



Remembering Sister Patricia M. O'Donnell

July 1, 1928 – Feb. 5, 2011

When I was asked to write the remembering for Sister Pat O'Donnell, I reluctantly accepted, figuring I would ask for bits and pieces from those sisters who lived and worked with her. Every sister's first response was that Pat truly exemplified her religious name, "Generosa" because, as one sister said, she was "generous to a fault." This is a compilation of the "bits and pieces" and also some comments sister herself wrote. Sister Cecilia Campbell contributed most of this information.

Sister's parents, Olive (Wall) and Gerald O'Donnell, were both born in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, but they raised their family in Detroit. Sister's father was a musician and often referred to himself as a "one man band." Pat's mother was a seamstress and made most of the girls' clothes.

Pat, the oldest child, was born on July 1, 1928, in Detroit and was baptized at St. Gregory Church. Her brother, Gerard, called Bud, was born shortly after, but he died many years ago of cancer. A set of twins followed, but they died at birth. Then Mary Therese completed the family, having been born in 1932.

The children attended St. Gregory grade and high school, taught by IHM Sisters. Sister Pat entered the congregation shortly after graduation. As a novice she was missioned to St. Raymond School and wrote that Sister Florent Gillet tried to turn a crowd of inexperienced teachers into mature instructors. Sister Pat taught second graders – half-day sessions with enrollments in the 90s. She prepared her pupils – numbering in the hundreds -- for their First Holy communion with CCD classes.

Sister Noeleta O'Dea related that at St. Matthew's School, Sister Pat was working on art projects with the children, and when Sister Noeleta had to go to her room with a message, she was amazed at the creativity that was in progress. Later that night, when discussing the projects, Sister Pat laughed and commented, "I don't get excited any more when a boy comes up to me with paste in his hair."

At Annunciation, Sister Pat had charge of the kitchen, and not having driven and without a car, she went with Sister Mary Conrad from a neighboring school to the Eastern Market every Saturday morning to buy produce. She wrote that she learned a lot from Sister Mary Conrad and that they remained friends for many years.

A sister who lived with Sister Pat at Annunciation tells that one Christmas Eve Pat was busy preparing the goodies for after Midnight Mass. Time passed quickly and she hurriedly went to change clothes for Church. In so doing, she washed ALL her stockings and went to Church, carefully covering her bare legs with her long black cloak. When the sisters arrived in Church, it was

packed and they had to go to the sanctuary for Mass. Sister Pat spent most of the Mass keeping her cloak close to her legs.

While at Emmett with only two other sisters, Pat taught seventh and eighth grades, had charge of the library, the Title I program, two CCD classes, the Parish Council and Pastoral Team. She wrote that she and Sisters Beth Wood and Mary King were BUSY! In the summer the sisters worked with migrants, signing vouchers for food to provide \$5.00 per day for adults and \$3.00 for children. There were so many people in need that Pat went “voucher crazy” and the person in charge in Lansing called her to hold off for a few days. He teased, “For a person with a vow of poverty, you can spend money faster than anyone I know.”

But it was at Gesu that Pat did most of her mission work. For over 30 years she taught eighth grade – mostly math – in a school that changed from Caucasian to 90% African-American in a short time. Sister Pat ran the Bingo program twice a week, organized the annual Christmas show, Black History Month celebrations in February, Halloween party, yearbook, alumni connections, declamation contest and sports activities.

Pat had many talents. Like her mother, she was an excellent seamstress. She made Sister Stella Rabaut’s and her sister, Mary Therese’s Golden Jubilee dresses.

She also loved to cook and bake. For many summers Pat and Mary Therese spent weekends at Crawfton and then at Watervliet, cooking three meals a day for five to 25 guests. They worked hard to make the meals tasty and attractive.

As she looked back on her life, Pat recalled her many travels with her sister to Elderhostel programs. Together with Sisters Paula and Norine Wholihan, they drove out west, enjoying nature in all its beauty. She particularly enjoyed her visit to the Philippines to visit with Telly, a teacher at Gesu, where she witnessed such a different culture.

When Sister retired to the Motherhouse in 2006, she continued to sew kitchen hand towels for the Christmas sales. Soon after, she was diagnosed with cancer. After many treatments and surgeries, her doctor reluctantly told her that no more could be done in her case. She accepted his report with deep faith and confidence, realizing how Mary would react when she heard the bad news. Mary sobbed and embraced Pat, urging her not to die yet. Of course, this intensified Pat’s pain when she witnessed her sister’s reaction.

Then on Nov. 6 of last year, Mary Therese died unexpectedly, which made Pat even sadder. She told Sister Cecilia Campbell that she had prayed that God would take Mary before her, because it would be too difficult for Mary to accept Pat’s death. She thanked God for answering her prayer and accepted Mary’s death calmly, peacefully and courageously.

The nurses and aides told me that as Sister’s illness became more serious, she enjoyed short visits from her friends and always thanked them for coming. The nurses who cared for her told me that she never complained, even when she was in great pain. Always she thanked them even for small favors.

At the time of her Golden Jubilee, Pat wrote, “My greatest hope is that I may always keep an openness to the Holy Spirit and a willingness to risk what we are called to do. It seems more and

more that I am called to faith and trust that the work that God has done in us will remain if I have faith.

Sister Pat, your prayer has been answered in all its fullness as you rejoice now with Mary Therese and your family in your true home, after a long life of answering God's call and doing God's work. Please intercede for us as we look forward to our true home in Heaven.

Mary Laubacher, IHM
February 7, 2011