

**Remembering Sister Celeste Rabaut, IHM**  
**July 22, 1914-May 10, 2011**



Our dear Celeste was born the second child, and first daughter, of Stella Petz Rabaut and Louis C. Rabaut, who eventually became the parents of nine children-Francis D. Rabaut, S.J.; Celeste Rabaut, IHM; Louis Rabaut III; Mary Jane Amata; Vincent C. Rabaut; Carolyn DePorre; Joan Barrett; Stella Marie Rabaut; and Martha Rabaut, IHM. When Joan Glisky interviewed Celeste not too long ago, Celeste never got past the stories of her happy childhood and her great love for her family, especially for her father. She told Mary Jo Maher that she did not have the gift to write about her father, but if she did, no one would believe it.

From the eight years of sharing life in our family home, I formed some fond memories. When I fell off the swings and incurred many wounds, Celeste painted a dog of mercurochrome on my sore knee. She gave me a stuffed dog for my First Communion – I wonder if she sensed it was holy?

Celeste graduated from St. Paul's School and began attending Marygrove, which she really appreciated. It was Depression time and our father was elected to Congress in Washington, D.C. He asked her to go and work with him. She had already expressed her desire to become a sister. She agreed to go for two years and then go to the convent.

In 1937, on a wintry February day, we drove Celeste to Monroe. It was an extremely painful time, and I had never seen my father so agonized. Some time later he was able to hang in his office the poem, *I'm the Daddy of a Nun*, with its verse:

“But now, somehow it's different-  
With each rising of the sun.  
And my heart is ever singing,  
I'm the daddy of a nun.”

After being professed, Celeste taught both at Annunciation and St. Matthew Schools in Detroit. She then studied library science at Catholic U. in Washington, D.C. The timing was great. My father met the IHMs when they came to study and arranged for a fine meal and at times, a tour. He loved doing this and the sisters were so grateful. Celeste

seemed to appreciate her new field of learning. She served at Marygrove library from 1951 to 1975. While at Marygrove, Celeste was influenced by Sister Honora Jack, who was a lover of truth. Celeste came to realize that truth is God's way of seeing things. I think she focused on the search for truth during the rest of her life. She wrote of truth in her Book of Life. Celeste also deeply admired, appreciated and was influenced by Sister Claudia Carlen. It was a great joy to her in later years to spend a summer in Rome helping Claudia as she worked on indexing the Papal Encyclicals.

I was a student at Marygrove while Celeste was there. I can tell you that I do not think even a pamphlet got past the check out desk when she was on duty. What she did, she did thoroughly.

Celeste celebrated her silver Jubilee at Marygrove in Alumnae Hall. It was a grand event. Our large family and many family friends gathered for this very joyful occasion.

I felt that in many ways Celeste was a hidden soul. She was seldom in the limelight. She was very bright, thorough, exact, truth-seeking, honest, open to listening, not easily swayed and needing repeated presentations when making a change in her thinking. She was refined, faith-filled, thoughtful, kind, hard working and very trustworthy. She could be relied on even for little things.

In 1975 Celeste was asked to serve as community archivist in Monroe. A challenging time for Celeste was when she helped with the book, *Building Sisterhood*. She struggled to understand feminist insights. Whenever we drove into Detroit together, we seemed to get on this topic until our destination was reached. She wanted to be true to herself as she supported the project.

When it was time for a new full-time archivist, Celeste was concerned until she heard that Sister Rose Matthew was chosen. Rose Matthew organized a beautiful celebration and welcomed Celeste as archivist emeritus. I remember how much my family and many of us enjoyed that celebration. Celeste was also very pleased at the choice of Donna Westley as our current archivist and loved helping in the archives as her condition allowed.

On Nov. 17, 2006, Celeste moved to the Memory Care Unit. Very often I could still see her hospitable, prayerful, refined, intelligent self. Due to a broken hip, she entered the hospice program. The hip healed and she graduated from hospice.

Her next move was to main floor health care on Jan. 17, 2011, a surprisingly easy adjustment. In these later years, she became delighted with her brightly polished fingernails. Life was full of surprises.

On April 19, Celeste reentered hospice. Father John LaCasse provided a reflective anointing ceremony on May 9 and she died on May 10. The last few weeks of her life, Celeste told us, “I want to go to God – I want to go home.” Celeste, you have your heart’s desire – We rejoice for you.

-- *Sister Martha Rabaut, IHM*  
*May 1, 2011*

It is fitting that Martha describe something of the family and home life that nurtured her sister Celeste. The beauty of Celeste Rabaut is founded on those realities; as she described it, the family of origin is “the basic thing to who I am.” Of course, when family members become IHM community members, memories of family and community events merge and these two accounts have some inevitable repetition.

Against that backdrop I want to remember the Celeste who many of us knew in her religious and professional life. Her religious name was Palmyre, after an aunt who was a Sister of Charity, but the name was also that of her great-great-grandmother, Palmyre Prangiers Rabaut.

At the wake for Sister Shirley Hinks, Sister Jo Sferrella reminded us not to define our multi-talented Shirley only by her skill at rendering humorous one-liners. It is equally true that we cannot define Sister Celeste Rabaut by one memorable trait. She contributed to life a multiplicity of gifts.

Time limits me to acknowledging only four or five characteristics of Celeste that stir my memory of her as an IHM Sister. Happily they overlap with the virtues and talents Martha just mentioned. I want to speak of them as someone outside the family who became a friend of Celeste. I want to recognize her tenacity, integrity, refinement, good-humor, compassion.

Yes, we must start with persistence. Celeste was so tenacious in her convictions that it would be easy to say she was simply stubborn. Many IHMs recall Celeste at the Congregational Governing Board or at Chapter, reading a well-researched paper or passionately articulating her convictions about what should and should not be retained or inserted in the Constitutions. To her it did not matter how many agreed or disagreed with her; she charged on, explaining, asking questions, pushing toward acceptable resolution. I came to call her “the old warrior” as she represented now one cause and then another.

She was not the kind of person who just looked on and said something should be done. She picked up the challenge and forged ahead. When the Marygrove Capital Campaign called for support in 1997, it was Celeste who found a way for the Motherhouse sisters

to support the college where she had ministered for 23 years (1951-1974). From Celeste's initiative, Motherhouse sisters sent over \$1500 to the campaign by way of a Celebrate Marygrove College Day that Celeste orchestrated. In her thank-you note to Celeste (2/22/97) Sister Carol Quigley wrote, "In my wildest dreams I couldn't have imagined such an event."

Carol probably understood especially well how persistent Celeste could be. It was Carol who, as IHM president, invited Celeste to work closely with her from 1982-88 not only as congregational archivist but as general secretary as well. A truly impossible job, it seemed. Yet, throughout that period and with heavy time limitations Celeste somehow instituted and upheld lasting archival procedures in fine detail (and without much technology). Some of these procedures support the work of the archives staff even now.

Again, those of us who worked with Celeste in putting together our book *Building Sisterhood* know well Celeste's tenacity. Together we developed the principles of writing a feminist history. As a group we struggled toward agreement. "History is a gathering of *facts*," said Celeste, but the group wanted also to recognize that those facts were filtered through the personal lens of the historian. Celeste resisted and engaged us with her concerns over many hours and through several meetings. In the end Celeste fully endorsed all 18 principles, not only #1 that read "All history, including feminist history, is first of all grounded in factual data," but #2 which affirmed, "History in all its forms is interpretive." (*Building Sisterhood*, p. 365) We came to acknowledge our debt of gratitude for Celeste's unflinching challenges that led us all not only to greater clarity and mutuality but to making concrete our goal of achieving our work by group consensus.

Undergirding this unremitting courage of Celeste was a solid integrity that characterized all that she did. Perhaps her two years of service to Congressman Louis Rabaut as his personal secretary in Washington, D.C., sealed that commitment to integrity. She saw her father, a man of peerless integrity, carry out his convictions on a national stage and she loved what she witnessed. She was, as Martha also said, deeply inspired by Sister Honora Jack's affirmation that "truth is God's view of reality."

We witnessed such integrity in Celeste. She pursued the truth in her life by entering fully into any ministry assigned – with the elementary and high school students given into her charge, at her post in the card files at Marygrove, laboring over minutes as general secretary, organizing records in Archives, attending whatever events the community planned or provided. In all this she saw herself realizing the truth of her life, what she called "God's view of reality." Even in the last few years when her energy and health declined, she would turn to me in our shared Archives office and announce that she had to leave – as if she had to let me know – because there was a MCLRMP meeting or a speaker or a wake. Her perception of reality, her faith, her understanding of

what she had promised by vow – these were the bedrock referents from which she took direction.

Refinement, also, marked Celeste's relationships. This characteristic was so ingrained you might overlook it. Unless she was dedicated to the truth of a cause, Celeste never put herself forward. She had a gracious manner, giving attention to others present, putting herself in the background. One night at a celebrative meal, several of the participants in writing *Building Sisterhood* were surprised to discover that Celeste was much more than a facilitator of their archives research. They learned that Celeste had a remarkable background of experiences in Washington with her father. They plied her with questions and soon learned a lot more about her than they had ever known or suspected. Her personal journey, her degree studies in library science and archival structures, her travels, her published writings about Latin poetry, her founding activity and service as treasurer of the national organization, Archivists for Congregations of Women Religious – these were not the subjects of Celeste's chatter. She deferred regularly to the topics and interests of others. Those who knew Celeste well will remember that she never sought the limelight; rather, she entered gently into social events. As her health and energy declined, this refinement remained as a long-cultivated trait.

And what about Celeste's good-humored outlook? She often had such a serious demeanor that her geniality, too, could be overlooked. One bit of advice she offered to those coming after her was to enjoy events with the community (1996). "Relationships are what mattered," she said. She had a warm laughter and responded to fun and the funny things of life. As she sorted her beloved Sister Claudia Carlen's papers in the Archives she would now and again start chuckling and turn to me to share this funny story and that humorous incident her reading recalled to her. She laughed at her father's clever ways of getting the Rabaut children to clean up the yard; she laughed at herself making a mistake as his secretary and using his personalized government stamp just to pay a bill. She described her going down to the main post office in Washington and getting the postmaster's permission to go through the mail bins until she found the specially stamped letter and rectified her error. I will long remember her cheery sharings.

Celeste was also compassionate. She relished recounting her parents' many kindnesses. She admired how her father forgave some of his debtors during the Depression. She recalled how he took time and great pains to see that someone in his district was given the compensation due him. She took them as models for her own caring.

I remember conversing with her one day about poverty in Detroit. I should not have been surprised, but it did startle me to hear the passion surge in Celeste's voice as she analyzed the issues of poverty in terms of justice for the working people, care for families, the needs of children and needs for adequate legislation.

On another day, I mentioned casually someone's need for a handbag for a trip she was making. Immediately, Celeste responded, "I think I have just the thing. I'll get it from my room."

These are just small incidents illustrating for me that in small matters and in large issues Celeste had a heart for the needs of others. Perhaps many of you, who knew her for more years than I, recall other instances that bear this out.

We say farewell to a strong woman, a woman of tenacity and integrity, of refinement and good humor, a woman of compassion. We are thankful for these many years of her sojourn among us and among God's people.

I will let Celeste sum up her life in community in her own words:

"My life as an IHM sister has been a happy one, both during, pre- and post Vatican II. We have a wonderful community spirit and a challenging vision. We have kept the essence of our 1845 founders and applied that essence to new leads in a changing world. Our current vision is timed for now and our immediate future. *My future* is in God's plan. I trust God for the Grace to respond according to God's will." (9/9/03, Tape Four)

Blessings on you, Celeste, dear relative, dear IHM sister and friend. We are confident that in the Communion of Saints you will continue to accompany and support us wayfarers who knew and loved you.

-- *Joan Glisky, IHM*  
*May 12, 2011*