

Remembering Helen Theresa Coulter, IHM
Feb. 12, 1949 - June 5, 2011



It is my privilege to share with you the “Rememberings” of Theresa Coulter. I would like to begin with an explanation of the cover on our booklet this evening. You will notice the quote from Theresa’s patron, Therese of Lisieux. On Saturday evening we were talking and praying with Theresa – telling her she is too young to die, and there is much more work for her to do with her causes of peace and justice. Theresa’s voice was very weak at this point, and she took up pen and paper and wrote: “I will spend my heaven doing good on earth.” Thus our cover.

This “Remembering” was written with input from Theresa’s sisters and brothers, the sisters who lived with her at Star of the Sea, sisters from her mission unit (Windsurfers), friends from the IHM Peacemakers, coworkers in the Business Office where she has worked much of this past year, and other good friends.

Theresa’s sister, Dolores shares:

“Theresa was the fourth of five children of Helen Urzedowski and Malcolm Coulter. The first four of us were born within five years (1944 – 1949) and the fifth, our sister Melissa, came along 11 years later. Our parents always said that Theresa was born with a smile on her face. Literally. The rest of us came out screaming and crying, as babies usually do when they are born, but not Theresa. They said that she did not scream or cry, she just smiled at her parents and everyone around her. I think they knew then that Theresa was special. The rest of us saw that smile later, as she grew up, and knew they were right.

“As Theresa’s older sister by a little over three years, we always shared a bedroom while we were growing up. I can still recall the imaginary line down the middle of our bedroom (my side and her side) which was our way of maintaining our separate spaces. We also worked out rules with our brothers so that special treats like Mom’s chocolate chip cookies, fudge (Mom’s famous family recipe), pies and cakes were divided fairly. If Mom made a batch of cookies (usually 50 or 60 at a time) each of us had a one-fourth allotment – and woe to any sibling who ate more than their share. We even carefully lined up glasses to measure out equal shares of pop. Our older brother Malcolm was usually in charge of dividing the pies and cakes into scrupulously equal pieces.

“As the fourth sibling, Theresa often had the same teachers at school that her older siblings had had. Theresa was always an excellent student, but I know she would get tired of being recognized by a new teacher as Malcolm, Dolores, or David’s younger sister. She also had to put up with another burden of being a younger sibling – ‘hand-me-down’ clothing from her older sister.

“As our family expanded with marriages and children, Theresa always remembered every birthday and anniversary, not only for her siblings and nieces and nephew, but also her sister and brothers-in-law. After our father died in 1986 at age 64, Theresa took up the task of watching over our mother. She would visit Mom every week, take her shopping, help her pick our presents for her grandchildren, and take her to appointments. She accompanied Mom on several trips to visit her family in Omaha, Neb. As the years progressed she helped Mom with paying her bills and managing her finances. Mom named Theresa as her patient advocate and when Mom entered the nursing home at age 89 in January 2006, Theresa took over the responsibility as the primary contact person regarding Mom’s care, until Mom passed away in February 2008.

“As everyone who knew Theresa was keenly aware, she was fiercely committed to peace and justice causes. We would get regular notes and emails from her asking us to contact our senator or representative regarding a social justice issue, to sign a petition or support a boycott of a product from a socially irresponsible corporation.

“She had a heart of gold and convictions of steel. She left us a legacy of love, good works and commitment to a more just society, reminding us, in the words of President Kennedy, that ‘here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.’”

Her brother David reflected:

“I think the most important thing to recall about our parents is how they nurtured Theresa's natural God-given talents. Theresa told me that she learned about her faith from our mother. I think Theresa's faith was innate, but our mother helped her develop it. I think that may be why Theresa was so close to our mother. Our mother's faith was quiet, not imposing, but genuine and all-encompassing. Our mother had worked for Father Flanagan at Boy's Town in Omaha, and she learned how to love all people in need. That was the unqualified love for the poor and disadvantaged that Theresa learned and practiced in her life, too.

“Our father had a sincere and deep commitment to social justice. Theresa's natural inclination to social justice was supported by his beliefs. I do not want to say she got it from him, because I think her beliefs were her own and were based on her faith, but she was supported by him. He did not support her vocation at first – but not for the same reasons many parents objected. While our father was a devout Catholic, he wanted his daughters to be independent thinkers and was very intent on making sure they saw themselves as equals in the workplace – and he was not sure this could happen in our church. However he came to realize that it was right for Theresa and became supportive. In the end, he was proud of what she had accomplished in the area of social justice.

“Theresa took the best of what she received from both of our parents, and combined faith and social justice into a vocation that sustained her throughout her life.”

Theresa and her oldest brother, Malcolm, enjoyed a trip to Poland together in the summer of 2008. Theresa was always proud of her Polish heritage. They flew from Detroit to Warsaw where they began a two-week tour visiting all the major cities, including Tarnow where their ancestors came from. They enjoyed a raft ride on the Dunajec River, which forms the boundary between Poland and Slovakia.

Theresa attended Dearborn public schools for her elementary and high school education. She attended religious education classes at Sacred Heart, Dearborn, and there met the IHM sisters. She attended Marygrove College and received her master's in economics from the University of Michigan. It was at Marygrove that she met and was greatly influenced by her instructor, friend and mentor, Amata Miller, IHM. Economics, peace, justice all came together for Theresa in these studies, and she remained involved in all these areas throughout her life. She was very involved in the IHM Peacemakers and was a valuable member of the Responsible Investment Committee. She always had a great love for the city of Detroit and was very involved in the pressing social, political and justice issues that are a part of Detroit. She died as an active and faithful member of Holy Rosary Parish in Detroit.

I personally had the privilege of living with Theresa at St. Cecilia's in the late '70s while she was still in formation. During this time she worked with, and greatly admired, Father Frank Granger who was pastor at St. Agnes. This experience deepened and grounded her love for the city and her conviction regarding the church's responsibility to educate and serve the needs of the poor.

Theresa had many ministries in Detroit, Flint, Eastpointe, Roseville and Harper Woods. She was a pastoral assistant, an advocate for social justice (Groundwork), a teacher, a librarian.

Patricia Soltesz, IHM, a long-time friend of Theresa's, describes her as a woman of faith, a lover of God, a person passionate for justice in the world and our church. At the same time she was a gentle woman who was an introvert and treasured her solitude. The quote on the back of the program was taken from a card and note Patricia received from Theresa two weeks ago. She said the message spoke strongly to her.

Theresa enjoyed history and treasured her trips traveling with her brothers Malcolm and David. She said her parents instilled a love of learning, and she was a researcher and a life-long learner. Even this last month of her life, she was learning new skills to be used in our IHM Business Office where she had worked two days a week this past year, and planned to increase her time to three days beginning July 1.

During this past year she courageously dealt with her rheumatoid arthritis. She found volunteer positions to keep active in ministry and be supportive of the IHM community. In addition to her work in the Business Office, she tutored in the "Gem Room" at Holy Redeemer Grade school and taught religious education classes at St Paul and Star of the Sea parishes in Grosse Pointe.

Theresa loved her family. She was very proud of the accomplishments of her siblings. She was very happy to be the godmother of her niece, Maria, and very proud that her niece Anna is a "take charge" altar server at St. Joseph Parish in Howell. She followed and was very interested in everything her niece Elizabeth and nephew David were involved in. She would be very happy that you are all here.

She also greatly loved her IHM family. She reminded us on Saturday that June 7, 2011, marked her 30th anniversary – and she added, "30 wonderful years." Theresa was active in her mission unit, currently the "Windsurfers," and enjoyed serving as a Coordinating Council representative from

2003-2009. She was very appreciative of the support she received from her local community especially in these recent months, and certainly in this final journey.

Theresa was very alert on her death-bed. Sisters Marge Cannuelle, Barbara Zimmer and I were singing along with a tape of familiar and meaningful songs. We then went into favorite IHM songs – old and new! Theresa then asked for “Precious Lord,” “Amazing Grace” and “How Great Thou Art.” She lit up with her beautiful smile when we concluded with “This Little Light of Mine” – a favorite of her religious education classes.

Theresa loved and appreciated music and enjoyed playing the violin with the IHM musicians, as well as with the Grosse Pointe Symphony. Because of the arthritis in her fingers, she was no longer able to play. As she faced her death she expressed her joy that soon she would be able to play her violin again.

A couple people who shared their thoughts mentioned Theresa’s eyes: their brightness and the fact that they represented her openness. I would like to share this last story that I believe is very significant and close to all of our hearts. Theresa had signed up with the “Gift of Life Registry” online. We received a call from the eye bank shortly after she died requesting her eyes. I am sure she is very happy that someone will be able to see a child, count the stars, research a cure, read a book or just enjoy the beauty of our Earth because of her final gift of life.

You will be greatly missed, Theresa, by your families and all those connected to you. You promised, “I will spend my heaven doing good on earth.” You have always been a woman of your word. As much as we would like to let you “rest in peace” ... there is much work to do here, and we are going to hold you to your promise.

Thank you for the gift you have been to all of us and to our church. We love you.

Margaret M. Sweeney, IHM
June 9, 2011