

REMEMBERING SISTER CATHERINE KERWIN, IHM



Today we remember Sister Catherine Kerwin, the last of five excellent IHM Kerwin educators.

Catherine's parents, Philip Alphonsus and Lillian Parks, were married at Holy Redeemer Church in Detroit. Sister had two brothers, Philip and William, and one sister, Marian. Catherine, the youngest, was born on Aug. 23, 1915. All her siblings are deceased. The Kerwin family was a jovial one with much laughter and fun. There were always guests around and hospitality was given to anyone who dropped by.

Catherine attended St. Catherine School from grade one-three, but that changed due to the death of her mother. Mrs. Kerwin had been bed-ridden for two years and died from cancer. What a shock this was for a child of 9. Initially Catherine could not accept the fact that her mother would never return. Mr. Kerwin, who must have been very sensitive to his young daughter, took her by the hand one day and walked her to her mother's grave. He knelt on the grave and held the little girl close to him. This worked and the visit confirmed for Catherine that her mother would never return.

After this visit, Catherine was extremely sensitive to her father's grief. She instinctively knew when he was particularly sad and she would sit close to him and gently rub his shoulder. The father responded to this show of love and always relaxed after this tender gesture of a little girl. Five years later, Mr. Kerwin married his wife's best friend, Sophie Thiel. Since Sophie had always been around the family and had been called Aunt, there was no trauma about this nor did the children have negative reactions.

As a result of the death, Catherine was bathed in perpetual love and affection. The extended family nurtured her and Marian, her sister, took over the mother role which she had been gradually assuming during the mother's illness. A major decision was made at this time to entrust Catherine to the care of the "dear IHM Sisters at the Academy." Catherine spent nine years as a boarder. The Academy was always home to her and she took the experience in stride.

At the age of 18, Catherine entered the IHM order. She said this was a natural step “just going from one building to the next.” Her sister Marian had become an IHM six years earlier and was known as Sister Marie Lillian. Catherine was unaware of the power and prestige of her three IHM aunts, Sister Phillipa, Sister Margaret Ellen and Sister Marie Winifred. These women had always been “Daddy’s little sisters.” They were simply family members. Once entered, she said the aunts were her “favorite penance” and her advice to all is “don’t enter where you have relatives!!” Sister continued this part of the story by admitting, however, that these women were wonderful to her, but they made sure she toed the mark. Although many of us had Sister Marie Winifred for our preparation for teaching, Sister Catherine said she did not know how it occurred, but she “skidded” by her aunt’s training. There must have been teacher blood in all the Kerwin women because even though Catherine “skidded” by the wonderful trainer, she was an educator through and through as her long career proved.

Besides having teacher blood, there was a line of religious vocations in the family. At the time of entering, Sister had two cousins who were Redemptorist priests and two IHM cousins, Sister Baptista White and Sister Alice Clare White. The vocations continue today. Many of us know Archbishop-Elect Joseph Tobin, a cousin who has just been appointed the new secretary of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Institution of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

Catherine was received on Jan. 2, 1934 and given the name Mechtilde. Final profession was Jan. 2, 1939. Sister’s teaching career was varied and ranged from junior high to graduate school. She obtained her early degree the way most of us did – in summers. Besides the normal preparation, Catherine took drafting and Latin to enhance her secondary teaching possibilities. She attended Catholic University in Washington, D.C., on two summer scholarships to be certified to teach the visually impaired. Since Catholic U. did not offer a master’s in special education, Catherine transferred to Wayne State. Here she proceeded through her M.Ed. with certification in the education of both the mentally and emotionally impaired. With a scholarship from the National Defense Education Act, Catherine continued on for a Doctor of Education degree. She wisely accumulated sufficient credits to be a certified school psychologist. In Sister’s file is a letter from her major doctoral professor addressed to the congregation. In part, it says, “The (Doctoral) committee considered Sister’s dissertation a splendid one and that her interpretations in the final oral exam were distinguished.”

Professionally, Catherine was happy as she progressed through the grades and into secondary and then into special education. She loved teaching, loved her pupils and

was pleased with her mission experiences. She had artistic talent and delighted in doing bulletin boards for anyone who wanted help. She was often characterized by her sister friends as happy-go-lucky.

After obtaining her doctorate, Sister was missioned to Marygrove College. Here she prepared college students in her chosen field of special education. She considered it a privilege to teach teachers. She believed that many handicapped children were not loved and teachers had the responsibility to show love and care that otherwise might be missing.

During her years at Marygrove College, the Dad's Club paid for religious faculty to study abroad. Catherine spent three months exploring special education methods used in various countries in Europe. This was an exciting experience in her life as she went to Ireland, Belgium, Denmark and Italy. She was faithful in studying the systems in the countries, but she also absorbed as much as she could of the culture using her free time to visit art galleries, museums and national historical sites. She wrote long letters to her local community about her trip and left copious notes on everything she saw and did.

When the special education major was discontinued at the college, Catherine became the school psychologist at Gesu. Two years later, she chose to be an assistant in the Academy Library followed by a similar role in the Motherhouse Library. In all these positions she was noted for exactness and was even labeled "General" by the Academy students because she demanded good behavior.

Sister was beginning to have serious health problems: falling and severe hearing loss. Her condition required her to move into health care. The diagnosis of Ménière's disease gave her an answer as to why she fell so often. In her confinement, she was a loving patient even asking the health care persons for a hug. Aides describe her as a colorful person who smiled and winked and appreciated the smallest kindnesses. Her hearing loss made it difficult for visitors, but she did enjoy people stopping by.

In summary, vocation and a prayer life were preeminent in Catherine's life. How she loved her God. On her ministry forms she reiterated over and over that she believed in a ministry of presence. Her Book of Life page is a poem on Love.

Community was a value like no other. She loved the sisters and enjoyed fun times, always entering wholeheartedly in any activity. On mission she enjoyed cooking, especially baking cookies, playing cards and just visiting.

Catherine's family was always uppermost in her life. Because she was such a loving person, it was obvious that the family love, despite the mother's early death, formed Catherine into a warm, nurturing human being.

Teaching was a passion. No one was ever more satisfied in their profession and felt such joy and rewards for doing a job!

So, we bid farewell to the last of the Kerwins. The community has been blessed with these strong women. May they enjoy their reunion in heaven. You, Catherine, followed in the footsteps. You are now with the God of your Love poem and of your loving heart. May you rest in peace.

Written by Sister Marie Hopkins, IHM
Read by Sister Margaret Ann Henige, IHM
Aug. 12, 2010

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