



Remembering Our Sister Helen (Ursulina) Mekeal, IHM

Sept. 11, 1914 – Sept. 5, 2010

Sister Helen Mekeal's early life, by her own admission, was one of turmoil, confusion and misunderstanding on the part of family and co-workers. Despite difficulties, both physical and emotional, she lived a long life marked by constant prayer and unconditional reliance on God.

Helen was the fourth child born to William and May (Casey) Mekeal in Akron, Ohio, on Sept. 11, 1914. She would have turned 96 next Saturday. Her older siblings were Mary, Patrick and Irene. Bill was one year younger than Helen. Her parents separated when Helen was two years old, and she was placed in St. Joseph's Orphanage in Cleveland. She remembered little from those years except that she was punished for being a "stubborn little mule." Her brothers were placed in Father Baker's Home in Lackawanna, New York, and Helen met with them for only a few visits during their lifetimes.

In the seventh grade she was sent to the Nardin Academy in Buffalo, one of eight children who *worked* for room, board and education. The Academy was conducted by the same religious who ran the orphanage. After several years, her sister Irene invited her to live with her and an elderly wealthy single woman. This, too, was a difficult time for Helen. Several years later she moved to live with a family nearby and got her first taste of living a genuine family life. Helen attended public schools for a short time but disliked it because it was so different from the Catholic atmosphere she had experienced earlier.

Then her sister Mary, who had recently married, made arrangements for her to live with a cousin, Mrs. Charles Latham, who had three adopted children. While living there, Helen attended St. Vincent School in Akron, where she was taught by IHM Sisters. Her sister Mary paid for room, board and tuition.

Helen enjoyed her high school years and had fond memories of Sisters Julianne, Mary Ambrose and Edward Marie Ufford, all of whom inspired her to enter the IHM congregation.

Helen came to Monroe June 22, 1934, the same day I did, and received the name Ursulina at her reception on Jan. 2, 1935. She wrote that her novitiate

days were marked "by a struggle with communication but that Sister Mary Hubert supported her in an outstanding way."

Helen's early years of teaching in the primary grades were very fulfilling for it gave her great joy to prepare children for their First Confession and First Holy Communion. During these years she was also involved in organizing libraries and teaching CCD classes and remedial reading. She was successful in all these duties, even though she suffered bouts of sickness. She felt especially fulfilled as a librarian.

When she came to Monroe in 1972 she wrote, "I am resolved to make this my House of Prayer, reading about prayer and making a special effort at Centering and Contemplative prayer." She was very grateful to Father Eugene Simon, a Jesuit at Manresa, for his gift of Spiritual Direction. Helen modeled her prayer on that of St. Therese of Lisieux and often made the Oblation of Self as she assisted in various ways on the supportive staff in the Infirmary.

One of her ways to foster IHM community life was to write letters to sisters in the foreign missions, relating events at the Motherhouse to keep them informed of retreats, guest speakers, concerts and other events. Her article entitled "Prayer and Service Bring Jesus Near" was published in the *Monroe Evening News* during Lent in 1981, relating her personal ways of living this holy season as a time of prayer and self-denial.

Helen attended daily Mass whenever possible, and she participated when she could in community activities. Meanwhile, she spent her days in silent and contemplative prayer. Sheila Hindman, our visiting nurse, told me that Helen was always pleasant to work with and was so grateful for every kindness shown her. Brenda Kelly said that Helen saw Jesus in each person she encountered. Ginger Ortez reported that Helen called everyone "Sister."

From her room in the Health Care Center, Helen wrote near the end of her life, "Lord Jesus, I accept cheerfully and willingly with its anxieties, pains and sufferings, whatever kind of death it shall please You to be mine. I unite it with Your Holy death on the Cross. Amen."

We will miss you, Helen, your smile in spite of pain, and rejoice that you now enjoy peace and contentment in the presence of the Lord Jesus, whom you loved and in whom you placed your trust.

Written by Sister Mary Laubacher, IHM
Sept. 9, 2010