



Remembering Mary Leon Robb, IHM

Dec. 16, 1909 - May 9, 2008

Mary Leon, baptized Marion Robb, was born Dec. 16, 1909, in Howell, Mich. She was the fourth of seven children. Ruth the first child, died when she was three months old. Then Anna, James and Marion (Mary Leon) were born into the family with just a year between them. Margaret, William and Leon came three years apart.

Family was very important to Mary Leon. She was especially fond of her father, William Howard Robb, who was one of 10 children. He grew up on a farm in Deerfield Township north of Howell. He decided to be a lawyer and worked his way through college. In October 1905 he married Agnes Ellsworth of Stockbridge, a graduate of Ypsilanti College. During the next few years William practiced law, did some real estate work and sold cyclone insurance. His greatest accomplishment was the founding of Citizens Mutual Auto Insurance on Aug. 30, 1915. Since then, the company has grown and has agencies in many cities in Michigan.

There was no Catholic School in Howell so Mary Leon was sent to the Hall of the Divine Child in Monroe for second grade in September 1918. Mary Leon referred to this trip to Monroe as "...the first time she entered the convent."

When Mary Leon was in the 8th grade her parents built a new house and wanted to have all of their children home for the year. They lived at their cottage while the home was being built. Thanksgiving Day dinner was the first meal together in their new home.

Mary Leon wrote in her autobiography, "As a young child I was always active. I loved to swim and play ball with my brothers. One of the last summers I was home my father rented two horses, Topsy and Joe. What a good time we had with them. Each summer we went to our cottage at Lake Chemung and spent many happy hours swimming, rowing, playing ball and other games."

"As a young girl I always wanted to be a nun. Once in a while I changed my mind and decided I would rather be a cowgirl and go out west. I recall one day while I was riding a horse called Indian at the Academy I was thinking that it would be such a selfish life and I knew then I would be a sister".

Mary Leon's brother William was attending 6th grade at the Hall of the Divine Child when he had to have an operation for mastoid. He died of cerebral meningitis a month later on May 4, 1927. This had a profound effect on Mary Leon and always brought tears to her eyes when she spoke of him.

When her parents learned that Mary Leon wanted to enter the convent in July after graduation they received permission for her to travel for a month. "Little did they know," she writes, "that I would later be a great traveler."

Thus from the middle of April until the middle of May, Mary Leon and her Mother traveled by train going through Kentucky to New Orleans, to New Mexico to the Grand Canyon, to Yosemite National Park, to San Francisco. From there they traveled by boat to Seattle. Then they took the northern route home visiting Denver and Chicago, and then on home. "It was a wonderful trip and I sure enjoyed it."

The morning of July 2, 1928, I arose at five o'clock took a plunge in the lake and how I did swim, saying, "This will be the last swim of my life."

"When I entered the convent I was the ninth living member of our family in the IHM community. We called ourselves "The Nine Choirs of Angels." They were Sr. Berchmans McGivney, Sister Cornelia Robb, Mother Theresa McGivney, Sister Vincent de Paul McGivney, Sister Anticeta Conklin, Sister Lourdes Flynn, Sister Leonarda Callaghan and Sister Norberta Callaghan." Mary Leon delighted in the many happy hours in the summers spent together visiting and sewing for the missions. Another relative Mary Leon was very proud of is her cousin Father Michael McGivney, who founded the Knights of Columbus in 1882. On several occasions she was invited to events of the Knights because of her relationship to Father McGivney.

In 1929 Mary Leon had her first mission experience at St. Charles Newport. The following year Mary Leon was missioned to Blessed Sacrament in Detroit. There she taught 5th grade and made her first vows at Christmas time. In September 1931, she was assigned to St. Gregory's. She described the six years at St. Gregory's as strenuous recalling that she always had 65 to 70 students. One year she had 110 students on half-day sessions. Her next four years at St. Peter and Paul in Ionia were less stressful with smaller classes and time for fun in the going to and from the "Castle on the Hill."

After six years at St. Boniface in Detroit, Mary Leon was assigned to teach 9th grade at St. Agnes for two years. Then Mary Leon taught five years at St. Philip in Battle Creek. It was during this time that her mother became ill with cancer. Mary Leon had the comfort of being able to visit her mother during her illness. Mother Theresa accompanied her for the first visit. There after she went with Sister Borromeo as her companion. Her mother died April 5, 1952. The following year her father died. He had been ill for nine years following a stroke that left him paralyzed and without the power of speech. He died December 26, 1953.

In 1954 Mary Leon went back to teaching grade school at St. Mary in Mount Clemens, as there was a need for elementary teachers. In September 1957 a fire destroyed St. Peter Church and part of the school. Continuing with the school program in the midst of the rebuilding presented many challenges.

After two years at Our Lady of Lourdes, River Rouge, Mary Leon was assigned to Holy Ghost, Albuquerque. She writes, "When I received this assignment I was thrilled, I was looking forward to the 'Land of Enchantment.'" "One compensation for going far away is the chance you have to travel to many interesting places." She then lists about a dozen places to visit in the historic Southwest stressing, "The most wonderful were the trips to the Grand Canyon."

In June of 1968 Mary Leon was back at St. Mary in Mount Clemens for two years. When she saw that schools were closing in the area and we then had open placement, she applied to go back to Holy Ghost and was hired. After seven years at Holy Ghost and a total of 47 years of teaching, Mary Leon felt it was time to begin another ministry.

In the summer of 1977 Mary Leon took some classes in gerontology and made an appointment with the pastor at Assumption Parish to talk about creating a program for senior citizens. She was hired and worked with the senior citizen coordinators in two neighboring parishes to provide programs for senior members of the parishes. The programs included spiritual, educational and social opportunities. Through the years they planned several trips, the highlight of which was a 15 day trip to Hawaii. In 1980 she had an opportunity to travel to Oberammergau with a friend for the Passion Play.

With some changes in the situation at Assumption Parish, Mary Leon made the decision to return to Monroe in 1982 where, she writes, "I knew I could be of service." And indeed she was. For several years Mary Leon ministered in the infirmary organizing games, offering exercise and

dancing classes and visiting the sick. She also taught religion to two of her cousins who were attending Meadow Montessori School in the academy building. Other families asked if they could be included. When the number of students increased, she recruited some of her friends at the Motherhouse to assist in the teaching.

Residence at the Motherhouse did not put an end to Mary Leon's travels. Already in November of her first year at home, she accompanied Sister Mary Ivan on a pilgrimage to Mexico for the 450th anniversary of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The following spring she made the much-anticipated trip to the Holy Land with Sister Mary Leo. Then in September 1984 Mary Leon took off for three weeks of traveling and visiting relatives and friends in Arizona, California and New Mexico.

All through the years Mary Leon was an avid swimmer. Together with several other IHM Sisters joined the senior citizen swimming class at the YMCA. She was delighted when they were invited to use the pool at Norman Towers on Thursdays. Each summer she signed up for time at Crawfton and enjoyed several "good swims" each day. A definite requirement for the location of her annual retreat was that there be an opportunity for swimming.

Is it any surprise that when the new mission units were formed Mary Leon opted to join the Frequent Fliers and enjoyed being with the group in St. Louis or some of the more western locations of their meetings.

Always ready for a celebration, Mary Leon thoroughly enjoyed her Jubilee celebrations, Golden, Diamond and 75th, delighting in all of the opportunities for travel to be with family and friends and to appreciate the marvels of creation.

Regarding her spiritual life, Mary Leon wrote, "I had a deep devotion to Mary. As a child I wanted to give my life to God. I wanted to be a teacher. Once in a while I would change my mind and decide to be a cowgirl since I loved horses so much, but I always came back to the idea of being a sister. My eight days or six days of retreat have been very important to me. It is a time when I can be relaxed and renew my relationship with God. A few years ago I took a workshop on centering prayer and since then I begin my day with a twenty minute period of centering prayer followed by my morning meditation. In the afternoon I try to spend time before the Lord and do some spiritual reading. I have always had a great devotion to St. Joseph. It was on March 19, 1928 that I asked to enter the IHM Community."

Mary Leon's dear friend Gretchen Webb shared with me some of her experiences with Leon.

"Leon told me many times that every morning when she wakes up she says, "Is it today, Lord?" She was so open to the will of God! She was such a happy, grateful woman! She constantly thanked God for everything! She was so grateful for our IHM Community. She said this every visit I had with her. I have been so impressed by this. She really challenged me to stay focused on the will of God."

"During one of our conversations a couple of years ago, I asked her how she was able to always be so positive and just take everything in stride. Without hesitation she told me that when she was in high school she received a D in her class on Cicero. She was quite upset by this, was crying and wrote her Mom about it. Her mother's response to her was, "Marion, never let ANYTHING get you down." She said that she hears her Mom saying this to her whenever she has difficult days. This impressed me so much that I have it on my refrigerator.

Leon always focused on the positive in everyone. I have never heard her say a negative word about anyone (and I have known her since I was 4.) She had an amazing ability to love and she brought smiles wherever she went. She always had that energy and zest for life that seemed to be contagious. She never considered herself to be old. As she entered her 90s she was so happy

and proud that God had blessed her with this long life. She would often say, "I don't know how I am going to get to go to heaven, since I am blessed with such good health! I don't want God to forget me."

One of the first things I heard about Mary Leon when I arrived in Albuquerque was, "Jiggle the car keys and Leon is in the car." She was hard to keep up with, she had so much energy. She truly appreciated life and all it had to offer. Now we entrust her to our loving God who is able to fulfill all of the longings of her heart. Go now, friend, and enjoy the wonders of eternal life.

Written by:

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