



Remembering Ruth McDonnell, IHM Nov. 9, 1917 - Aug. 6, 2008

This Remembering was written by Sister John Mary Baker, a long and close friend of Ruth for many, many years. At John Mary's request, and with her approval, I have added a few thoughts, memories and anecdotes of my own.

On Nov. 9, 1917, the world was enriched by the arrival of Ruth McDonnell, the daughter of Finley and Margaret Larmer McDonell. Ruth had one sister, Jane, three years her senior. The two girls and their parents settled into a simple but comfortable home in St. Agnes parish where the parents went to church and the girls to school. Finley McDonnell, Ruth's father, worked at Ford Motor Company. Born to a life she herself described as "one designed by God" and deeply rooted in the IHM community as she herself tells us, *"I never wanted to be anything but an IHM."*

Over time, it became evident that Ruth's desire would be met but at great cost – she was left an orphan at age ten. For the next 12 years, Ruth and her sister Jane lived on what Ruth termed was an "aunt hill" – made up of her father's six sisters, unmarried women who cherished their orphan nieces. Ruth attended St. Agnes parish school for her elementary years and later St. Mary Academy in Monroe. After her senior year she wanted to enter the IHM congregation but the aunts prevailed on her to go first to college. Mary, Sarah, Christine, Margaret, Isabel and Ruth McDonell were all professional women who insisted that career decisions should wait until after one's professional preparation was completed.

"The Aunts," as they were often spoken of, were involved in educational careers, for the most part as school principals, guidance counselors and librarians, with the exception of Mary, who was secretary for Edgar Guest, poet on staff of the Detroit News, and Ruth, who worked for a lawyer in the Fisher Building.

It was no surprise then, that after graduation from the Academy, Ruth attended Marygrove College, graduating in 1939 with a major in biology. In that same year, after obtaining her degree, Ruth entered the IHM community. She was given the name Marie Elise, and made final vows in January 1945. She had fulfilled her aunts' wishes and her own heart's deepest desire.

As a novice, Ruth taught at Immaculata High School and there her long friendship with Mother Anna Marie began and took root. After four years, she was assigned to Akron where she taught religion and biology for five years. In 1951 Ruth was appointed Mistress of Postulants, a post she held for the next nine years. It was during this time that my own friendship with Ruth developed and lasted all these years. She knew me to the end – even if after about fifteen minutes she would say with finality...*"You can go now."* I last saw her on the second of August, the feast of

St Alphonsus, our congregational patron, and was dismissed as usual, with a tapping of her fingers on the table.

In her later years, Ruth disliked being reminded of those years in “the ministry of formation” – nor did she want to hear the stories of former postulants now-professed religious of many years – who liked to tease her about her “formative” ways. She fiercely loved these young women even if she was sometimes hard on them. On her page in *The IHM Book of Life*, in listing a novena of gratitude for events of her life, she singled out *“nine years as Mistress of Postulants, learning generosity from young women who were willing to give ultimate gift of their lives.”*

Reception Day, when these young women were received into the novitiate, and second year novices made their first vows, was always a special occasion for the IHM congregation, and one in which Ruth took special pride and joy. One of these times remains engraved in my mind. As Assistant to Sister Mary Hubert, the Novice Directress, Ruth and I were responsible for decorating the chapel. Together we drove to Detroit, went to several florists, and purchased many varieties of beautiful flowers as met the eye. Ruth was gloriously extravagant – no question of expense even considered. And – of course – all bills were charged to Mother Anna Marie Grix and placed on her mail shelf in the professed community room. The chapel was awash with the odors of lilies and roses.

The day following Reception and Profession – in Mother Anna’s inimitable handwriting (not always easy to decipher but *this day* very, very clear) a note appeared on the mail shelf of Sister Marie Elise – Directress of Postulants. It contained one sentence – *“What did you two think you were doing? Putting on a ‘Brigg’s Wedding’?”*

I think that it is no exaggeration to say that Ruth was an extraordinarily beautiful-looking young woman (as she was beautiful as an older woman as well). On visiting Sundays, the older brothers of postulants were more than wide-eyed as she entered the parlor – and contrary to the experience of most families who cherished moments of privacy with their daughters *without* the superior, these young men wanted her to *“hang around a while”* as they put it.

After her years as Postulant Directress, Ruth returned to her teaching. Besides setting up the religion program at IHM Westchester, Ruth studied theology at the Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and later at Loyola University in Chicago where she earned a second master’s degree in religious education. Also at this time, Ruth joined the staff of William Sadlier Press where she edited *Journey in Faith*, a text for high school students.

In 1966 Ruth became the Secondary Religion Consultant for the Archdiocese of Chicago School Office. This position included conducting workshops, serving as lecturer to faculty and parent groups, as well as being a member of the Curriculum Committee for the Archdiocese.

After almost ten years in this post, Ruth went to Washington D.C. in 1975 where she worked with the United States Catholic Conference. Three years later the Conference of Catholic Bishops and the U.S. Catholic Conference, after an intensive search, announced her appointment as the first woman to serve on the Associate

Secretary level of the U.S. Catholic Conference. When Bishop Thomas C. Kelly, O.P., General Secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops announced her appointment, he said:

“Sister McDonell, in addition to her unique gifts in the area of religious formation of the young, has an invaluable breadth of knowledge about contemporary educational questions facing the Church. Her appointment will do much to strengthen the Department.”

As a specialist in Adolescent Catechetics, Ruth made recommendations for actions by the Bishop’s Committee and also directed the representatives of youth committees throughout the country.

In May of 1991, Ruth returned to Detroit after working for a year in New York City for the Sadlier Press where she did editing on some of their text books. She disliked New York, where she had no friends. She felt isolated and alone. Returning home gave her time to be with her beloved sister Jane and the Perkins family – many of whom are here today and have kept in touch with her throughout the years. In time, Ruth settled in Milford, Mich., and became director of religious education at St. Mary’s Parish. This was a very rich time for her, where, as she notes, with gratitude, in the last lines on her *IHM Book of Life* page, that “*I was able for the first time to put down roots in a parish community and have come to know the deepening love of friends.*” It was in this parish that she celebrated her golden jubilee as an IHM Sister. And it was from this parish in the spring of 2004 that she moved to Monroe – first to an apartment at Norman Towers, and then in August to the Motherhouse. The initial move and its journey were hard on her and a painful decision in many ways. It was putting closure on a life of activity and involvement that had given her so much movement and activity. Friends and family, and of course IHM Sisters, helped her to make the move.

Ruth had good IHM friends at Monroe which softened the adjustment and her very dear friends from St. Mary’s in Milford, especially Mary Krebs and Ann Westenberg, came regularly to visit. They took her to Panera’s to lunch which she especially enjoyed, and when no longer able to go out, they would accompany her to the community dining room. Major celebration times during the year always found a special bouquet that found its way from Milford. Gradually, as the years passed, Ruth’s memory began to fade, and painfully as well, her recognition of others faded away from her even if she pretended otherwise. To the end, she always recognized her long-time friend John Mary – whom she addressed quite simply as “John.”

By nature, Ruth was ever anxious to modify or control or assist with the needs of friends, the lives of her charges, or simply the betterment of the world in general. Such an outlook on life was bound to be fraught with moments of impatience, misunderstandings and laughter – and yes – many tears. Ruth, however, met such challenges with patience and she was able to accept the outcome whatever shape it took.

Her inquisitive mind and her love of beauty faded as well. Always well dressed and groomed, her surroundings meant a good deal to her for a longtime. She especially loved the two prints of Monet that I believe followed her from apartment to apartment. Besides her rosary and her bible, the two volumes of the office in

contemporary language by the Indianapolis Carmelites, and the Commentary on St. John's Gospel by Sandra Schneider, IHM, remained in full view. Although she received a copy of *Newsweek* regularly, I rarely saw her turn the pages and never once after her move to her room on third floor did I ever see her turn on the television. It was as though in some way she had already begun a final journey.

An active life to be sure – one governed by enthusiasm and an awareness of the needs of others. Essentially, Ruth simply loved life itself. Every aspect of it was of interest to her – art, poetry, theology, music and very especially people. To paraphrase the poet Lowell, *"Wherever she looked, whenever she listened, she heard life murmur or saw it glisten."*

We've all been enriched by your life among us, Ruth. We thank you for every moment of it and look forward to a great sharing in the joy you are experiencing in Our Father's House when our time comes. We pray you Godspeed.

In conclusion, I would like to share a poem written by Edward Seifert, a DeLasalle Christian Brother. It is entitled *Felix Lives: In Memory of Brother Felix Scanlon*.

I received the poem from IHM Associate Noreen Foley, a former student, colleague, and close friend of Ruth. Noreen had it earmarked for Ruth's final celebration. Felix, for whom the poem was written, as given way to Ruth:

(Ruth) lives
In life beyond our conceiving.
While we pray here
the spirits are wiping not only tears
but fuzz from her eyes.
She was a woman bemused and befuddled,
scarcely knowing the women
who loved and reached out to her,
but now it is revelation itself
that clears (her) eyes
and dismisses the shadows around her.
The glory is shining
on unrolling parchment.
Here she reads a new order of love
where there is no more forgetting,
only new knowing
and hands outstretched to lead her
to the Lord of all living.

Written by Margaret Brennan, IHM
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