister B.A.’s career. Through the years she has served as general secretary to the congregation of the Sister of the Holy Cross and as a faculty member, dean of students, vice president for fiscal affairs, vice president for campus affairs, and chairman of the board of regents for Saint Mary’s.

For a short time she left Saint Mary’s to pursue a long-time ambition to work in a hospital. She served in the department of pastoral ministry at Saint John’s Hospital in Anderson, Ind. and Mount Carmel Hospital East in Columbus,



Ohio, between 1974–1977. But her work as chair of the board of regents soon brought her back to campus where she has remained and presently serves as assistant to the vice president of college relations.

As I sat in her office listening, I realized that the piles of books and papers surrounding her were a visible collection of that past. She is one of a kind, the link to information about a student's alumnae relatives, dates of events, identification of material and countless questions about faculty and the college's history.

Yet for all Sister B.A. knows of others, we know very little about her. We know of her accomplishments, of course, but what she likes, how she thinks, what her hopes and dreams are—who she really is, are things we don't know. Would

she be willing to answer some personal questions? I soon found the answer.

How did you receive the name Basil Anthony?

"The mistress of novices took care of selecting the names," she said. "They asked me to write to my brother to see if he could recommend the name of a Jesuit saint. He wrote back and said he thought the name Sheila or Barbara would be nice. I was given the name Basil Anthony. Basil Anthony Moreau was the founder of our community. The name had never been given before and it was the centennial anniversary of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, so I think that's why I got it. Anthony was, coincidentally, my brother's name also."

Sister B.A. talks with Mary Dornbach Snyder '80, a director on the Alumnae Association Board of Directors.

What is the biggest crisis you've ever faced?

"It was just this year that I was thinking to myself that I really have been so fortunate in having a crisis-free life," she says. "There were concerns about making the right decisions, but never a real crisis or even a severe illness. People tell me I haven't really changed and I think it's because I have stayed well through the years. You can manage most things if

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you have good health. That's why I think I have never had a crisis."

Do you recall receiving any specific answers to prayer?

"I can think of several times in my life that I thought there were absolutely no human answers and I felt that it was only through prayer that the matter would be cleared up."

Sister B.A. is quick to add that she doesn't believe it's through her prayers that an answer has come. "I have great faith in the prayers of the sisters in the infirmary," she says. "When I see some of those sisters come to early Mass every morning and what an effort it is for them to just get up and get dressed, I think, how can God refuse them anything? That's why I hope I can stay on their list," she laughs.

Is there anything that depresses you?

"I am not a moody person," she says. "I become depressed when I can't help someone who needs it. You can only help someone to the extent they want to be helped. Many people come to me for advice, for little things or big things or just

to unload. I learned prudence from my parents who believed that you don't hang out the dirty laundry. Keeping a confidence was also part of my training in theology. I think it is important not to betray someone's trust in me."

She adds that people are important to her. She is seldom conscious of background—who is Catholic or who isn't, divorced or single, young or old. In a friend she looks for prayerfulness, compatibility, tranquility, spirituality and happiness. In others she looks for ways to be of service.

Though she enjoys people in general many of her favorite activities are solitary. "There's nothing quite so marvelous as walking across campus in the morning with the birds singing and the sun shining," she says. "I like solitude and quiet." Time spent in private devotions and prayer each morning sets a tone for her day which usually begins at 5 a.m.

"I am not a lonely person, though I have had incidents where I have lost close friends in death," she says, "but not to the place that I couldn't manage it." Her greatest loss besides her parents was Mother Gertrude, superior general to the congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. "She was everything a person could be: friend, perfectionist, a beautiful person. At my final profession, they gave me her silver heart." Sister B.A. had been her personal secretary for five years and had traveled extensively with her. The cross is a possession she has always treasured.

The thought of a treasured possession prompted a question in a different direction. *Is there something you would like to own that you've never had?*

Her answer came quickly. "There is nothing I need." She laughed. "There are two ways to look at that: either I am very well cared for or my needs are simple. I thank the Lord for this all the time," she says. "If we have the essentials, it also says to us that we must not be wasteful."

What is your most memorable experience?

"One of the biggest thrills of my life was to be at Notre Dame when 30 theologians received honorary degrees. They were brought in from all over the world. We sat in the fifth row of this glorious convocation and I said, 'We're sitting here because the sisters did laundry for the priests 100 years ago, and I hope something we're doing today is going to get tickets for someone 100 years from now.'"



What would you like to experience yet in your lifetime?

"More of the same," she says. "I keep my eyes on eternity because I think that's important, but while I'm around I want to enjoy it."

What do you think heaven will be like?

"I think it's going to be relaxing in the arms of God. Everything is going to be as perfect as you can imagine. I think that just being in the presence of God is going to be enough for me. I remember a theology class when one of the students said to the father that she couldn't imagine being happy in heaven if her dog wasn't there. His reply to her was, 'If you need your dog to be happy in heaven, your dog will be there.' I think he just meant that everything you desire will be there."

What's the biggest problem the Catholic church faces today?

"I guess I think we need more faith. Faith in God is knowing that He loves and cares for us. Faith in our neighbor is

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being able to overlook an awful lot of flaws in order to help or believe in their abilities. When I am disappointed in a neighbor, I say to myself, 'If that person was my best friend, the one person I trust most, would I forgive them?' and most of the time I would. When I have trouble with forgiveness I find it's mostly because I have misjudged other people or failed to give them enough credence."

What message would you give the world about God?

"The only person that matters is God because He is unchangeable. You can think of the most marvelous person you can imagine and still that person doesn't begin to equate with God. If you don't want to be disappointed in a person, if you want to love to the fullest, if you want everything to be perfect, then your answer is God. And I think that if you realize that, then you are willing to sacrifice for Him and His purposes."

I left her office feeling I had only scratched the surface of Sister Basil Anthony's experiences. She is invaluable to the college not only for what she knows, but for who she is.

Brett McLaughlin, Saint Mary's public information officer, expresses it best.

"Whenever I reach a dead end seeking information, I always go to Sister B.A. If she doesn't have the information, she knows where to find it." Sister B.A. in her own humorous way sums it up this way. "If I dropped dead in the morning, there would be no replacement."

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