

A Tale of Two Sisters in Spiritual Direction Ministry: Martha Buser and Helen O'Brien

BY KATHY WILLIAMS

Sister Martha Buser (Olga)

For someone who is literally a rock star in the Ursuline world, what strikes you the most about Sister Martha Buser is how down to earth and humble she is. A well-known author of two books on Ursuline foundress, Saint Angela Merici, *Also in Your Midst* and *Lover of Us All*, international speaker

University in Pittsburgh in 1964, while teaching grade school for seven years and high school for thirteen. Sister Martha recalls, "I thought, this is it, I am going to be a teacher the rest of my life." But in 1972, the superior, Sister Adelaide (Fackler), said she wanted me to be the novice director.

So people wanted me to talk about her." The Ursulines in Cincinnati were the first group to invite her to come speak about Angela, and that was the beginning of her "Ursuline Tour," as she calls it.

Word of mouth spread about her talks, and in 1980 she was invited to

“As I stand before God, the God I know; and I stand before God as I know myself; and what I desire in my deepest heart; that is what we talk about in spiritual direction and that is what prayer is.”

and retreat leader, Sister Martha is delightfully humorous and laid-back, all qualities which serve her well in her current ministry of spiritual direction.

Sister Martha went all the way through the Sacred Heart schools, and was greatly influenced by the Ursulines who taught her. She was attracted to missionary work, but she was also attracted to the Carmelites and their monastic way of life. It then dawned on her that the Ursuline Sisters had both worlds—contemplative and missionary.

During her junior year in high school it became evident to Sister Martha that she was called to religious life. She told the boy she was dating she was going to enter the convent after graduation, which led to a broken heart (his). She recalls, "The boldest thing I ever did in my life was come through the door and say, 'Here I am.' It's a definitive statement."

She earned her bachelor degree in English in 1958 from Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, then her master's from Duquesne

Because part of what novice directors did was to introduce the novices to Saint Angela, Sister Martha went back and studied Saint Angela in depth. And, she says, "I fell in love with her. She came alive for me, because she was a very real person. And, I have a gift—or some may call it a curse—I speak well and I write well.

lead an institute in Brescia, Italy, about Saint Angela and Ursuline Spirituality.

By the time the "Tour" was over, she had given talks in every Ursuline motherhouse in North America. She says she, herself, had nothing to do with it. It always seemed to her that divine intervention led her—just when she thought her path was set



Sister Martha Buser in her home office

Q&A on Spiritual Direction with Sr. Martha

What is Spiritual Direction?

“It sounds like one person is telling another person what to do, doesn’t it? It’s another ear to hear where God is leading them. It’s listening. I don’t talk a great deal. I listen and then I ask questions, like, ‘Where did that come from?’

“I treat everyone individually, and discern what is good for each person. Angela was a spiritual director. She said to have each one engraved on your heart separately because that is

how true love acts.”

Some of the first questions she asks people in spiritual direction are:

“What do you want?”

“Who do you think God is? Not, who should you think God is?”

“And, how do you know God? What name do you give God?”

Digging Deep

“When you ask, ‘Who are you when you stand before God?’...that is a whole different story. That’s what

prayer is. As I stand before God, the God I know; and I stand before God as I know myself; and what I desire in my deepest heart; that is what we talk about in spiritual direction and that is what prayer is.”

“And I just listen. And I just say, ‘That’s interesting, tell me some more about that.’”

“Sometimes I think, ‘are they ever going to put things together?’ And then all of a sudden, God gives it to them, and it’s wonderful.”

one way, God had other plans. Sister Martha says, “I never asked for all this. I was just going to be an English teacher!”

Interwoven throughout these years of travel was her ministry of spiritual direction. Sister Martha was doing spiritual direction parallel to all of the writing and speaking, because that is what her ministry truly was. She thinks it was always her calling, but

she didn’t really recognize it at first.

So, a young girl from Louisville, who wanted to be a missionary, and who loved to pray, but only saw herself teaching English, got to travel the world as a missionary for Saint Angela, as well as guide young women to become Sisters. And, during all of these ministries over the years, she helped others discern their own prayer and faith journey and continues to do

so with great love and understanding. One could say God definitely had a plan for Sister Martha Buser.

As Sister Martha wrote in *Lover of Us All*, “When all is said and done, all the books about Angela Merici written and read, nothing is left but to acknowledge; it’s all about love.”

Sister Helen O’Brien

For Sister Helen O’Brien it only took one year of being at Ursuline Academy in South Carolina for her to decide on becoming an Ursuline Sister. Her father had served in the Army during WWII. After the war, her father remained in the military and was assigned to Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

While in South Carolina, her father insisted that Joan attend Ursuline Academy in Columbia. Ironically, she remembers saying, “I don’t want to go to a Catholic school. I don’t want nuns!” She only went there from 1950-51, but she says, “That one year sealed my life!”

When asked what it was about the one year spent with the Ursuline Sisters that made such an impact on her, Sister Helen says that while she was not very religious or spiritual as a child, that time at UA awakened

something deep in her. There was also an at-home-ness about the school because it was so small and intimate—there were only about eleven girls in her sophomore class.

In 1951, her father got transferred to San Francisco. In July of 1952, the then-Mother Superior, Sister Columba Ishanski wrote to Joan, “Sister Ferdinand said you are interested in becoming a Sister. You could come and do your senior year at Sacred Heart Academy and be a postulant at the same time. The teenaged Joan said, “Let’s get on



Sister Helen, right, with Sister Theresa Nguyen, OP

with it!” So, her parents put her on a plane to Louisville in December 1952.

Sister Helen received her undergraduate degree from Ursuline College in Louisville, and her masters