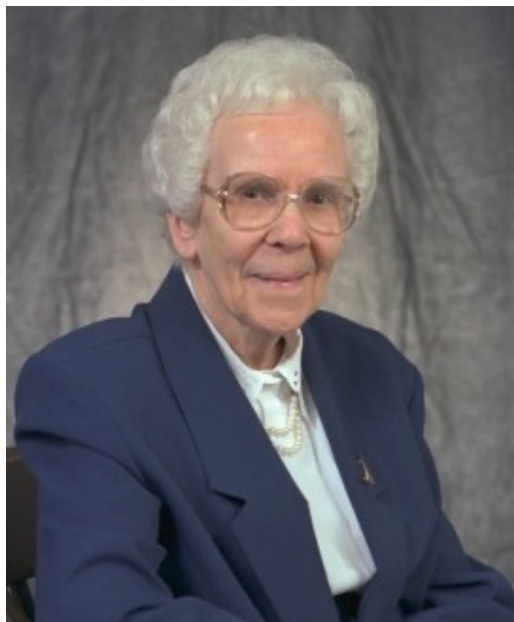


Remembering Sister Marie (Marie Carmel) Dunigan, IHM

Feb. 1, 1916-Feb. 18, 2010



Feb. 1, 1916 marked my birth – the oldest daughter of James Patrick and Mary Margaret Fitzpatrick Dunigan. I was named Marie – the third oldest of seven boys and three girls, but now I am the sole survivor. However, four of my brothers died in infancy. I remember three of them but especially Edward who died of pneumonia when he was seven months old. I was then 12. It was at that time that I realized how the deep faith of my mother and dad helped them to accept God’s goodness even in adversity.

My great-grandfather, Patrick Dunigan, was one of the earliest settlers (1838) in the area they called Emmett. We lived on a farm two miles from town. Despite the distance from neighbors, we had many friends for fun times. Big families abounded, and everyone knew everybody.

My formal education began in a rural school, Riley #10 - grades one through eight. Our teacher, Margaret Burne, a member of the neighborhood and parish, was also our “Catechism” teacher who put the finishing touches on our preparation for Penance, Holy Eucharist and Confirmation. This was a summer activity.

When Father John F. Farrell came to Emmett as pastor in 1923, he visited every family in the countryside. His hope was to build a Catholic school. In 1924 this dream became a reality, and the school was ready for occupancy and staffed by IHM Sisters. I was then in the third grade. Even though I had three aunts and a grand-aunt who were Sisters of Providence at St. Mary of the Woods, Indiana, I was sure these sisters dropped from heaven.

As I grew up, I loved school and also enjoyed taking care of the younger children and helping my mother with house and garden work. Dad wouldn’t think of us doing farm work as chores – that was the boys’ work. I wouldn’t want to live on a farm now, but as I look back I can understand how closeness to the soil brought my parents closer to God in their daily lives. To this day I still enjoy the space and quiet of the outdoors, growing things, babbling brooks and the beauty of the woods. This all helped me appreciate God’s creation.

When I was in the fourth grade, my three aunts came to visit. It was a very special event. Because of the distance to Terre Haute, Indiana, only grandma visited them each year. Of course, I was enthralled with them. From then on I wrote regularly to Sister Borgia and Sister St. Bernard, but stopped writing to Sister Helen Loretta when she didn’t answer my letters.

As I grew older, my desire to enter religious life became stronger. I just took it for granted it would be Monroe – never thinking of St. Mary of the Woods – they had enough Dunigans!

Since Our Lady of Mt. Carmel only went through grade 10, I had a decision to make – St. Stephen, Port Huron, or Monroe. After “discernment” I was accepted as a postulant in Monroe. Even though my grandmother was disappointed, no one was surprised!

On July 1, 1932 I began my IHM journey with the sisters – a memorable day for them and for me. It was Homecoming Day to the new Motherhouse. The sisters were so excited and I was so lonesome! By mid-afternoon, it was my turn to be accompanied by Sister Vigilia Burns to Our Lady’s altar. I was then entrusted to my guardian angel, Sister Mary Rene. So many postulants came on July 1 and 2, I don’t think we ever knew the actual count – somewhere in the 70s or 80s. My consolation was if they can do it, so can I! By St. Theresa’s Feast, about 40 of us asked for the habit. On Jan. 2, 1933, 35 of us were received. I was delighted to be given the name of Marie Carmel after my parish. Postulant and novitiate days were bonding time with our class and those who had come before and after us. Jan. 2, 1935, 32 were professed and again 32 were finally professed on Jan. 1, 1938. To this day we are 32 IHMs. Twenty-eight are enjoying fullness of life in God while four of us are still on the journey. Jesus continues to be center and meaning of our lives and mission in one spirit!

Over the years, change has been an integral part of religious life. While the Spirit has been operative in my life, experiences in the ministry of formal education, St. Vincent’s and St. Charles, both in Detroit, prepared me for a return to St. Mary Parish School in Monroe. We lived at the Motherhouse and went back and forth each day. The special grace attached was the opportunity to know the senior sisters, the infirm, enjoy the other “parochs” and even though we couldn’t talk to the novices and postulants, they were not strangers. The Hall of the Divine Child followed – early formation in community, prayer and service kept us centered amidst “around the clock duty.” The sisters savored every opportunity to enrich this spirit among us.

1954 marked the Marian Year. Mother Theresa McGivney chose Our Lady of the Assumption, Albuquerque, N.M., as our congregation’s mission for the year. I, along with three other sisters, was assigned to this new venture. What an enriching experience! Association with several different orders of sisters who also were great distances from their “home base” made for a close-knit community spirit. The benefits were spiritual, social and educational. Preparation and deliberation surrounding Vatican II were part of the era. Shortly after returning from New Mexico, I am again in Monroe at St. Joseph’s – things had changed over the years with the “parochs.” Each parish now had a convent. Having had the experience of both going back and forth and now being part of the parish community made a very positive difference for the sisters as well as the parish family. What a spirit!

My last, longest and most challenging mission experience was at St. Cyprian Parish in Riverview from September 1969 to June 1985. After teaching eighth grade for a year, I was asked to assume the principalship. Despite the troubled financial times for parochial schools, St. Cyprian’s continued to thrive – due greatly to a cooperative parish staff, school staff, education commission and parents.

When my 40th year in formal education was approaching, I was moved by the Spirit to discern my mission for the future. After prayer, in-service education and limited volunteer visiting to homebound parishioners, I resigned as principal in favor of ministry to the sick and elderly. The next question was, “Where?” Shortly after my resignation, the pastor, Reverend Walter Hurley, asked if I would remain on staff in ministry to the sick, elderly and families in need. Thus began my second “career” in September 1975. I found deep enrichment personally and those who ministered with me

– the health care visitors, the St. Vincent de Paul members, and those to whom we shared God’s gifts and love in our ministry. I ministered in that capacity for my last 10 years at St. Cyprian.

I returned to the Motherhouse in 1985 to begin pastoral care in St. Mary Health Care Center. My ministry in education spanned 40 years – 22 years in elementary grades and 18 years in administration.

Since September 1985 I was engaged in pastoral care in St. Mary Health Center for 11 years. Both ministries, education and pastoral care, have given me varied opportunities to further Jesus’ liberating mission among his people – and to receive from them more than I could ever imagine! July 1, 2008 marked the completion of 75 years on my IHM journey. In my heart I paused and thanked God for each new day.

Last summer’s community celebration of her “diamond jubilee” was the high light “par excellence” of Marie’s ministerial life among hundreds of friends and former students who whole-heartedly expressed their appreciation of her presence among them.

Of remarkable significance to her was a personal tribute by Fr. Jude Verly who, as a young assistant at St. Cyprian’s, worked closely with Sister Marie, both in the school and later caring for the sick. He was assigned to St. Cyprian as an assistant, then as pastor working closely with Sister Marie, both in the school and later caring for the sick. I quote part of a passage sent to her from Fr. Jude, “May this celebration deepen within her heart that holy passion to be possessed by the Divine Presence and allow the fullness of God to shine forth from within her.”

We close these fond memories of our sister, friend, and classmate of the well-known “32” with her treasured biblical quote:

“This is what Yahweh asks of you, only this, to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8

Written by Sister Marie Dunigan, IHM, and
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