



REMEMBERING SISTER MARY FAITH HUGHES

Jan. 21, 1922 - Sept. 7, 2009

Sister Mary Faith was an extremely extroverted, lively, animated person. She said that life taught her to think positively and to trust in the Providence of God.

Sister Mary Faith was one of 12 children, six girls and six boys, born to Joseph Hughes and Catherine Downs on Jan. 21, 1922 in Detroit. The six girls were Mildred, Carolyn, Mary Jo, Helen Rita, Anne Marie and Catherine, who died of whooping cough when she was only about 3 years old. Catherine was named for their mother. With her Irish eyes and dark curls, the family thought that she was just too

beautiful to live! Three of the girls entered the congregation, Carolyn (Sister Rita Marie), Helen Rita (Sister Mary Faith) and Anne Marie (Sister Charles Borromeo). One boy died as an infant, Bernard. Five boys lived to adulthood, Bill, Joe, Jack, Tom and Bob.

Helen and Anne Marie, the two youngest girls, were always pals growing up, sharing friends and good times. They were both sisters and buddies. This friendship lasted all their lives.

Mr. Hughes had come from Cambridge, Mass., Mrs. Hughes from Port Lambton, Ontario. The Hughes grandparents emigrated from Ireland to Boston; the Downs grandparents from Ireland to Ontario, Canada. Some family members thought it would be a good idea for Catherine and Joe to get to know one another. So, an open house was hosted by relatives in Marine City, Mich.. where Joe and Catherine met.

Mr. Hughes, was a contractor and owner of the Joseph M. Hughes and Sons, Co. The family lived in Saint Leo Parish on the west side of Detroit. When Helen Rita was a young child, they moved to Saint Charles Parish on Detroit's east side. This is where the family met the IHM Sisters. Sister Mary Faith spoke warmly of her happy childhood. "We had a happy home with lots of teasing," she said. Their father tried to get the children to react to one another by often engaging them in a game of Monopoly. From the sixth grade on, Mary Faith had a group of pals with whom she socialized regularly. One favorite outing was ice-skating on Belle Isle, Detroit. Our Sister Mary Ann (Marie Andrew) Untener's family lived on the island. This group of pals was able to leave their shoes at Untener's and enjoy the hospitality of Mrs. Untener's home-baked cookies on their return. In fact, one of these pals told Mary Faith that when she came home from the convent, he'd be waiting! On her entrance day the crowd wanted Helen to go with them to a dinner dance, then to the convent. Since Mother Ruth Hankerd, the general superior, had told Helen that July 2 was the very last day, she had to decline!

Mr. Hughes was aware that his wife was lonesome for her “home town.” So he bought a summer home in Port Lambton, Ontario, on the St. Clair River where the family spent their summers. Sister Mary Faith spoke of their wonderful vacations there. She wrote, “My parents encouraged us to sit and watch the beautiful sunsets on the water. We went swimming at least twice a day! The North and South American ocean liners would pass at night, and we could hear the music from the boats and see the couples dancing.”

Helen Rita Hughes had attended Field Elementary for kindergarten, then went to Saint Charles School from the first to 12th grade. She said that she liked the sisters. She found them to be positive and to be good teachers. Her sister, Carolyn (Sister Rita Marie), had entered the congregation in 1929 and now 11 years later, Helen felt that she had a calling. “I need to try it,” she told herself. After graduating in June 1940, Helen entered the Postulate. Later she said that she had never doubted her religious vocation. Her parents found Helen’s leaving too hard to take her to Monroe. She remembered them waving good-bye in the driveway as her older sister, Mildred, drove out for the Motherhouse. This was on July 2, 1940.

Helen Rita Hughes was received on Jan. 2, 1941, and given the name Sister Mary Faith. She had asked for that name since her aunt, who was a St. Joseph Sister in London, Ontario, had told Helen that the gift she would need most as a woman religious was *faith*. Sister Mary Faith said that she always tried to pray with Mary’s faith. Her name signified her spirituality. While still a novice Sister Mary Faith was assigned to teach second and fourth grades at Saint Mary School in Monroe. This began a long and very successful career as an elementary teacher. From 1942-1971, she taught first through fifth grades in various schools throughout Michigan. Sister Mary Faith excelled as an elementary teacher. She mentored many student teachers from the University of Detroit and Marygrove College. I sensed her pride when she told me that each one was successful in the public school system.

In 1971 Sister Mary Faith felt called to answer an invitation to be a pastoral assistant at Immaculate Conception Parish in Auburn, Ind. After a year, she returned to Saint Mary of Redford, where she had taught for several years, working in parish and prayer ministry. Then from 1978-88, Mary Faith was a pastoral assistant at Saint Dorothy Parish, Warren, Mich. In 1976 she wrote, “After prayer, discussion with my spiritual director, my provincial and my pastor, I feel called to pastoral ministry. I believe that at this point in history there is a place for women in pastoral ministry in the church. I also believe that this goes along with our IHM charism to answer the need of the church and the world.” Sister Mary Faith was very successful as a pastoral minister. “The people liked me and I liked them,” she told me. She felt she related well with older adults even after so many years in the classroom. While at Saint Dorothy, Mary Faith found that she had a gift to help hospitalized parishioners who were near death accept their passing peacefully. This word was afloat. The woman who cooked in the rectory said to her one day, “Sister Mary Faith, I love you but if I’m ever in the hospital don’t come near me!” In 1987 Sister Mary Faith wrote on her Ministry Commitment Form that she prayed to be a contemplative in action, not a busy activist. The

words of the Psalmist, “Be still and know that I am God,” became very meaningful for her.

Sister Mary Faith kept herself involved and updated throughout the years. She was one of the first four sisters to go to Mary, Mother of the Church Parish in Burnsville, Minn., in the summer to get acquainted with the pastor and the people before we opened a religious education center there. One summer she had a grant to go to New Orleans and take part in the Witness Program, which consisted of a team of women religious, priests and deacons from all over the country to teach inner-city black children and to develop leadership skills among black adults. During the summer of 1974, she participated in a Clinical Pastoral Education Program at Mt. Carmel Hospital, Detroit, in order to sharpen her pastoral skills. Also, she took advantage of joining a House of Prayer two different summers, which she wrote were beautiful experiences. In 1996 Sister Mary Faith wrote, “I feel secure in saying that I am a Christian liberal feminist. This helps me when dealing with family, friends and sisters at the Motherhouse.” This awareness came after having taken part in the theology workshops of the ‘90s. Sister Mary Ann Flanagan’s, IHM, classes on feminism were especially insightful for Mary Faith, she wrote.

In the late ‘80s, when her hearing and sight began to diminish, Sister Mary Faith decided that it was time for her to come to the Motherhouse where she continued to be helpful in many ways. One activity that Mary Faith most enjoyed was working on art pieces for the annual Motherhouse Christmas sale. Of this time she wrote, “Daily I pause and hallow our lives and our land! Divine Providence has taken care of our IHM community in the past and I believe that God will do the same in the future!”

Sister Mary Faith had learned to pray from her mother. “God is your special friend,” Mrs. Hughes told her. “Talk to God as a friend.” She did this, cherishing time alone with God in stillness. She also had great devotion to Our Lady and said that reflection on the Scripture of the day nourished her spirituality. Sister Mary Faith said of herself that she loved life. She loved people. “I am grateful,” she said, “for a happy home, a happy school and happy friends!”

Dear Sister Mary Faith, having received the invitation to go Home where God awaits you, where one is always welcome, we take leave of you with the prayer that you will possess God in fullness and joy!

Written by Patricia A. O’Donnell, IHM
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Sept. 10, 2009