



REMEMBERING SISTER MARIE MADELINE PHILLIPS April 7, 1909 - Jan. 30, 2008

Sister Marie Madeline is remembered as an extremely extroverted person who liked to socialize, write letters and attend parties!

Marie Madeline was the first born to Wilhelmina Henrietta Viol and William Henry Phillips, Jr. on April 7, 1909 in Detroit, Mich., and given the name Marie Wilhelmina. Her brother, Robert William, was 19 months younger than Marie. Bob and Marie enjoyed a very favored childhood. Their parents had hoped for 12 children and seemed to shower all of that love they had for a dozen on their two offspring. Mrs. Phillips had come with her family from Germany when she was two years old. The Viol family settled on the east side of Detroit where they had relatives. Mr. Phillip's father had come from England and his mother from Ireland. They had settled in Corktown on the west side of Detroit. The two met at a party and, according to Marie Madeline, "It was love at first sight!" They were married in the rectory of Saint Vincent Parish, Detroit, since Wilhelmina was Lutheran. Marie Madeline told me that her mother always thought she and her husband were being punished by having only two children for having entered into a "mixed marriage."

The family lived in Annunciation Parish, Detroit, where Mr. Phillips was manager of Annunciation Community Hall and where they were members of the parish. The children went to the Julia Ward Howe Public School for their first years since it was only a "few doors" from home. When Marie was in fourth grade, she and Bob began at Annunciation School. Sister Marie Eugene Hackett was her first classroom teacher and Sister Borgia McDonnell started Marie on her music career.

Marie Madeline's home life was warm and loving. She often spoke of family picnics on Belle Isle (Detroit, Mich.) during the summer months and ice skating outings there in the winter. Marie Madeline wrote, "...my parents deprived themselves of such luxuries as...fashionable clothing in order to fill the house...with the best in books, educational material and music. Attending concerts...and the symphony...was a must..." This was a most enriching background for Marie Madeline's future as a teacher of music and music appreciation. Mr. and Mrs. Phillips managed Camp Kenokee near Emmett up in Michigan's thumb. The whole family spent their summers there. Camp Kenokee was a Catholic camp for underprivileged boys that predated Camp Stapleton.

When Marie was in the 10th grade her teacher, Sister Marie Monica Hart, spoke with the girls and encouraged them to consider a vocation to the religious life. This began Marie thinking about entering the IHM congregation. Her parents would have none of it! They warned that if there was any more talk of becoming a sister, they would send her to the local public high school, Southeastern.

Marie did not bring up the subject of entering for the next several years. As a sophomore at Marygrove College, Detroit, with the help of Sister Marie Bernadette Vonder Heide, who had been Marie's senior teacher at Annunciation, she spoke with her parents again of her desire to become a sister. Marie thought that now she was of legal age to make this major life decision even without her parents consent. She had decided to go to Monroe if her parents gave their approval or not. Marie Madeline wrote that her parents sorrowfully consented but they added, "What have we done to you that you would want to leave us?" Knowing that her parents would never leave her in Monroe if they drove her there on entrance day, the plan was for her to go to

Marygrove and ride to Monroe with Sister Marie Bernadette. This was on Friday, June 21, 1929.

Marie Madeline wrote that during her Formation years she was never troubled with doubts about her vocation nor did she suffer much from loneliness even though every time her parents would visit they would cry and beg her to go home. She believed that the trials and frustrations she had had before entering were a "good preparation". When she was received on Jan. 2, 1930, Marie was given the name of her loved fifth grade teacher who had died a few years before, Sister Marie Madeline Ryan.

Marie Madeline was very accomplished in music and always thought she would be a music teacher. She had told Mother Domitilla Donohue, the General Superior at the time, that she could probably learn everything she needed to know about being a sister except be a classroom teacher! This changed when, as a novice, Marie Madeline was teaching second grade at Saint Joseph School, Monroe. After school one day a little girl was staying around and asked Marie Madeline if she could stay until Sister left. When Marie Madeline asked her why she wanted to do that, the little girl said, "It's so nice and warm here!" Marie Madeline was stunned to discover that every child's home life was not as hers had been. She thought to herself, "I am needed here. I can make a difference in children's lives." From 1931 until 1969 Marie Madeline was a classroom teacher in middle grades, junior high and high school in Michigan and Albuquerque, New Mexico. She did teach piano, briefly, and music appreciation in high school.

She had a short stay in the primary grades. Marie Madeline was surprised when her principal told her that she needed to keep the children in their seats and teach them something – she thought that these cute little youngsters were too young to have restraints put on them!

One day early in her teaching career Marie Madeline remembered asking one of her students to read orally. This little boy kept shaking his head, "No!" Marie Madeline continued to encourage him and he kept refusing. After class he said to her, "You must be the only one in the whole school who doesn't know I can't read!" This touched Marie Madeline so deeply that she was determined to focus on helping her students learn to read and someday to become a reading specialist. Frequently Marie Madeline would even ask her principal to assign the slowest students to her classroom. She wrote, "All during my teaching career it was the students who found it difficult to learn especially in the fields of reading and English grammar and composition who claimed my interest and challenged my ability."

In her 60s, while teaching at the Academy in Monroe, Marie Madeline realized that the classroom setting was becoming too stressful for her. This is when she began her career as a psychometrician, one who can measure mental processes and/or functions. In 1969 under the tutelage of Sister Mary McGrath at Marygrove College, Marie Madeline was prepared to work with students in the reading clinic there. Sister Mary wrote of Marie Madeline, "As a student in her practicum, Sister is one of the very best examiners whom I have trained. Her rapport is excellent, scoring exact, interpretation superior--an A student." After about 10 years in the Marygrove reading clinic, Marie Madeline retired to the Motherhouse.

From the time she was a very young sister, Marie Madeline had many bouts with serious illnesses, especially TB and Crohn's disease. She endured many surgeries, hospital stays and months at a time in our Health Care Center. In spite of all of this she kept herself active well into her 90s.

When Sister Marie Madeline was temporary professed, her mother was received into the Catholic Church. Even though Marie Madeline wrote that this was the "happiest day of her life," she always considered it a gift to have grown up with such a devout Lutheran as her mother was. Marie Madeline told me that she never believed that only Catholics went to heaven, as she was taught! This awareness came into focus vividly for her during the time of renewal in the church.

Marie had grown up respecting all faith traditions, so, she said, she was “perfectly comfortable” with the changes that occurred. In fact, she thought they made sense!

Marie Madeline was a great communicator. She made efforts to keep in touch with family members and former students for many years. This trait began when she was only four years old. Her mother had gotten rid of the family cat. Little Marie thought it was lost and she was heart-broken! In an effort to gain sympathy from her grandmother, she wrote a message to her. The message had a picture of Marie’s house with her cat walking away from the house. She wrote “Grandma” on the envelope and put it in the mailbox on her corner. Marie trusted that her mail carrier knew everyone and would know where to deliver the letter. Marie wrote several messages similar to this until the mail carrier finally caught on and spoke with Mrs. Phillips.

Marie Madeline was also an avid reader. Well into her 90s she was still reading articles about current issues in the church, the U.S. and the world.

Marie Madeline told me that she had a fervent devotion to the Sacred Heart and she rarely missed saying her rosary. She said that she didn’t feel the need to go to the Chapel to pray. She could always converse with God “right here” (in her room). Marie Madeline spoke of how much the Stations of the Cross meant to her, especially during penitential times in the Church. She also expressed her deep love of the IHM congregation. “I have had a happy life. I’m fortunate,” she stated.

Dear Sister Marie Madeline, you have had a stellar career as an educator. Your goal was to be certain that every student in your care could read! What a noble ambition. We are proud of what you have been able to accomplish in the name of the IHM congregation. Now we can say of you, happy are you who has died in the service of God. Yes indeed! You are promised rest from your hard work, because the results of your labors go with you. (Rev 14/13 adapted)

Written by Patricia A. O’Donnell, IHM
Read by Rita Rennell, IHM