



## Remembering Ellen Balle, IHM

April 16, 1918 - September 7, 2005

We are together today to acknowledge the life of our sister, our family member, our friend, Ellen Balle also known to many of us as Sister Berchmans. The pattern of her life was created by her own experiences and relationships as well as by our connections with her.

If it were up to Ellen, we might not be here to recall her life and certainly she would not want us to spend a significant amount of time nor a dictionary of words describing her and recalling her life among us. Perhaps in her own succinct way she might describe her life in these words: God was the center of my life. I lived, I loved, I learned, I taught, I shared, and I cared. What more can be said! And yet, we want to savor her presence among us more carefully and lovingly. Oftentimes, knowing Ellen was more of a misty vision than a clear photograph of a complex, generous and deeply dedicated woman who was not always understood.

Ellen, a Detroit native, began her life in 1918 as the first child of her parents, Johanna Behan of Detroit and Michael Balle formerly of Toronto. Her sister, Jean, is unable to be here due to her own diminished health. Her brother, Michael, died several years ago and her sister-in-law, Patricia, is with us today. Ellen also has several nieces and nephews and grandnieces and nephews whom she cared for deeply and invited us to pray for often.

Having attended several elementary schools, Ellen connected with IHMs in her high school years at St. Mary of Redford and Holy Redeemer. Following graduation she entered the IHM community in 1936 and then spent most of her teaching ministry in elementary and high schools in the Detroit area. In 1967 she expanded her ministry dimensions by going to Uganda in the first group of IHMs. Their primary ministry was to teach the young sisters and seminarians.

She returned from Africa which she loved dearly when she was invited to become a physical therapist at the Motherhouse. After that ministry Ellen participated in the Religious Leaders Renewal program at the University of Notre Dame. Following several more years of service here at the Motherhouse, Ellen continued her educational ministry at Marygrove in the math lab and administering the education center there. In 1992 she retired into volunteering at Harper Hospital, the Dominican Literacy Center and Holy Rosary Parish Bingo. Ellen also lived in the city of Detroit until she moved here to the Motherhouse in 2002.

These broad strokes of her life give us some clues about the person of Ellen. She was an educator throughout her life. Many of us know that she was an excellent teacher and a popular one. She was able to teach math, science and English equally well. Certainly she was a woman with an intellectual gift for

grasping concepts. This was enhanced by her ongoing curiosity and thirst for learning. Additionally, she always had a great desire to help others learn.

Of course, we also know that she was a great reader. One of Ellen's friends mentioned that she was "always impressed by the quality of her books." Others of us appreciated both the quantity as well as the breadth of her reading. She once remarked about her own books, "I won't read these again but they comfort me."

Ellen also loved to figure things out. While she was in Africa one of the other teachers was planning an experiment in chemistry but didn't have the right materials. Ellen "figured out" what could be substituted. (And it worked--no explosion.) I recall Ellen telling me about her dad who was asked to develop a certain type of gadget and he did. She was delighted with his skill while also expressing a real affection for him. Another aspect of her own curiosity was her adventurous spirit. She was eager to travel quite a distance in order to see the great natural beauties in some of the African countries.

Some things seemed quite obvious to Ellen so at times she was impatient with the "mundane" and could be quite direct and succinct. As one friend remarked, "You always knew where Ellen stood." The words of James Burtchell, "Sanctity shows itself in extravagant moments; but it creates itself in humdrum everyday duty," on the booklet cover may well give us a clue about her own struggle with the humdrum.

Ellen was a very generous woman. Some of us experienced her willingness to be a driver for us during times of crisis or special need at no little cost to herself and regardless of the time or the distance. Just last year someone remembered with deep gratitude how she offered to drive her to Detroit when she had a broken her wrist.

While she lived in Detroit in her years of "retirement" Ellen also gave of herself. She was always concerned about her neighbors and was ever faithful to her work for the Holy Rosary Parish Bingo on Friday nights. Those of us in the Heartheners Mission Unit knew well how difficult it was for her to make the choice to be present for our Friday night sharing because it meant having to absent herself from Bingo. Only for the Mission Unit would she do that!

In some ways Ellen was a woman of few words. Just a few months ago in a conversation with her, Ellen mentioned to me that she came from a family that did not do a lot of talking. She was bothered by the fact that some people didn't understand that she preferred less conversation and words than many other people. She let her actions speak her values.

Ellen, we are grateful for your life with and among us. Thank you for being a woman of integrity who continued to struggle for justice throughout your life.

Peggy Schmidt, IHM  
9/12/05