



**Remembering Sister Ruth (Mercilyn) Phelps, IHM
Dec. 3, 1914 - Dec. 5, 2008**

In reading the autobiography of Sister Ruth Phelps, also known as Sister Mercilyn, the truth clearly emerges that the call to the life of interior prayer was realized. This unexpected gift was deeply appreciated by her who, at reflective moments at life's end, wrote in the words of St. Vincent de Paul, "So much for so little." But now, let the cameras swing back to sister as she shares the story of her entrance and life with the Phelps family.

"I was born in Detroit on Dec. 3, 1914, and baptized Ruth Marian at St. Vincent's Church on Feb. 15. When I was three months old, I had a severe case of whooping cough and was near death three times. My mother pinned a medal of St. Anne on me and was sure that St. Anne saved my life. My father agreed, saying otherwise, the size of the medal would have killed me.

"My father, Arthur Wesley Phelps, was born in Detroit of German and English descent and baptized in the Episcopalian church. He was a veteran of the Spanish-American War. My mother, Nora Catherine Sheridan, was born in Lucan, Ontario, Canada, of Irish parents. She came to Detroit as a young girl to work.

"My older brothers were Franklin Arthur and Charles Wesley, both now deceased. My younger sister was Dorothy Frances, also now deceased. Helen Catherine died of diphtheria at nine years of age, when I was two years old, and this was a great sorrow, especially to my mother.

"We lived in St. Vincent's parish within the mile circle of down town and within hearing distance of the cheering crowds at Tiger Stadium. Safety was not an issue in those days; the kids in the block played games until late at night, when we were called home. Mother was fond of taking walks around the neighborhood in the evening, visiting with the neighbors and giving my father some quiet time. Sometimes, my father would take us to Clark's Park and Michigan Depot Park, to give my mother some quiet time. Neither my mother nor my father had much of an extended family, and Canada was far away, so we depended on friends, and my dad had lots of friends. He liked to go to the lakes and take us to the country. When I was in grade school, we built a cottage on a spring-fed lake in White Lake Township. It was wonderful to have a place to enjoy the clear air and the water. I learned to swim, row a boat and paddle a canoe.

"My father worked for Detroit Edison and was stationed as an inspector of new homes in the Redford area. For that reason, and because Detroit's inner city was deteriorating, we built a new home a mile from St. Mary's of Redford parish in 1926, when I was in the seventh grade. This was a wonderful experience. We had cleaner air, more room, a two-story house, and most of all, room for my sister to have a dog. On my first day of school at St. Mary's, the sister gave me a seat in the middle of the room. I turned around and was surprised to see my friend, Ruth Lemelin, from St. Vincent's. We chatted and sister remarked, 'Imagine, talking the first day in school.'

"During the twelfth grade, a sister asked me if I ever thought of going into the convent. I didn't think I was worthy of it and I knew it would not be a pleasant idea for my family. My mother opposed any thought of my leaving home, perhaps because of the memory of my older sister, Helen, who died at such a young age. It was not until 1936 that she finally decided that I was not going to give up without trying religious life. During these 'waiting' days, I often went to Mass and prayed fervently that I would do what God willed.

"Soon after I had made my decision to go into the convent, I received a job offer. God works in peculiar ways. I still wanted to try the convent. In early spring I heard my mother talking over the back fence to our neighbor, saying, 'I think Ruth has other ideas.' I knew then that she had made her mind up about my choice of life.

"On Sunday, June 21, 1936, my father and mother drove me to Monroe. I had never been to Monroe before. The strange surroundings held my attention, so that I forgot it would be some time before I saw my parents again. My mother accepted my choice of life when she saw how happy I was. My First Profession was on Jan. 2, 1937, and my Final Profession was on Jan. 2, 1941. I enjoyed the spirituality and the companionship of the sisters.

"My first assignment was to St. Michael's school in Flint, Mich. For three years I taught second grade. This was an ideal place to get acquainted with the IHM ministry. In 1941, I was transferred to St. Matthew's, also in Flint, where I taught second and third grade. However, it was a time of great sadness. My mother was suffering from cancer. In her kindness, Mother Teresa called me on Oct. 15, and told me a car was going to Detroit and I was to visit my mother. This was an especially great favor to me, since it was the last time I would see my mother alive. On Oct. 31, just as I was going to give a Halloween party for my students in the second grade, they called and said my mother had died. Deep as the sorrow of the family was, to my dad, it was an agony. Six months later my father joined my mother, as he said, 'I can't live without her.'"

From the mid-'40s to the '60s, Ruth taught in several Detroit schools. Then Mother Teresa assigned her to the newly-opened Holy Ghost mission in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where the Native Americans and the mountains were a source of renewed energy and a great joy. According to Ruth, there were so many new experiences and activities.

- Her first airplane flight above the clouds, a time for meditation on the beauty of God
- Exploring the mountains and enjoying the mountain air
- Enjoying the dance of the tumbling tumbleweeds across the vast mesa
- Visiting the Indian pueblos and seeing the native dancing

"I enjoyed life at Holy Ghost Mission and Assumption parish in New Mexico, where I served from 1954 to 1959. How happy the people were to have us teach in their school. I continued my commitment to prepare the little ones for their First Holy Communion.

"Returning to Michigan, I taught from 1959 to 1975 at Our Lady of Lourdes, Sacred Heart in Dearborn, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Mary of Redford, the school from which I graduated.

"At this time, I was interested in a change of work. Sister Esther McNally asked me to join her at St. Richard's, Westland, as religious coordinator of the fifth and sixth graders. We commuted the first year from Redford, but at the pastor's suggestion, we lived in an apartment in Westland for the last year. This was an unusual experience and an enjoyable experience, a taste of the freedom of choice the sisters were enjoying at this time. One summer I took a course in gerontology at Madonna College.

"My last years of teaching centered in elementary schools in Michigan. However, I found a second calling when I became directress of the St. Mary Infirmary Housekeeping Department." On Sister Ruth's retirement, an evaluation was made of her service giving deep gratitude and appreciation for her dedication to this task. It's quoted here:

"In her usual, typical fashion, Ruth endeared herself to all with whom she worked, by plunging into each task with vigor. As a result, 'they' can't let her go, even when her file states clearly that she is now a rehired retiree. Ruth drives patients to doctors, purchases needed items for nurses and aides, and sews for any area in the Infirmary in need of her services.

Tenderly she nurtures our plants in the sunny cloister. Typically, too, her few leisure hours find her tailoring suits, dresses and even drapes for friends." A wonderful compliment!

"Reflecting on my life as an IHM Sister, I value the sense of community that surrounds us and the support we give each other. We've gotten a better understanding about who Our Lord is, and what life is all about. It takes a long time to learn who Christ is and how much He means to our lives."

So we conclude her appraisal with these thoughts:

Life is a process when the experience of decline of physical energy forces us to let go of each period of life as we pass through it! Conversion means openness to change. A crisis in our lives is the voice of Christ inviting us to receive more of the Divine life, a call into the unknown. We can be sure that Sister Ruth has responded to this invitation, that she has said "Yes" to all of her life and now is radiant with the love of God who has claimed her forever. So we can say, as we began, in her own words, "So much for so little."

Sister Stephanie Mueller, IHM
Dec. 9, 2008