

Obituary

Sister Virginia Celmer, IHM, died Nov. 26, 2020, at the IHM Motherhouse. She was 75 years old.

Virginia was born in Detroit on June 26, 1945, to Charles and Stella (Kopicko) Celmer. As a young student, Virginia attended St. Luke and Immaculata High School, where she came to know the IHM Sisters of Monroe. After graduation in 1963, she entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and received the name Sister Marie Amata. She was later known to many as Sister Ginny.



After earning a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College, Sister Ginny instructed students in religious education, social studies and psychology at St. Mary, Monroe; Marian High School, Bloomfield Hills, Immaculate Heart of Mary High School, Westchester, Ill., and St. Thomas the Apostle High School, Aurora, Ill. During these years, she earned a master's degree from St. Louis University, which led to her transition into health care services as a chaplain at Mercy Center for Health Care Services. This led her into graduate study of psychology at Texas Tech University. She earned her doctoral degree in 1986 and served for five years as a psychologist at the Consultation Center in San Antonio. Sister Ginny operated a private licensed clinical psychology practice for more than 20 years in San Antonio and was esteemed by her professional colleagues.

Health concerns led her to close the practice and return to the IHM Motherhouse as a resident of IHM Senior Living Community in 2014. She renewed many friendships within the community, maintained long-distance friendships and encountered new friendships with many of the staff on the Monroe Campus with her quick wit and wisdom.

Remembering

When Virginia Celmer, IHM, PhD, moved into the Motherhouse on Founders' Day, 2017, she was returning from ministry of 11 years in Chicago and 36 years in Texas, a cancer that was in remission and a serious infection that almost took her life. Those who knew her in Michigan, and when out of state could welcome her home. Those who had not known her, met a new and interesting friend.

“Ginny,” born in Detroit on the 26th of June in 1945, was the only child of Charles “Charlie” Celmer, a builder and construction worker, who was born in Anderson, Texas, and Stella Mary (Kopicko) Celmer of Detroit. Both were Catholic, Polish and first-generation Americans. Ginny was baptized at St. Andrew parish the next month.

About being an only child, Ginny related: “My cousin Tommy was born a week before I was born, and my aunt almost died. That scared my dad, I think ... nobody ever said anything. ... I think that’s what scared him.”

Ginny, a child of deep feeling, came home from kindergarten sobbing and sobbing. Why did she do that? Ginny told her mother, “They were praying to the wrong God!” Well, Ginny’s first language was Polish, and the sisters were praying in English. Thus, was her family life and her early spiritual life.

Ginny, while making a game of dusting, said to her mother, “When I grow up, I’m going to be a doctor and then I’m going to be a nun.” Her mother’s response was, “Well, you might be a doctor but you’re never going to be a nun.” Ginny never mentioned it again until it was time for the IHM entrance interview.

Her kindergarten was taught by the Felician Sisters and grade school by the Sisters of Charity – in black habits.

Ginny intended to go to Holy Rosary High School. Her friend urged her to go to Immaculata for the competitive high school entrance exam – just for practice. She related, “Well, I got accepted to Immaculata and when my father saw that I got a scholarship, he said, ‘You’re not going to Rosary.’ That’s how I got to know the IHMs. I thought they were very strange people dressed in blue habits. That was the first time I saw that.”

Very active in high school, Ginny was in Sodality, band, choral, debate and orchestra. When Sister Marie Chantal needed a secretary, Ginny took the job. She taught CCD class and ran the nursery school on Sundays.

She grew accustomed to the IHM Sisters in blue, but when told about the meeting with the General Superior on Feb. 2, Ginny said, “Oh, no you don’t. No, I am not.” Then, she had to admit it was something she had always wanted.

When Ginny came to the congregation in June 9, 1963, her parents were supportive enough. But it was hard on them when she left the state.

After profession in 1966 and graduation from Marygrove College in 1968, Ginny's first mission was a challenging time of teaching shared seventh and eighth grade at St. Mary, Monroe. Her heart was in high school.

The next year she went to Marian High School in Bloomfield Hills, then to Immaculate Heart of Mary High School in Westchester, Ill. While there, co-principals Sisters Joyce Duroske and Patricia Kidder brought in a psychologist to train some faculty as paraprofessional psychotherapists to work with students. Ginny was chosen.

Ginny said, "So much in my life is pure God because so many opportunities were created out of nothing for me." During her year of renewal Ginny spent weeks teaching survival English to Vietnamese refugees in Fort Indiantown Gap, Pa. One of the letters in her file expresses grateful thanks for the amount of time, sweat and physical labor sisters expended to make this program successful and keep it functioning.

After a renewal year Ginny returned to Chicago for clinical pastoral education at Lutheran General Hospital. While in Illinois, Ginny regularly went to Visitation House of Prayer. She said, "It was quiet, just what I needed to have reflection and somebody there who I could reflect with. ... It was a holy place. ... I'm glad that the legacy is carried on through Riverview, various places."

While teaching at St. Thomas the Apostle High School in Hyde Park, her provincial, Sister Chris Dombrowski, encouraged her to seek and follow where God was leading her. Ginny saw the opening for a position at Mercy Center for Health Care Services in Aurora, Ill., and the head of the department created a position for her. She already had a master's degree in theology from St. Louis University. The head of the Department of Psychology told her to forget further studies and said, "... you've got to go for the PhD."

When Ginny applied for the program at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, she got a scholarship. Lubbock became a new diocese. About her second year there, she was asked to do a retreat for the sisters, was elected Vicar, doing her doctoral work, teaching, working in a newly created position as graduate

assistant counselor and then, became representative for all the sisters in Texas on the Catholic Conference Board.

In December 1981, Ginny's mother called. Her father was in hospital and was dying. Ginny flew out the next morning and saw him just before he died.

The dissertation was completed. It was the "Study of Personality and Occupational Profiles of Roman Catholic Priests and of Women who sought to become Roman Catholic Priests," a topic she believes could never have been published in a Catholic University at that time.

The opening of doors continued.

She was invited to visit San Antonio and was offered a position at Consultation Center. She substituted at Oblate School of Theology. In 1990, she opened a private practice but in January 1991, she was hit by a truck, had serious surgery and was out of work for eight months, during which time she learned that she did not need to save the world.

In 1993 when Ginny's mother died suddenly, she attended to all details of the funeral and property.

Outside of her work, Ginny's home was the 2,500-family parish of St. Francis of Assisi. She loved to sing and was in the choir. Just thinking about the very socially conscious parish was exciting. A parish-sponsored ministry called "mobile wolves vicious," used a food truck, made sandwiches and served more than one million sandwiches, dinners, three meals a day, 365 days a year. On Thanksgiving, they served dinners for the homeless. There was real care for people. She loved Texas, called it her family of hearts – the pastor had built a close community.

Her two best friends in life, Bev and Yolie had both died of cancer. Back at Monroe, Ginny served Development Office contacting donors on birthdays, but she also delighted in the number of raffle tickets her friends purchased.

In winter of 2018, Ginny was diagnosed with a cancer of ligament and bone. In summer of 2019, another tumor was discovered in the same area.

Ginny loved her friends and relatives. Her phone was her lifeline when personal contact failed.

Ginny loved her ministries:

She loved spiritual direction retreat work to see the way God works. She was licensed in chemical dependency and could see when abuse victims became addicts by using drugs as band-aids over the pain. She loved working with people in recovery and seeing the freedom and joy they attained. Because of her medical knowledge, she saved a patient from an extremely invasive surgery. Ginny knew that the patient's medications were causing her symptoms.

Ginny used therapy dogs. The three rescued and trained poodles were present for every session for individuals who would benefit from their quiet presence. The wise lesson she learned from her psychology practice and study was to never give up hope. Healing and growth are possible as long as we are alive.

On a final, personal note, almost every evening, I met with Ginny out of doors, then indoors to talk, then we added prayer. Ginny wanted to end every meeting by using the blessing that her friends, Harriet Singelyn and Hilda Skelly prayed with each other.

May the blessing of God be upon you.
May God's love wrap you round
May the presence of the Holy Spirit fill your sleep
And speak in your dreams.
Alleluia,
Amen!

Finally, today I would pray with you for Ginny, May God's love wrap you round with unending happiness.

Alleluia!
Amen!

Written and delivered by Rita Fisher, IHM, Dec. 2, 2020.

