

## Remembering Helen (Christella) Peatee, IHM Jan. 29, 1915 – March 9, 2010



Helen Mae Peatee was born in Milan, Mich. on Jan. 29, 1915, the second child of her father Isadore Peatee and Mary Shibler Peatee. There were six children in the Peatee family: Amos, Helen, Katherine (who was also an IHM sister), Karl, Laurence and Mary. The family moved several times early in Helen life but when her father got a job at the Ideal Furnace Company, they settled in Milan. Life was normal for the Peatee family until Helen was in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Her mother, who was only 37, with six children, died of the flu. Mrs. Peatee had been the parish organist and was well known in the community, so this was a shock not only to her family and friends but also the parish and friends and neighbors.

Mary, the youngest child, was only two years old. Her godparents took her until school was ended in June. Helen stated in her autobiography that her mother must have had some premonition of her coming death because she made her father promise that if anything should happen to her before all the children were grown he would enroll all of them in a Catholic boarding school. Vowing to keep his promise Mr. Peatee began investigating Catholic boarding schools. He went to visit Monroe. Mother Theresa was the principal of the Academy, and made arrangements for Carl and Laurence to be enrolled at the Hall of the Divine Child. Katherine and Mary Agnes were accepted at the Holy Family group at the Academy. Helen states in her autobiography that the family was broken up and her father was alone. The entire family never assembled again in the family home.

Helen was planning to attend the University of Michigan, but her father wanted her to attend a Catholic college. Mother Theresa suggested Marygrove and Helen began classes there in 1932. It was at Marygrove that she became acquainted with the IHM Sisters.

Helen's Book of Life page identifies six calls that were important in her life. "The first call was the call of our Lady to accept her as my Mother on the eve of my own mother's death." Helen was proud to be the valedictorian of her class but was sad because her mother, who was looking forward to this event, was not there to share this honor with her.

The next call was to religious life. Helen was in church on Holy Thursday and felt the call to give her life to God. This was quite a surprise, since Helen had had a steady boyfriend for two years. Helen entered the community on June 21, 1935. Helen spent 53 years in education as a teacher in grade schools, high schools and college. She was registrar at Marygrove and finished her ministry as grade school principal in three grade schools in Florida from 1974-87. Her educational background was extensive and she always made sure she was prepared for her ministry.

In 1948, when Mother Theresa began the missions, Helen volunteered her services. It wasn't until 1953 that Helen's third call to the missions was realized. Helen was sent to Santurce, Puerto Rico. Helen described this 12-year period as one of the happiest times of her life. She celebrated her Silver Jubilee there and her sister Kathy, IHM, was in Cayey at that time. It was a very joyful, spiritual and social event. A former student wrote to Helen that "the lessons you taught me changed the course of my life. No matter if you're different or if people laugh at you, in the end what really counts is to be able to help people, to love and be loved." We thank you Helen for teaching all of us that valuable lesson.

When Vatican II was in session, Helen felt the call to change. She entered whole-heartily into all the ways of renewing herself by retreats workshops and graduate study. Helen was living in a small group on Provost in northwest Detroit. This is when I first met Helen. This was the time of great excitement about all the changes in the church: the liturgy, lay involvement, new vicariate structure. We would often invite one of our pastors for a home liturgy, a meal and discussion at each others' houses. We would come together for community discussions and special days. This was also the time for progressive parties, so we got to know each other traveling from house to house, enjoying good food and friendship.

The next call that Helen identifies is a call for deeper contemplative prayer which was nurtured at her sabbatical at Manna House of Prayer. She lived this out in her retirement years by her spiritual reading, retreats, centering prayer and room ministry. We often think of ministry as activity, but Helen had a ministry of presence. She was more limited to her room the last several years because of health issues. Everyone who entered her room was touched by her care, concern and interest in what you were doing. Her family, friends and health care personnel all benefited from her welcoming presence.

We all know the special relationship that Regina Affholter and Helen had, a true example of community, each one giving to the other what they had to give. Each morning and evening they gathered for prayer. Helen would read the prayers because Regina's eyesight was so limited. Regina would run all the errands that Helen needed. They also shared meals together for companionship and helped each other by cutting and locating food on the tray.

The last call is one to openness to the spirit of the present moment. This perhaps was Helen's greatest challenge. In the last years, Helen has had many heart spells each time thinking this would be the last but always coming back in good spirits. If you think of Helen you know she was an in-charge person, so having to accept help dealing with low energy and physical limitations was not easy.

One day when I came to see her she was not a happy camper. She had on what she called her "clunkers." Because of leg pain they had recommended low heel shoes so she could still walk around her room. I am sure if there are high heels in heaven Helen has found the supply and has them in every color to match all her well-coordinated outfits and her perfect hair styles.

Helen, you have answered all your calls faithfully. When your final call came on March 9, 2010, around 7 p.m., we know you answered with the same spirit with which you have lived your life – with a resounding “Here I am Lord, I am ready.”

Helen asked me to read this final message from her to all of us. Before I do, let us take a moment to picture Helen. Recall your own memories of her. Please, sometime today share that memory with someone.

My Dearest Family and Friends,

St. John Chrysostom said back in the fourth century “those who we have loved and lost are no longer where they were before. They are now wherever we are. So I am still here with you.”

I would like to paraphrase the psalm written by Edward Hayes to convey my thoughts and wishes to you, my dearest family and friends. I leave you the memories of our time together, the tender love-filled moments, the successes we have shared, the hard times that brought us closer together and the roads we have walked side by side.

I also leave you a solemn promise that after I am home with God, I will still be present wherever you are. Whenever you are in need call on me. All I take with me as I leave is your love and the memories we have shared. Let us always remember that our roots are forever intertwined.

I love you so much,

Helen

Prepared by Mary Ann Markel, IHM  
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