

## Remembering Sister Maura Morrissey, IHM

May 20, 1914 – Feb. 22, 2010



Maura grew up in a loving Irish family in Jackson Mich. Her Dad, John Morrissey and her mother, Margaret McIntyre, were both born in County Clare, Ireland. Maura's mother came from a large family: seven girls, four boys—all but one came to the United States. Her Dad had one brother and one sister who came to the United States; being a quiet man he did not often speak of the Morrissey's. Margaret and John met in Jackson and were married in St John Jackson in 1901. They had 11 children: four boys and seven girls. Two died very early after birth: Loretta (fourth eldest) and Virginia (the second youngest).

In her personal oral memoirs, Maura tells of her own birth.

“Margaret and John Morrissey and their family, Walt, Ed, Mary John, Margaret and Frances, were celebrating the birth of Teresa, the eighth child, on May 20, 1914. Even though Teresa was not a beautiful baby, she was welcomed into the home - she had a hair lip. A team of doctors, plus my cousin, Dr. James O'Meara, performed surgery on the third day of my birth.

Many doctors have told me how fortunate I was to have this taken care of so early in life. When I was growing up I was never made aware that I was different.”

Sister Maura describes her childhood as “a happy home with many ups and downs especially during the depression. We never knew we were poor.” The Morrissey children attended St. John Jackson where the IHMs taught; in fact most of Maura's brothers and sisters graduated from St. John. Mr. Morrissey owned a grocery store; Maura's first lessons of charity came from her Dad, who assisted the sisters, gave selflessly to the orphanage and reached out to those in dire need.

At age 16 on March 19, while assisting Sister Ann Frances Bodley in cleaning the basement of the convent, Maura was asked by sister if she ever wanted to be a sister. Maura emphatically responded no but agreed to make a novena with sister to St Joseph, keeping this just between the two (of them) without telling anyone. Near the end of the novena, with a bit of nudging from Ann Frances, Maura discussed this with her mother who felt she was too young to make such a decision. Maura then tried using the Little Flower as an example of one who entered religious life at 16. To this her mother replied promptly, “You are not the Little Flower!” Her Dad was very much surprised, wondering how she would finish her education. In the end, both parents supported her decision. Hence, on June 2, 1930, Maura was driven to Monroe by her girlfriends and thus began her life as an IHM.

Maura loved her family and kept in touch with each one of them. Even recently, she was always sending cards to her nieces, nephews, great-nieces and nephews and even the great-grand ones. Whether it was Thanksgiving, Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Easter or Christmas, Maura had her list ready and cards would be addressed and mailed to the clan. She enjoyed their visits and was delighted with the surprise 95<sup>th</sup> birthday party in 2009.

Maura describes her postulancy and novitiate as happy days “even though in the novitiate she was on the carpet frequently.” In January 1931, Maura, as a novice, was assigned to St Michael Flint to teach third grade. It was here with Sister Seraphine that Maura felt she grew in “kindness and thoughtfulness, modulated her tone of voice and learned not to be bold, etc. The other sisters in the house kept an eye out for me and taught me what not to do so I didn't get into any trouble.” Maura made final vows Jan. 2, 1935.

After four years, Maura was missioned to Harbor Beach. With Sister Sophia as the principal, Maura learned not only the humanness of religious life but saw in action the reaching out to those in need by a superior, whom Maura describes as “one who was ahead of the times.” The years at Harbor Beach were very happy ones. When Maura was transferred to St. Patrick Detroit she said, “I cried buckets.”

Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?  
When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothed you? When  
did we see you ill or in prison and visit you? Whenever you did for the least of mine,  
You did for me. Matthew 26:37-40

This quotation from scripture Maura wrote in her book of life. These few questions and their simple revolutionizing response sum up the life, the ministry, the love and faith of Sister Maura Morrissey. For the next 50 years of her life Maura fed the hungry, clothed the poor, gave shelter to the homeless and reached out to every type of marginalized person. Jesus was at the core of her life; she celebrated Jesus’ life through the works of mercy. At the heart of whatever Maura did were the works of mercy. Dorothy Day used to say: “Your love of God is only as great as the love you have for the least of God’s people.” Maura believed sincerely the poor are Jesus; what you do for them you do to Jesus.

St. Patrick Detroit became a watershed for Maura - a defining moment in her life. Here she was introduced to the very poor, the disenfranchised, the homeless, and to all that could be described as “dysfunctional – marginalized - forgotten.”

Now, a remembering of Sister Maura would not be true if we did not include the folklore of Maura Morrissey, stories of what she did all along the way in carrying out her ministries.

Her first years at St. Patrick saw her with 14-15 students who needed to see a probation officer on a weekly basis. Most of them varied in age from 13 years to 17. Many times Maura became an advocate for her boys against police harassment.

Jimmy had come late to school when a towering large police officer appeared at the door of Maura’s classroom demanding to take Jimmy in; he was loitering and looking into every store window on the way to school. Maura refused to let Jimmy go. Later that day, she asked Jimmy why he was late. The boy’s eyes filled with tears. His mother and dad were breaking up; the dad had already left and the mother said she was too. But Jimmy had a little sister and was worried that the mother would leave her alone. Compassionate Maura saw that the boy was very worried so she let him go home to check on his baby sister. Jimmy returned a bit relieved. His mother was at home with the baby and she was not going to leave them.

Another time, Maura was getting the students ready for Good Friday procession. She needed her tall student to carry the cross. But he was in jail. So Maura herself went down to the police station and asked the police to release him for the period needed. The Police did just that and Maura had her cross bearer.

Maura doggedly pursued what she thought the children needed. The pastor at St. Patrick was no exception. She took Father aside one day and firmly told him, he could say his prayers in the morning, say Mass and his office then take lunch, BUT get himself over to the school where the children needed someone they could trust. “If they don’t have us, who do they have?” Needless to say, Father obeyed.

It was here at St. Patrick that Maura met and worked with Msgr. Suedkemp. He founded the Bosco Home for kids---a safe haven for boys and girls of the area. Maura also collaborated with Msgr. Suedkemp in establishing the Ryan homes...especially Kundig center... a residential campus for the elderly. Oftentimes, Maura visited the apartments up and down Cass corridor and in the projects; brought them food and clothing. Remember this was at a time when IHMs ordinarily did not do such things.

From St. Patrick, Detroit, Maura went to Sacred Heart Roseville teaching eighth grade for four years in a very well organized school. This was a hiatus from inner city ministry---most of the students came from homes with both parents; very different indeed from St. Patrick! Life was calmer but adjustment to suburban life a bit harder for Maura. She was the senior sister amid a very enthusiastic group of young sisters.

Yet here, too, Maura's legend grew. Sacred Heart was a large school - three classrooms of every grade in the elementary school with the high school just beginning. There wasn't much grass around the front of the building so Maura and her eighth graders took it as a special project to plant grass one Friday afternoon. Lo and behold on Monday morning, the entire front was indeed covered with a lovely coat of actual real live green grass. The so-called "miracle" of Maura's grass spread rapidly among the students. Unbeknown to all, one of her student's dad felt sorry for Maura and sometime during the weekend had sod installed wherever Maura's group planted grass!

Returning to her circuit in the inner city, Maura's first year as principal was at Our Lady of Help in 1957 - five sisters in all with less than a hundred children. Knowing from the very beginning that the school would close at the end of the year, Maura did her utmost to make certain the students received the very best. In fact, she even helped the seventh graders by teaching them eighth grade materials so they would be accepted at any school. Maura's work was so thorough that every child was accepted by another school before Our Lady of Help closed in June.

In 1958, Maura arrived at the old Most Holy Trinity as principal and superior with nine young energetic sisters - 458 students from kindergarten through eighth grade in a four-story old, dilapidated building and a convent that matched the school in its age and conditions. Furthermore, students came to school if and when they wanted to. None of the classes had any new books, nor did any class have even one box of new crayons - materials were all hand-me-downs.

Never one to shirk any responsibility, Maura began with the faculty; all were to be well prepared. She would try to provide whatever they needed to do an excellent job. She contacted all her friends at other, more affluent schools for donations, new books, materials, etc. She believed each child could learn and deserved the best. At Thanksgiving time she sent out the eighth graders and told them to bring in anyone who was not in school---she did this twice and the daily enrollment began to appear normal. Free days were very few in order to keep the children safe and provide meals---breakfast, lunch and a hefty snack before dismissal time.

The parish provided a medical, legal clinic and AAA services. The cafeteria prepared an evening meal for families - children could not come alone. Many families had no water, no gas - sisters used the convent facilities to allow these children to wash and clean up prior to school. During the cold season, while the students worked in their classrooms, corridors often were used by seniors and the homeless for refuge from the bitter cold. Maura taught parents how to read and write two or three evenings a week.

After the Dec. 1, 1958, Holy Angels fire in Chicago, the Detroit Fire Department condemned the Holy Trinity Building and ordered all students off the top two floors or school would not re-open after Christmas. During the entire Christmas vacation, Maura and the sisters went to work moving bookcases, books, materials and desks. All 80 kindergarteners were moved to the first floor and the seventh and eighth graders to the rectory basement; every possible nook and cranny, even Maura's office, was used as classroom facilities; the medical clinic and adult education areas were taken over for classrooms. By the time the fire department returned after the holidays, their instructions had been followed to a "T." The school passed inspection and classes resumed after the holidays! Often times, inspections were spontaneously made by the city; each time Maura complied, which meant work for her and the sisters.

Sometime during that year, the IHM General Council wrote a letter to Msgr. Clement Kerns, the pastor, indicating that the Congregation would not be responsible if there were any fire at Holy Trinity School. One reporter asked Msgr. Kern how he could sleep with so many children in such an old building. "I do sleep, said Msgr., "the sisters are here."

At another time, the fire department warned Maura about a violation. Used clothing was being stored underneath the stairwell near the medical clinic. Maura asked Lucy, the woman in charge, to remove them to another place. The request went unheeded. Maura took it upon herself to remove the fire hazard; when the Msgr. accosted Maura about

the incident, she looked him in the eye and without flinching said to him:” Father, remember this, neither Lucy, you, nor I are above the law and the safety of our children is always a top priority!”

At the end of the school year Mother Anna Marie wrote Msgr. Kern that if he did not begin a new school building, the sisters would not return in the fall. On the day prior to the sisters leaving for their summer destinations, Msgr. came to the convent and asked if they could have coffee and donuts ready; he was having a ground breaking ceremony. Ground was broken and plans for the new school physically began.

School continued in the old building until the new one was ready for occupancy. On the day word was given to move, Maura and her troops began. The evening before, the sisters moved all the shelvings, books and materials to each room. The next day, beginning with the eighth<sup>h</sup> grade, each child picked up his or her desk and moved into a new classroom. The older children then assisted the little ones with their move. Like clockwork, everything was in its place and classes continued - all in one day! In the midst of the move, Tony, the maintenance man, a bit hassled and disgruntled, ran over to the rectory and complained to Msgr. Kern that “Maura was a tiger over in the school and would stop at nothing!” Msgr. promptly took himself over to the school and caught up with Maura in her office. Before words could be exchanged, Maura had the pastor physically moving files in the office. She needed help and she got it!

Maura visited homes; she brought them food, blankets, bed linens and other necessities. What she couldn't do herself she persuaded social workers into action. She even sent the teachers out to visit the homes. After one visit, one teacher came back in tears - the family had no water, no food, no gas. She had no idea people were living in conditions such as these. This was a beginning for the teacher to understand the reality of those who sat in front of her in the classroom.

In 1964 Maura was assigned to Most Holy Redeemer Elementary school as one of the eighth grade teachers. The following year she returned as its principal. This was a huge leap - being an administrator for a school with over 1,100 students and a staff of 30 teachers. For the next 11 years she ran a marvelous school - students and teachers were her first concern. Maura worked tirelessly to provide the best educational materials available. Redeemer Elementary School was, under Maura's tutelage, a happy place of teaching and learning.

Yet even here education for Maura was more than books and learning. It meant making certain that underprivileged children had enough to eat and their basic necessities were provided.

During Maura's first term at Redeemer, demographics in the area began to change. The school remained stable and Maura collaborated with a very well organized St. Vincent de Paul Society who would distribute necessities to those in need.

Well educated herself with a BA from Marygrove College and an MA from Wayne State University, Maura was an excellent teacher and a superb principal. Her primary focus was the students - they needed the best. She labored tirelessly to provide just this whether it was new textbooks, complete boxes of crayons, new phonics cards or life-giving experiential field trips; since these students lacked so much at home, Maura did everything to provide food, clothing and shelter. Moreso, Maura made sure teachers were of the highest caliber and gave students their best. Students' and teachers' interest and education were top priorities. Despite demanding a great deal of those who worked with her, Maura was known for her fairness, her honesty, kindness and loving concern for all.

After her principalship ended, Maura remained at Redeemer and volunteered for a year to visit those who lived alone. Her work was so effective; the parish hired her for the next five years to do this ministry full time. Then in 1983, due to unusual circumstances in the school, Maura re-applied for the administrative position of the elementary school. The Archdiocesan office agreed to one year; three months later after an evaluation, they told her she could keep the job for life!

But five years later, Maura returned to her Christian service ministry in Redeemer's parish and served the aged. Again, this woman of the most abandoned went into action. She acquired a van used specifically to bring the elderly to church

or to the doctor's office. The seniors had no place in the parish to meet, no place for comradeship or a place of safe quietness among themselves. Working in a special way with the city, Maura acquired the abandoned Healy home. With a few helpers, Maura herself cleaned up the house, painted, repaired and turned the place into a comfortable haven for the elderly. Often times Maura would ride the ambulance with the elderly to the hospital and stay all day with them. The same zeal demonstrated in her earlier missions had not lessened. That deep compassion and sincere love of the poor remained the motivating factor in her ministry - in her life.

We can say that despite her reputation for being an excellent teacher and a most able administrator, Maura is best characterized by her ministry to the poor and the needy. No matter where she served, a multitude of students and their families were anonymously assisted with clothing, food, shelter and other necessities.

In 1991, Maura was one of 28 citizens honored by the Detroit Police Department and the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce for heroism beyond the call of duty. The commendation and all the newspaper articles spoke to Sister Maura's outstanding citizen leadership, community concern and selfless service. They listed the following:

“Promotion of Unity in the Community Festival at Clark Park; institution of “Meals on Wheels” program; coordination of several food bank drives; assisted struggling young mothers in acquiring nursery needs; serving on Administration Commission and Christian Service Commission of Holy Redeemer's Parish Council; served as president of Ecumenical project S.A.V.E., a community-based volunteer organization servicing the needs of frail and elderly residents throughout southwest Detroit and; in recent years, assisting police officers from the fourth precinct and the mini-station section in an annual free Valentines dinner and party for senior citizens.”

Maura served the poor in other ways than in the inner city schools and parishes. Did you know that for two summers she actually lived at the request of the general superior in an apartment on the Cass corridor attending to the needs of that neighborhood? This was no easy job, especially when you had to live in a cockroached-infested apartment. The pastor wanted her to begin a food co-op from nothing...but Maura felt the needs of the elderly needed her attention. So she began with the building in which she lived. She called the health department—there was no phone, no security and the owner was uncooperative. While the health department began to work, Maura attended to the needs of those living in the apartment. Mac was an elderly man who asked to see her. Mac had his problems with the bottle; everyday Maura went to see him and listened to him. After her summer there, she continued to keep in touch with an occasional Thanksgiving Day card or another at Christmas. One day she received a call from a protestant minister asking if she knew Mac. Mac had been found dead in his new quarters. The minister told Maura they found her cards with him. Since Mac kept in contact with a religious, the pastor was going to give Mac a Christian burial!” This made Maura very happy---now you know why she continued to keep in touch with so many through her cards!

Did you know that again at the request of congregational leadership Maura spent two summers in Mt. Vernon, Ky., attending to the needs of the “mountain” people? She taught school from 8 a.m. until noon, then spent the entire afternoon visiting homes. The poverty she witnessed here she described as “worse than she had ever experienced at St Patrick, Holy Trinity or Holy Redeemer.”

The Holy Redeemer parish weekly paper summarized Maura perfectly. “Maura's faith in Christ, her commitment to her religious vows and ministry, her loyalty and love for Redeemer parish and selfless service to the wider community make Sister Maura an outstanding example of a true disciple of Jesus.”

In 1995, Maura came home to the Motherhouse. For 12 years she was an Infirmary Visitor, bearing gifts of kindness, comfort and laughter to all those sisters in health care. Her ministry of mercy and compassion remained the same. In 2007 Maura officially retired and accepted prayer as a full-time ministry. It was not uncommon to see Maura scooting herself around in her mobile wheel chair to visit the bedridden and share a bit of Irish wit and laughter.

Yes, the heart of what Maura lived were the works of mercy. She celebrated the life of Jesus through the works of mercy; the poor are Jesus - what you do for them you do for Jesus.

Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?  
When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothed you? When  
did we see you ill or in prison and visit you? Whenever you did for the least of mine,  
You did for me. Matthew 26:37-40

Maura, well done, good and faithful servant; you are now one with Jesus, Maura, and enjoying eternal peace with the  
countless number of saints you helped while here on earth! Alleluia!

Written and presented by  
Josephine M Sferrella, IHM  
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