

REMEMBERING OUR SISTER IMELDA NEATON, IHM
Dec. 12, 1912 – Sept. 13, 2010



When the Motherhouse bell tolled on the morning of Sept. 14 and word spread throughout the house that Sister Imelda had died peacefully during the night, we heard over and over again – not only from the sisters, but from the nurses and health care staff – how much we would miss our gentle, kind, loving sister and friend. Just her presence – her person – made us a more gentle, kind and loving community.

Sister Imelda loved us, as we loved her. On her Book of Life page, some 10 years ago, she wrote: “It will take an Eternity to thank God for placing me in this Community of beautiful and gifted women. Led on in a ‘gentle, mysterious’ way, God has inspired me through many Sisters

who were teachers, models, and friends.”

But Sister Imelda had an equally tender (and perhaps greater) love for and devotion to her family. She looked forward to visits and phone calls, knew how each one in the family was doing and prayed for everyone’s intentions.

Born on Dec. 12, 1912, Mary Cecilia Neaton was the fifth of nine children born to Peter Emmanuel Neaton and Anna Elizabeth Donohue.

Mr. Neaton was a teacher. He and a number of young boys from Emmett, Mich., were encouraged by the pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel to attend a high school seminary in Windsor where they received an excellent education. Peter Neaton decided not to go on for the priesthood, but attended the Jesuit College in Detroit where he received a bachelor’s degree. He taught at Xavier University in Cincinnati as a young man and continued as a teacher in the St. Clare County public schools when he returned to Emmett with his young wife. In addition, he wrote feature articles for local papers, including the *Port Huron Times Herald*.

Anna Donohue Neaton, although born in Emmett, was a graduate in music from a convent school in Sarnia, Ontario. When she returned to her family farm in Emmett, Anna would go from farmhouse to farmhouse with a horse and buggy, giving music

lessons. However, after her marriage to Peter Neaton, Anna gave all her attention to her ever-growing family.

The Neaton's first four children were boys: Phillip, Francis (known as Pete), Joseph and David. Mary, their fifth child, (our Sister Imelda) always said that she was "spoiled" by these four older brothers – and protected by them as well.

In addition to Mary, the Neatons had four other girls: Jane (who became Sister Angelica, IHM), Elizabeth (known as Betty), Margaret, the youngest – and a baby sister who died before Betty and Margaret were born.

Sister Imelda's youngest brother, David, and her youngest sister, Margaret, are the only two still living. David is 99 years old and will celebrate his 100th birthday on Dec. 20 of this year. Margaret, the youngest in the family, is here with us today.

In recalling her childhood, Sister Imelda wrote:

“As a child I received much attention as ‘the first girl.’ I have recollections of a beautiful mother who was most charitable in speaking of others and in caring for three of my grandparents until their death. I have the tenderest of memories of her dealings with all. She also endured the work and suffering that went with living on a farm. She restricted us girls to the house when there were neighbors helping with ‘threshing,’ ‘butchering,’ etc. She kept up on her reading and loved sociability. She gave parties for the neighbors and accepted invitations to parties in Detroit from her former friends. From her I received a love for the Blessed Virgin Mary.”

From first to sixth grades, Mary attended a small rural public school. About school, she said later, “I was fascinated by the things the ‘big kids’ learned and did.” Her first teacher there, Mollie Crowley, recognized how quickly little Mary Neaton learned, so she moved her ahead one grade. From there, all the way through high school, Mary was a year younger than her peers and, as she said, not as “worldly wise” as they.

In 1924, when the IHM Sisters opened a Catholic school in Emmett, Mary entered the seventh grade. She appreciated Mother Liguori (Stanley) and especially loved and admired Sister Marie Edward Patton, an excellent teacher and the person who most influenced her decision to become an IHM Sister. Our Lady of Mount Carmel School in Emmett did not offer classes beyond the 10th grade, so Mary completed high school at St. Stephen's in Port Huron.

In January, 1931, six months after Mary's graduation, Sister Benedicta Hoey sent her a letter, telling her to meet her at the convent in Port Huron. Although no reason for the visit was given, Mary knew instinctively why she was to meet Sister Benedicta. Many years later, Sister Imelda related the story this way.

“I thought: ‘The time has come!’ I took the bus to Port Huron and met her. She gave me a list of things needed for the convent ... I came home with news that I was going to be a Sister – and showed the list. After convincing everyone that it was really so and turning down a suggestion that I become a Dominican (so that I could come home every three years, as my cousin up the road did), I prepared to enter the IHM Community the next month.”

She arrived in Monroe on Feb. 15, 1931 – and was always grateful that the very kind Sister Vigilia Burns was in charge of the postulants. Mary missed her family greatly. At reception into the novitiate on Aug. 15, she was given the name Sister Imelda.

In 1931, the IHM Motherhouse, a complex of many old building erected in the 19th century, was still located across from St. Mary Church, on the banks of the River Raisin. Sister Imelda joined the other novices that helped with the move from the Old Motherhouse to the new (this) Motherhouse in June 1932. She was always grateful that she had experienced living in the Old Motherhouse and she loved to tell about helping with the move. (The novices, by the way, carried all their belongings in a pillowcase.)

While still a novice and after some preparation by Sister Marianna Markey at St. Mary’s School in Monroe, Sister Imelda began her 42-year teaching ministry, first in the elementary grades and then as a business education teacher in high school. Her students always loved, respected, and admired her. They knew that Sister Imelda was “special.” It is not surprising that the students at St. Agnes School called her “St. Imelda.”

In July 1972, Mary Ellen Glosser suggested to me that I ask Sister Imelda to be the secretary in the new IHM Apostolate Office. Mary Ellen said: “You will love ‘Meldie dear’ and she will be wonderful to work with.” How right she was! Perhaps it was Mary Ellen who gave her the perfect nick-name “Meldie.” From then on, every note and memo I gave to Sister Imelda began with the words “Meldie dear.”

How right Mary Ellen was about how wonderful Meldie would be to work with. In the four years we worked together in the Apostolate Office, everyone who came to us for help left a satisfied and happy person because of her gracious and gentle way. I “cashed in” on Meldie’s wonderful way with people. And I often told her so.

In 1976, when we sent a small community of IHM Sisters to St. Stephen Indian Mission on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, Meldie was in that group. During her three years working there in the Development Office, she came to appreciate the Arapaho and Shoshoni people, as well as the Jesuits and many religious and lay people at the mission. In reflecting on her experience, Meldie wrote: “I feel richer for having become

acquainted with them and their ideals. Because of them, my prayer life is better and has been deepened.”

She did an excellent job in the Development Office at St. Stephen’s Indian Mission, working with a very shy Jesuit who always kept his eyes down and scraped his shoe on the wooden floor when he talked with anyone. He must have appreciated her greatly.

But it was the IHM Sisters with whom she lived that most appreciated her being at St. Stephen’s. She was especially kind to the young IHMs – and all of them kept in touch with her long after she and they had left Wyoming.

When she returned to Monroe, Meldie joined the staff of the Archives and gave 20 years of invaluable service in preserving records and photographs. It was hard for her to retire from the Archives because she loved her work there.

It was during her last years here at the Motherhouse that Meldie discovered she was an artist. “To my surprise,” she wrote, “I have enjoyed using pencil, charcoal, pastel crayons, water-color pencils and pastel chalk.” First with help from Sister Marie Louise Laperriere and then with Sister John Louise Leahy, Meldie produced remarkable portraits and lovely scenes. They are a reflection of her inner beauty. I hope that you have had or will have an opportunity to see them.

All of us who had the privilege of living or working with Sister Imelda – or caring for her in these last years – were inspired by her gentleness, her genuine interest in each of us, her tender love of her family, her prayerfulness and her gratitude for everyone and everything in her life.

In the last line of her Book of Life page Meldie wrote: “I will continue to follow my Leader, the Holy Spirit, who led me here. [It helps me] to repeat the words of John Henry Newman, ‘Lead, kindly Light ... Lead thou me on.’”

Meldie dear, all through your life you were led gently by the Holy Spirit. Pray for each of us now that we may grow in your spirit of gentleness, prayerfulness, kindness, and tender love.

Mary Jo Maher, IHM
September 16, 2010