

Obituary



Sister Helen Kohler, IHM, 87, died Thursday, Feb. 7, at her home, the IHM Motherhouse in Monroe.

Sister Helen was one of four daughters and three sons born to William and Mary Rose (Lambur) Kohler. She was born on May 25, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, and baptized Helen Marie at St. Joseph Parish, Lorain. She attended the parish's elementary school and St. Mary High School. After graduation, she entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe and received the religious name, Sister John Vianney.

Sister Helen earned a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College, Detroit, and a master's degree from the University of Michigan. From 1953 through 1975, she taught in the Detroit area at St. Cecilia, St. Agatha High School and Marygrove College; in the Chicago area at St. Felicitas and Immaculate Heart of Mary High School, Westchester; and in Monroe at the Hall of the Divine Child. Sister Helen had a special affinity for personal tutoring of students in special need or difficult circumstance. Working through the University of Michigan, she provided tutoring services at the Ypsilanti State Hospital. Sister Helen was hired into the W.J. Maxey Boys Training School, Whitmore Lake, to teach basic and special education for the next 24 years.

After retiring from teaching, Sister Helen resided in Belleville and often served as a volunteer tutor. She moved to the IHM Motherhouse in 2010 and was always quick with a joke or endearing story from her years of teaching to share with residents and staff.

Remembering

In 2012, Sister Helen Kohler wrote the following reflection regarding her life: "I am grateful to the IHM Community and to the Second Vatican Council that I am able to discern the paths I'm called to follow. As a retired IHM, I seek to be open to others, to respect the choices each one makes, and to be of service to others. I firmly believe that carrying out the mission of Jesus is to be patient with myself and others and to appreciate the individuality of each person. My guiding principles always are and will be contained in the peace prayer of St. Francis of Assisi."

Helen was born on May 25, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, and baptized at St. Joseph Church in Lorain. Her parents were William John and Mary Ross (Lambur) Kohler. There were seven children: Arthur, Beatrice, Fred, Helen, Dorothy, Francis and Lucille. Helen wrote: "My grandparents were born in Germany, but both my parents were born in America. We were quite poor, and both my father and my mother had to work from the time we were small children."

Helen attended St. Joseph Grade School, and St. Mary High School, both in Lorain, Ohio. Her older sister, Beatrice (Sister John Bosco) had entered the IHMs in 1945 but had to leave because of ill health. She returned at a later date. According to Helen, Beatrice was a very idealistic person with many talents. She loved God and she loved prayer; she loved people and she was a marvelous teacher. Helen wrote lovingly about Beatrice in the IHM Book of Life: "hopes, fears, pain, commitment, an IHM trying to maintain a balance between the human and the divine."

In 1949, Helen entered the IHM community and at her Reception into the Novitiate she received the name, Sister John Vianney. She made her First Profession in 1952 and her Final Profession three years later. In 1953, she was missioned to St. Cecilia School in Detroit, and then to St. Felicitas School in Chicago, Ill. In 1958, she ministered at the Hall of the Divine Child, (HDC) in Monroe, Mich. for five years. Among other places, Helen taught at (IHM) Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Westchester, Ill. and St. Agatha High School in Detroit. Helen wrote "At St. Agatha's I taught two classes of French I, one class of French II, two classes of American Literature to Sophomores, and one class of individualized Latin instruction. I lived in the convent with four Dominican Sisters. The living atmosphere was warm, human and prayerful, which resulted in happy, peaceful living."

While she taught at St. Agatha in Detroit, Helen also tutored patients at Ypsilanti State Hospital during the summers. Sometime during the 1960s, Sister Helen, a Latin teacher, received a Fulbright Scholarship grant to an academy in Rome, spending eight weeks there.

In 1975 – 1976, Sister Helen attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor as a student and continued tutoring patients at Ypsilanti State Hospital. From 1976 until 2001, she was a special education teacher at Maxey Boys Training School in

Whitmore Lake, Mich. "Maxey" was a last stop for many troubled boys and young men. When I lived with Helen after her retirement and she recounted stories of those days at "Maxey", I would be filled with admiration for her courage and love and patience with those troubled boys and their life stories. Helen firmly believed in letting everyone know his or her value by the way you would meet them. For the boys who came to Maxey, this was very different from the way society treated them: they were of no value to anyone.

On her 2014 Commitment Form, Helen wrote: "In the evolution of my life and ministry I was set on paths that led me among the vulnerable and marginalized and mentally ill. I received insights and appreciation of the heartfelt need these people expressed about their dependence on God. It made me wonder about who 'the least of our brethren are.' Daily I pray the peace prayer of St. Francis and try to be open and accepting toward others and try to give positive input."

In 2001, Helen retired from full-time ministry, yet she continued to volunteer in a literacy program and in elder care in Belleville. When in 2011 Helen came back to Monroe, she wrote: "When I came full circle to retire at the Motherhouse, part of my evolution was needing to enjoy and cherish past memories of ministry and wonderful people; and face forward to figure out my final phase of life. Living in a big group, and the constant activity (here) is a challenge for me. Helping others is a joy for me; I enjoy people and desire to acknowledge others and their needs. I am in a close contact with God daily. Each day, and many times a day, I ask for help to better understand how to deal with each day; and I think a lot about the reality of life after death."

Manifesting in her life what she wrote on paper about enjoying people and wanting to be of service to others, Helen chose to work in the Service Office and in the Library at the Motherhouse for as long as she could. When, because of vision loss, Helen needed more assistance, she moved to the Health Care Center in 2017.

About three years ago, our associate, Chuck Van Vleet, began to take Helen, in her wheelchair, to the Motherhouse Chapel for Mass, several mornings a week. Chuck and Helen had previously met when he was working at the hospital where Helen would go to visit her sister Beatrice. It seemed natural that they would get together again here, at the Motherhouse, and become good friends.

Is it not very touching how God brings about such encounters, so to enrich our lives?

A few days before she died, Sister Helen told Chuck she had seen Beatrice; and just the morning of her death, she told him, "I am dressed and ready to go." He understood that she was telling him that she was ready for her death.

Sister Helen did not want me to write her Remembering. She said, "Just say, 'She came, she lived and she died.'" Perhaps the truest things to say about Helen are the words she wrote about her sister, Beatrice, whom she loved so dearly:

"Christian values, IHM commitment, teaching ministry, maintaining the balance between the human and the divine, unique yet universal."

Good bye, Sister Helen, we are grateful for your life and love and ministry among us. We think you did a fine job at "maintaining the balance between the human and the divine."

Written and delivered by Roberta Richmond, IHM
Feb. 14, 2019