

Remembering Sister Annunciata Grix Aug. 16, 1908-July 9, 2008



Welcome to all here who have come to remember a near-century of life of Sister Annunciata. She did not pride herself on being the eldest in the community and was not looking forward to the attention of her upcoming birthday. Today we remember Sister Annunciata Grix, named, as a novice, in honor of the parish where she spent her school years. As happens with some, she became her name, a symbol of the Annunciation, the good news of our liberation in Christ Jesus. I shall, therefore, link my reflections to the Angelus, a time-honored prayer of the Church and the congregation.

Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you...

Katherine Elizabeth Grix was born August 16, 1908 in Detroit and baptized a week later at St. Mary's in what is now called Greektown. She was the youngest of three girls, regal of name and gentle of disposition, with a calm born of temperament and developed in depth.

She was proud of her 100 percent German heritage and the close family ties. Speaking of her happy childhood, she wrote, "Ours was a joy-filled Catholic home. Our parents encouraged us in our education and provided many opportunities for us to appreciate the gifts of good literature, music, art, travel and family." But in 1917 there began a litany of losses that punctuated nearly a decade. Let me read her own account:

"In April of 1917, my well-beloved grandfather died, followed shortly in November by the devastating death of my mother from cancer. She died November 1. Then on June 20, 1920, Marie (Sister Anna Marie) left home to join the IHMs in Monroe, Michigan. These were pre-Vatican II days, which meant her entrance was almost complete separation from the family. On November 11, 1923, Anesta (the eldest) died of a prolonged illness and on November 24, 1924, my father died very suddenly of an embolism. Four months later my godmother, my dear aunt Kate Wagner died. I was the sole survivor of what was our very happy home."

Behold the handmaid of the Lord... Be it done to me according to your Word.

Katherine taught for a year at St. Rose at the insistence of Sister Caritas more than her own inclination, and when Marygrove College opened its doors, she entered and studied there for two years. While at Marygrove, she realized that she was avoiding the vocation that would lead her to say, "I finally joined my sister at Monroe." She entered in 1929, was received in 1930. She professed first and final vows in 1932 and 1935 respectively.

Sister Anna Marie, who had taken their mother's first name for her religious name, was already well known in the community and recognized as potential leader. Annunciata took her place beside her, glad to let Anna shine. Their love and loyalty for each other flowed like the mighty Danube itself.

Annunciata spoke little of herself or her own spirituality. With 12 years of working very closely with her, I came to intuit her passion for God. Scholars who have revisited the meaning of the Annunciation have helped us to revise our image of Mary. Elizabeth Johnson, in her book *Truly Our Sister*, describes Mary in terms that are echoed in our sister, Annunciata.

Paraphrasing and applying to both women, we read that “her consent is a free and responsible act of self-bestowal...not a heroic super-woman, but attentive to God’s calling and this...drew her from her private safety to...a liberated, mature woman, who had a mind and will of her own, capable of self-determination and perseverance in her decisions.”

Being born and raised in a culture primarily of women gave Annunciata strength and self-reliance unusual for and ahead of the times. One sensed her grounding in God and she felt little need or desire to speak of that relationship to many others.

And the Word was made Flesh...

Annunciata spent 45 years in education, all within the Archdiocese of Detroit, during the strongest era in Catholic education. She began with the seniors at St. Stephen’s, Port Huron, then on to St. Agnes in Detroit. Having completed her master’s in education at Wayne, she moved to Immaculata High School, adding the role of librarian which would go with her for the next 20 years. Following that, she returned to the east side, near her home, serving at St. Charles and St. Martin’s. At Sacred Heart, Dearborn, she led the school as principal and the convent as superior. Judy Woods Schoenherr (former IHM Sister Helena) captured the experience, “In 1965, Sacred Heart, Dearborn was staffed with the most colorful, talented, opinionated, age-diverse variety of women that the IHMs had to offer. Although never very comfortable with conflict, in her very reserved and private way, Mother Annunciata listened to and respected each and every one.”

In each of these locations, she spent about four or five years and, like most sisters, probably was never mentioned in the parish jubilee celebrations. But, she shared the truth of the word in her teaching and students attest to her fairness. Marietta Murphy said Annunciata never understood why so many pupils kept in touch and told her over and over how special she was. She covered a breadth of areas from math to religion, English to economics, American history and drafting. Her studies followed a liberal arts model, but she could make her way in business as well.

And dwelt among us...

In 1967, she returned to Monroe, where she took on the work of assistant principal and business manager at St. Mary Academy. But in fact, she was home for good, as she spent the next 30 years in ministry within these walls.

In 1976, she began what she often referred to as the happiest days of her life. General Secretary Margaret Schloff invited her to work with us in the Central Administration, as receptionist for all and secretary for Sister Mary Mercy and me.

One day, she asked me what she could do to help me. Having no idea what I was doing myself, I thought and then said, “Please will you make me a list of the IHMs with both their baptismal and religious names. But just do the ones I don’t know.” That she didn’t laugh in my face was a sign of her class. Perhaps she realized then that I hoped for a mind reader, which she certainly became.

In an effort to be considerate, I would invite her to take a day off now and then. After several attempts, she said one day, "Sit down here a minute." She quietly asserted, "You are Irish and I am German. You love variety and need it. I thrive on consistency, even routine. When I need a day off, I'll let you know in advance, but it will be rare." I was stunned, but knew enough to respect her wisdom and her wishes. And there began our friendship and our delight in diversity.

In 1982, I asked her to continue as my secretary, with the title of executive assistant. She readily agreed and we became very close during those next six years. At times, we would enjoy an outing. Once we attended a concert featuring the rising star, YoYo Ma. For that performance, he received eight standing ovations, honoring each with another piece. As we drove home after midnight, she exclaimed with delight, "I think we heard a concert and a half." I knew then how much she loved, not only classical music, but especially the cello.

Marge Polys recounts "I was always in admiration of her openness to change and her humility to acknowledge when it was hard for her to do so." This was especially the case, after she attended a workshop to learn new understandings of sexuality, so important to our ministries.

Meanwhile, from 1979 on, Annunciata added a service that would transform both herself and the community, that of secretary for the new development program. This opened a wide world of contacts to a person who was naturally shy. She did this in the most authentic way possible, through prompt and beautifully written thank you letters. She covered the bases in some paragraphs, but gave a personal touch by adding comments she knew would touch the donor. If someone asked for prayer for a special concern, her thank you mentioned it. These ranged from illness to a lost pet, to a search for just the right spouse.

In fact, her letters made her famous. Every one received a letter that was fresh. That took some record-keeping and her 3x5 cards held a treasure of information. Because some sent a gift monthly, often in increments of five or ten dollars, she had to keep adding letters to her collection. From 1979-1998, she created 179 letters for donors. Her 180th was her letter of resignation.

During those years, I once introduced Anna Marie, her sister, to a donor who immediately said, "Oh, you must be the sister of Sister Annunciata!" Recounting this to Annunciata later, she emitted a slight giggle.

Amata Miller recalls the manner in which she related on the job. "I remember so well going in to her little office each morning and receiving the blessing of her welcoming smile. She was always willing and happy to talk. No matter how much she had to do she never let me know she was pressured. She was willing, at age 80, to learn the computer to write her letters to donors.

According to Marianne Gaynor, Annunciata's favorite letter was the one she wrote in September 1997. Let me close with portions of it:

"Recently the attention of the world was riveted on two women...one young, beautiful and glamorous; the other old wizened, and stooped. What was it that captured the respect and attention of all peoples? I think it was their hearts rooted in love and compassion for God's poor ones. The one saw suffering and worked to change the systems that created such horrors; the other saw suffering and worked to alleviate the immediacy of their agony."

Then, linking Princess Diana and Mother Theresa of Calcutta to the readers, she follows with:

“What brings this to mind now? Your recent gift to our IHM Development Program gives evidence of your own compassionate heart. Your solicitude for the aged and frail among IHM Sisters and your love for those sisters who minister among the poor and suffering give ample proof of the kind heart that prompts the gift.”

And now, joining in a celestial centennial, in memory of her who knew so well the limitless gifts of women, including all of us, let us recite the Hail Mary.

Hail Mary...

Carol Quigley, IHM
July 2008