

Remembering Sister Bernadelle Thompson Jan. 14, 1922-June 21, 2009



Harriet Margaret Thompson, our beloved Sister Bernadelle, was born Jan. 14, 1922, in Detroit, Michigan. Her father was James William Thompson, a Canadian, a native of Toronto, and her mother was Gertrude Goodrich, a native of Holly, Michigan, and of Irish descent. Her parents were married at Holy Rosary Church in Detroit in 1906. Nine children were the fruit of this union: four boys - James, Donald, Robert and Francis, and five girls: Harriet, Bernardine, Helen, Mary and Patricia. None of Sister Bernadelle's siblings are currently living. The last one to pass away was her dear sister Pat, Sister Mary James, a Daughter of Charity with whom she maintained a close, intimate relationship, always referring to her as Pat.

In their early married life the Thompsons first lived in St Leo's parish, where Sister Bernadelle and her siblings began their first years in school. Later the family moved to the east side of Detroit. The Thompson parents died rather young, the father in 1929, and the mother in 1944. The widowed mother was able to place her younger children in St. Vincent's Orphanage, where they received their elementary education. Because St. Vincent's was located in St. Charles Parish, children of high school age attended St. Charles High School. It was during her years at St. Charles that Harriet became acquainted with the IHM Sisters and later felt called to religious life in the IHM congregation. At about the same time, her sister Patricia entered the Daughters of Charity taking the name of Sister Mary James. Both Harriet and Patricia felt called to a ministry of teaching in their respective communities.

Sister Bernadelle entered the IHM congregation in the summer of 1939 and began her educational preparation for teaching that summer. In the summers of 1941, '44, '47 and '50 she received provisional elementary teaching certificates. In 1955 she completed her undergraduate education receiving a BA from Marygrove. In 1956 she received her permanent elementary teaching certificate. During these years she taught elementary grades from one to six in numerous schools in the Detroit area. In 1964 she received a secondary provisional certificate and in 1969 a secondary permanent teaching certificate.

About this time she realized a growing interest in library science and began studies in this area at Marygrove, then pursued further studies at Wayne State University, where she completed master's degree in library science. In 1964 she began her work as a school librarian in Detroit, then Battle Creek, Ann Arbor and Monroe before heading for Florida. In Florida she continued as a school librarian in many school settings in Miami, Key West, Tampa and Hollywood until 1990. At one point, she referred to these changes in ministry, not as her retirement but as her "rehirement."

Feeling that it was time to retire, she joined some of her IHM Sisters who had retired in Rocky Creek Village, where she continued as a part-time librarian and as a companion to the elderly. She returned to the Motherhouse in 1998 and served as a part-time receptionist for CBO until 2004 when it was necessary for her to enter the Health Care Center. Through all her years as an IHM Sister, Sister Bernadelle frequently expressed sincere gratitude to the IHM congregation for what it had done for her and for the many ways that God had taken care of her in difficult times through the congregation.

That Sister Bernadelle kept fresh her sense of humor while teaching, we note that during an interview for the Florida Catholic, she told two stories that evidence this trait. She recalled that in one fifth grade class, she had asked the students what the priest said to the bride and groom as he was performing the sacrament of matrimony. The response was that the priest had asked the groom, "Do you take this woman to be your awful wedded wife?" Then she recalled the incident when John, a kindergartner, needed assistance with his snowsuit, mittens, hat and boots. After 10 minutes of pushing and pulling, her efforts paid off. Then John told her: "Sister, these aren't my boots, they belong to my brother!"

Sister's classmates remember her as a quiet, retiring, caring, loving person, and as one who registered humor with a gentle chuckle. This caring extended beyond the classrooms where she taught and also to the world at large. Several of her commitment forms reveal this awareness of the problems that affected the lives of others, nationally as well as internationally. She quoted in one form, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and has employed me to carry on this particular ministry as a librarian." In this capacity she welcomed the opportunity to disseminate materials dealing with current issues. In her Page of Life she wrote that she thought she knew the meaning of freedom. In May 1980, when she was ministering in Key West, Florida, she was a first-hand witness to the Mariel boat Lift from Cuba to Key West. One incident that left a lasting impression on Sister Bernadelle, involved a young woman who was so happy to escape such cruelty unharmed that when she reached the shore and disembarked, she raised her arms to heaven and shouted at the top of her voice, "FREEDOM, FREEDOM, FREEDOM." With that she dropped dead at the

feet of the onlookers. Sister remarked that this experience has haunted her ever since. It taught her a valuable lesson about freedom.

At the end of her Page of Life, she wrote: "As an IHM sister, I have had many opportunities to exercise my freedom. The most recent choice is that of retirement to our Motherhouse, back to my roots. I am truly looking forward to the years ahead to continue my gift of freedom. I know that I will not be disappointed. "For where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is FREEDOM." (2 Cor. 17)

Thank you, dear classmate, for all you have shared of yourself with us and for just being you. May you now enjoy the full reward for your faithful service to God and the kingdom.

Sister Marie Andre Walsh
June 24, 2009