

Remembering Sister Mary Therese (Raphael Marie) O'Donnell
Dec. 8, 1931 – Nov. 6, 2010



On one of her IHM commitment forms, Sister Mary Therese states, “The greatest mission I can dedicate myself to is to manifest [God’s] loving relationship to all by radiating joy, peace and openness.” Throughout her life she personified these qualities in both her personal and professional relationships.

Mary Therese was born on Dec. 8, 1931, to Gerald Thomas O’Donnell and Olivette Frances Marie Wall. She was the youngest of three children. Patricia and Bud (Gerald Edward) were her older siblings. A set of twins was born after Bud, but they died at birth. According to her sister Pat, “There was no rivalry among them, but Mary [Therese] was concerned from the time she was in the first grade that she was not as smart as her elder siblings because they seemed to know much more than she.” Perhaps this is why Mary Therese became like a “little general” of the group. Mary Therese says in her oral history, “We had a happy childhood dominated by my mom and dad’s faith.” In fact, she attributes her and Pat’s vocation to the strong faith of her parents.

Mary Therese’s journey to Monroe took some strange twists. In the eighth grade at St. Gregory’s, where she attended for 12 years, Mary Therese felt she had a call to be a missionary. Buying pagan babies had given her a spirit of mission and helping others. In her junior year, however, she put her missionary desire aside to join a club whose sole purpose was to have fun. Her friend Marion Duggan was also a member. Dating and dancing were certainly fun, but the idea of becoming a sister haunted Mary Therese. In her senior year she had a spiritual experience that terrified her. She describes it in both her oral history and on her Book of Life page. “The church was empty. A young girl entered to keep her Lenten promise of saying the Stations after school. A music lesson had made her later than the other students. At the second or third Station she became conscious of another presence. She distinctly heard a voice over her left shoulder say, “I want you.” No one was there.

Mary Therese raced through the rest of the Stations by just naming them. When she knelt down at the Sacred Heart statue to pray for the intentions of the Holy Father, the

sun came in one of the windows and the statue turned a deep, radiant white. “I was scared stiff,” Mary Therese recounts in her oral history. I thought, “Oh boy, that settles it. I’ve got to go. Really, God wants me.” Mary Therese entered the congregation on Sept. 7, 1949, a few years after her sister Pat joined the IHM congregation.

Mary Therese had a very positive formation experience. She says, “[The] Postulate, Novitiate, Juniorate passed with God doing the most work. I struggled along enjoying life, being enriched by friends, education and the security of loving God in my feeble way and hoping that God would take what efforts I made to enrich the apostolate and myself.”

Accepting her first assignments was no little act of faith for Mary Therese. She comments, “The leadership asked what subject I wanted to make my major. I answered English, so I went on in history. (Sound familiar?) What grade would I like to teach? I asked for eighth and began in first – probably because I stood a noble five feet tall.

No matter what subject or grade she taught, however, Mary Therese loved her students and they loved her. They loved her “spunky” personality. She was their reliable caring friend who, at the same time, always made it clear who was boss. They loved her creative, adventurous spirit that could make a boring task fun and exciting to learn because of her “wild” imagination. Mary Therese’s challenge to them to do their best also inspired them to be their best.

Besides a great love for her students, Mary Therese also had high expectations for them. At Sacred Heart, Roseville, for instance, she gave her first graders three hours of homework every day to make sure they didn’t miss any learning because of half day sessions. She also expected them to read 100 books before they left first grade. When Mary Therese taught seventh and eighth grade at Our Lady of Good Counsel, she used her graduate history class notes as a teaching tool. When no one passed her first test, she “realized they might not be quite ready for university work.”

From 1953 to 2003 Mary Therese had a variety of positions, such as teacher in a grade school, high school and college level, pastoral assistant, religious education director and principal in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and Texas. In her oral history she laughingly admits she always wanted to be a Superior of the house and principal for one reason. “I could give the sisters candy any time I wanted – which really wasn’t the reason, but I thought it would be nice to be nice to people and do all that.” She also was eager to leave her religious education ministry and return to her first love: teaching junior high.

Mary Therese’s success as a teacher – Sacred Heart Dearborn Teacher of the Year in 2000, nominated for Who’s Who Among American Teachers in 1996, however, could not quiet the doubts she had about her own spirituality. She often thought “I’m not a

spiritual person. I sleep during meditation. I get distracted at reading. I blank out and rest during spiritual reading. I only hear Father Marron when he bangs his book down (Been there; done that)... All my years in the convent I have never gotten through a spiritual book.” She felt spiritually inadequate because “just to be with Jesus...was all she could manage.” It took her quite some time to realize being in the presence of God, lost in God is the deepest spirituality there is.

After Mary Therese retired in 2001 because of ill health, she lived at Marygrove where she tutored and worked with other children’s programs until she came to the Motherhouse in 2003. She continued her retirement by traveling with her sister Pat, working in the IHM Gift Shop, joining the choir, decorating the dining rooms and making ceramic pieces. (Her love of music came from her father who had been a concert violinist at one time, and her love of art came from her mother, a talented seamstress who could create her own designs.) Mary Therese was also a Eucharistic minister until her death in 2010.

Mary Therese, thank you woman of joy, peace and openness who had the courage to accept life on life’s terms with creative hope and humor. Thank you woman of faith who practiced Meister Eckhart’s way to holiness: “Doing the next thing you have to do, doing it with your whole heart, and finding delight in doing it.” Even though we will miss your bright smile, quick wit and generous service, our memories of you will pull us through. Rest now, our Sister, family and friend, in the arms of your loving God who has taken such delight in you through the years and will continue to do so forever.

Mary Ellen Loren, IHM
Nov. 8, 2010