

In Memoriam

Sr. Caroline Cerveny, SSJ-TOSF (May 9, 1943 - April 12, 2020)



Sister Caroline Cerveny, a digital ministry pioneer and beloved member of Espiritu Santo Parish for 18 years, went home to her Lord, her parents and her friends on Easter Sunday after a faith-filled and courageous battle with pancreatic cancer. She was 76.

Born in Cleveland, Sister Caroline was a member of the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph, TOSF, for nearly 60 years. She was a close friend and companion to Father Michael Cooper, S.J., and cherished our Espiritu Santo community. She belonged to the 55-plus Club and Woman of Espiritu Santo, where she was always willing to give a talk or lead an opening prayer. She will be remembered for her cheerful presence and friendly face.

“All these people were her Community of Faith, of Love, and of Service,” Father Cooper said. “Espiritu Santo truly was Community, her family.”

Her fondness for the parish is why she chose to stay here for her medical treatments, during which time the Ladies Auxiliary of the Knights of Columbus was extremely attentive to her, Father Cooper said.

Sister Caroline was a leader in many areas of traditional and new ministries, including online and social media, which she often said were crucial to meeting younger people and broadening the reach of the Catholic Church’s message. She wrote more than 100 articles and regularly presented talks at national and international conferences.

She also was a spiritual director, meeting people on a personal level. “She had such a beautiful impact on my life,” one of her directees recalled. “I will never forget some of the things she told me, always with a smile on her face, and it seemed she was giggling inside,” she said. “What a wonderful person.”

Among her friends was the Tampa Bay Catholic Gay and Lesbian Community, where she and her miniature dachshund and near-constant companion, LuLu, would occasionally attend Mass with Father Cooper in support and solidarity with her niece, her sister, and other friends.

Sister Caroline earned a Doctor of Ministry degree in church leadership from McCormack Theological Seminary in Chicago, and master’s degrees in religious education from St. Mary’s University of Minnesota and in Vatican II Spirituality from the Jesuit School of Theology at Loyola University, Chicago.

She became director of religious education for the Archdiocese of Chicago and later at the Diocese of Gary, Indiana. She went on to become director of social media for Sadlier Catholic Publishers in New York City. After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack, she came to Florida to join Saint Leo University as associate director of university ministry.

Sister Caroline left Saint Leo to develop the Digital Disciple Boot camp and empowered a team of lay ministers to join her in teaching how to use social media in ministry. She more recently founded the Digital Disciple Network, a professional organization for social media ministers, was an adjunct professor in the Doctor of Ministry program at the Catholic University of America, and was a member of the Catholic Press Association.

Brian Lemoj, executive director of the Office of Evangelization, Formation, Youth and Family for the Diocese of St. Petersburg, said Sister Caroline worked hard to create and to increase understanding of new evangelization through digital ministry with the diocese, for which she was well known.

“Sister Caroline never ceased in her efforts ‘to seize the catechetical moment’ and her vision and leadership will be greatly missed,” Lemoj said in a letter informing diocesan ministers of her death.

Sister Caroline led pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Ireland and Rome with Father Cooper and was a good and faith-filled friend to many.

She is survived by her sister, Judy (Paul) Young, of Youngstown, Ohio; a brother, Robert Cerveny; her niece, Theresa Young (Ann) of Cincinnati; and two nephews, Timothy (Becca) Young, of Youngstown, Russell (Jen) Young of Flint, Michigan, as well as four great nieces and two great nephews.

A funeral Mass of the Resurrection for Sister Caroline will be celebrated at Espiritu Santo after the church reopens and another celebration later in Cleveland with her Franciscan Community and family and friends.