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Sister M. Benigna Reisel

For the third time within the month, the Angel of Death issued a sudden summons in the Community, this time to Sister M. Benigna Reisel, 76, on Saturday night, September 16, at 11:40 o'clock. Though Sister had been resident in the Infirmary for the past four years because of a heart condition, she was not recently considered in any special danger. On this night, however, at about eleven o'clock she suffered an attack of nausea and severe abdominal pain, which finally yielded to Sister Peter's ministrations. "Oh, thank you, Sister! This is such a relief." But even at that moment, a heart block occurred, and she slumped, unconscious. A hurried call to Mother Immaculate and Sister Grace, nurse, brought them promptly, and as the three repeated ejaculations, Sister Benigna quietly expired.

For the funeral on Tuesday, His Excellency Bishop McNamara presided at the Solemn Requiem Mass celebrated by Father Angelo. The Rt. Rev. Msgr. Memmesheimer and Rev. William Hock, both of St. Francis De Sales, Chicago, were in the sanctuary. They also assisted Father Angelo in the graveside prayers at Resurrection Cemetery.

Sister Benigna entered the Convent Margaret Reisel of Chicago in August, 1904, making first profession in 1907. Of her forty-six years of active duty she spent twenty-five in Chicago, thirteen in Joliet, and eight in Ohio. Her last eight years were in retirement at the Motherhouse.

Sister Benigna's life and character were many-faceted. As a teacher she conducted classes on the elementary, secondary, and college levels. In her high school classes she taught chiefly commercial subjects; as a College instructor she also taught education and German. In the Community she is best remembered as an administrator. She was Superior at Sacred Heart, Englewood, And St. Peter's, Mansfield, and was principal of St. Francis Academy and of St. Francis De Sales, Chicago.

In all these positions, Sister was an educator and administrator with a dignified, impressive bearing and an "old-school" concept of duty and authority. The first reaction of students to her was one of reverent fear; but once they knew her, they recognized her innate kindness and they were won over--she so clearly desired their good. At the Academy in all her talks to the girls she would stress kindness, especially kindness to their parents.

With the Sisters under her direction, the first impression was of the direct and straightforward "captain," who, "if she had anything to say, said it." But soon they learned that, once said, the thing was over, and by-gones were by-gones. Then they noted other traits. They saw, for instance, her deep reverence for the priesthood and her complete co-operation with the pastor, and in one parish, her kindly support of a young and inexperienced assistant. They noted her good public relations with the parishioners, her consideration for parents when she had to make a correction--how she would let them feel that there was a big redeeming feature in this child who had in some other respect been at fault.

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Then, too, they found that she was generous, that, granting anything, she would "go all out." She would, for instance, take care of Sisters attending University; at Christmas, her gifts to all the Sisters of the house were a joy to her and them; and she was, the year around, a good provider. As superior at De Sales, she thought counting Sunday collections a burden on the Sisters, and she asked the Pastor to get an accounting machine and have the parishioners take over the work. This led to the discontinuance of 'collection counting' in the Community.

Those who knew Sister Benigna spoke of her as a gracious woman, observant of the thoughtful courtesies, "in some ways even tender"; and her Sister nurse described her as "mellowed by illness, docile, and grateful." But she had always been of an appreciative nature and never took favors for granted.

Sister had been devoted to her priest-brother, and the sorrow of his sudden passing remained always a wistful memory. She expected a sudden death for herself as well. Just a week before her passing she remarked to Bishop McNamara that she always made an act of perfect contrition before retiring. "If I awake, I repeat it." she said. "for I feel I shall die in my sleep."

Sister Benigna had an ardent devotion to "the regal Lady of Heaven, our good Blessed Mother," and she instilled this devotion in many of her pupils. A significant incident in this regard occurred the last week. On September 8th she received from a former student a gift which the girl had always sent for Christmas--two dozen yellow roses. This time the accompanying note read: "I've been thinking of you so much lately. I do not know when your birthday is, but I'm sure you celebrate with Her on September 8th." The roses, as usual, were sent to the Blessed Mother. And with their fading, before the next Saturday was ended, Sister Benigna's call came. It need not seem fanciful to hold that her trip Beyond, after her glad encounter with the Lord, must have been followed by His approving presentation, "Behold Thy Mother."