

Obituary

Sister Mary Laubacher, IHM, 101, died Friday, June 7, in the IHM Health Care Center, Monroe. She was recently under hospice care.

Sister Mary was one of seven children born to Herman and Margaret (Keffler) Laubacher of Canton, Ohio. Mary was born on the Feast of the Assumption, Aug. 15, 1917 and baptized in St. Joseph Church (Canton). The children attended the parish grade school and Mary later graduated from St. John the Baptist High School, Canton. In 1934, she entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, and received the religious name Sister Coronata. Sister Mary celebrated her 80th jubilee as an IHM Sister in 2015.



Education was her life-long ministry and was lived out in various professional venues. As a teacher, Sister Mary guided students at St. Michael and St. Mary, Monroe; St. Mary of Redford, Gesu and St. Gregory, Detroit; and St. Felicitas, Chicago. As a principal and teacher, she ministered at Sacred Heart High School, Roseville and St. Stephen High School, Port Huron, where she taught journalism. She furthered her own educational pursuits by earning a bachelor's degree at Marygrove College, a master's degree in education at the University of Detroit and a doctoral degree in education at Wayne State University. Sister Mary later taught in Education at Marygrove College, led the teacher training program and served as department chair. Many former students became friends and remained in contact throughout the years.

In 1974, Sister Mary moved to Lansing, Mich. to minister in the Diocese of Lansing as Secondary School consultant, director of Teacher Corps and Curriculum consultant for 45 schools within the diocese. She served the last three years as assistant superintendent of schools. In 1980, the diocese gratefully recognized her work in a civic commendation.

Sister Mary returned to serve in the IHM community sponsored schools as librarian at Marian High School, Bloomfield Hills and as principal at St. Mary Academy, Monroe. After a year of renewal at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash., Sister Mary returned to live at the Motherhouse in 1986. She served as

congregational Education secretary and librarian for more than 10 years. She cheerfully assisted staff with projects and always shared a kind and caring word with those she encountered in her day.

Remembering

Let us go back over a hundred years and meet Margaret Keffler and Herman Laubacher. They were born in the 1890s and grew up in the town of Malvern, Ohio. Of sturdy German ethnicity and solid Catholicity, we turn toward them with gratitude for permitting two of their eight children to become IHMs. Herman, after studying business law, became a bookkeeper at the Canton Drop Forge Company. He supplemented his income as a barber on Friday evenings and Saturdays. Herman found time for daily Mass, took his children on outings and family visits, often brought them small gifts after shopping, moved them all to an 83-acre farm to secure the family needs as the Depression came.

Of her mother, Mary Laubacher wrote:

My Mother was a beautiful woman with a deep love for my Father and us children, a generous soul, quiet strength, and a gentle manner. During the depression, when we moved to a farm ... she cooked for as many as seventeen people who came to live with us because of unemployment. Afflicted with Parkinson's disease in her later years, she showed enduring patience, a deep spirituality, and admirable hope." (Spinnaker April 15, 1996)

From the testimony of their children, they were excellent parents.

Today, we celebrate the life and mourn the absence of Mary Laubacher, the elder sister who preceded Jean in entering. There is an awesomeness to exploring over a century of living by someone like Mary Laubacher. She has been among us as a lively witness to loving and to generous sharing of the goodness of God.

Mary wrote, "I was born on August 15, 1917... and was baptized four days later ... as Magdalene Mary, after my paternal grandmother. However, my mother, fearing I would be nicknamed Maggie, immediately began to call me Mary. "I remember little of my early childhood, except that I felt loved by my parents and my Mother's single sister Olivia, who doted on me until she married circa 1927. (Autobiography, p. 1)

"I recall that I was sent to my maternal grandmother's when Jean was born. Dad called to ask for me and told me that I had a 'little sister.' I assumed that she would be about three years old and was happy I'd have a sister to play with. ... A wave of sadness spread over me when I saw the wrinkled face of a little red-haired baby. (Dad had not said 'baby' sister!)" (Autobiography, p. 2) For these many years, Jean and Mary have been close companions.

Of their growing up, Jean recalls that Mary was "always entering a contest for coloring pictures for the Catholic Universe Bulletin or (using) some other talent (for) which she often won a prize." (Occasion of 75th birthday)

Mary lived with her grandmother in order to finish two years of high school and to help with Aunt Olivia's two babies. Aunt Olivia died at the birth of Margaret, and little Johnny, her sibling, was only two years old.

Jean also noted, "BOOKS! Mary loved them! As we all know, she still does and reading fills much of her days." (Occasion of Mary's diamond jubilee)

Mary noted, "My parents tried so hard to make a musician out of me: piano, lessons, leather case for sheet music, all to no avail. I recall Dad promised me fifty cents if I could master a particularly difficult number. I persisted and actually won. But that was the end of my musical career." (Autobiographical insert)

Her parents were more successful with Jean and Olivia. There were also five boys, one a baby who died at birth, but also Edward, Tom, Bernard and Joseph. Apparently in the milieu of loving parents and siblings, many visits with relatives and fun on the farm, Mary could characterize her early years as "carefree days indeed."

Mary completed her education at St. John High School in Canton. There, she had grown to love the IHM Sisters. She observed that they taught "in near-poverty conditions." She saw that they "were crowded in a small house and did not have the Blessed Sacrament." (Autobiography, p. 3). She was drawn to joining them and did so on June 22, 1934. She came accompanied by her parents and with Doris Krause who also entered and became Sister Clarine.

Postulate and novitiate days passed quickly, and she loved her college courses. She received the religious name of Coronata in honor of Mary, crowned Queen

of angels and saints. Her devotion to Mary was strong and faithful. Here, in the Motherhouse, she witnessed to her love of Mary daily with her pause to pray the Angelus.

“By August 1936, we were considered prepared for teaching. I was missioned to St. Mary of Redford School where I taught for four years. The first three years, in Grade Three, were half-day sessions, 60 pupils in the a.m. and 60 in the p.m. ... very fruitful and fulfilling years.” (Ibid.) This was the beginning of a long and active dedication to the works of education.

Adding to life’s fullness were her sister Jean, who entered in June of 1941, and their first cousin Sister Carola Keffler, who arrived in February of 1946. Their presence added a special quality to life in community and took them back to Ohio and elsewhere for many a family gathering.

As Sister Coronata she moved to missions familiar to many IHMs and advanced from one grade level to another. We found her at St. Michael, Monroe; St. Felicitas, Chicago; Gesu and St. Gregory, Detroit; St. Mary, Monroe; Sacred Heart, Roseville; St. Stephen, Port Huron. She also advanced from teacher to principal and finally to instructor of teachers at Marygrove College.

Mary defined her favorite ministry as one preparing young women to become effective, dynamic teachers and principals. She envisioned them making their schools excellent Catholic institutions. Many a Marygrove graduate kept their ties with her over the years.

Along this challenging journey, community developments led her back in the ‘60s to choosing her earlier name of Mary. Academic needs led to the acquisition of a master’s degree from the University of Detroit and a doctorate in education from Wayne State University.

A full life it was. Relationships with many sisters, parents, students, co-workers enriched these years. But there was more to come!

After Marygrove, Mary became Assistant Superintendent of Schools in the Diocese of Lansing. “I was assigned to help principals in thirty-two elementary and five high schools. This entailed traveling to Flint, Jackson, Ann Arbor and other smaller Michigan cities.” (Autobiography, p. 4)

In 1980, Mary turned her attention to a change of pace in ministry. A farewell party marked the close of her six years in Lansing. An excellent commendation by Bishop Kenneth Povish, Mr. Bruce Fech, Superintendent of Education in the Diocese, and Sister Monica Kostielney, RSM, President of the Diocesan Board of Education, summarized well Mary's ministry.

In part, it read, "This dynamic woman religious is notable for her magnetic personality, sparkling sense of humor, zest for life, and energetic and progressive attitude." The signers spoke also of Mary's "exemplary teaching performance, and dedication to the total educational process." Yes. A full life it was.

But there was more to come! She was invited to serve as librarian at Marian High. Mary enjoyed these two years at Marian, but she had what she called the shock of her life when Sister Carol Quigley, then IHM president, asked her to be principal at St. Mary Academy. She served for three years, when Sister Diane McCormack suggested she take a year of renewal. What a renewing year that was at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash.! It culminated in a pilgrimage to Greece, Israel and Rome. Mary loved it.

Mary returned to retirement in Monroe where she expressed her desire to serve as IHM Education Secretary. Sister Amadeus Dowd happily chose retirement and welcomed Mary into her role. Mary, urged by Sister Joan Mumaw, also accepted the role of director of the IHM Congregational Library for 11 years. Thus, Mary's first 13 years of retirement proved busy, productive and much appreciated by the many sisters and others who came to her with their needs.

Throughout life, we have known Mary as a generous person. As she gave her larger roles in ministry to others and as physical weaknesses began to impose limits, Mary still found outlets for her many talents. Periods of preparing Montessori students for confirmation, reflective companionship given to a new associate, proofreading of the revised IHM Constitutions and of sisters' papers now and then, reading to friends with limited sight – Mary mingled such kindnesses with her increased time for reading and prayer.

In addition, her wit and wisdom cheered us at mealtimes when she shared the news and her reading at table along with a few good jokes. Also, she corresponded regularly with prisoners on death row. During the Motherhouse

renovation, Mary and her sister Jean officially initiated all new workers into the project with blessing and prayers.

Her nearly 102 years provide a lengthy chronicle. In Mary's case, that chronicle records many joys and sorrows. It is replete with multiple tales of a robust, inspiring, insertion into the day-to-day demands of life and into times of deep transformation.

"To Jesus through Mary" was Mary's mantra as evidenced by her participation in the daily Eucharist and her devotion to the recitation of the rosary. "Now that my 'Martha' days of active ministry are over," she remarked, "I am trying to live out my 'Mary' days of contemplative prayer in gratitude for life, family, friends and the earth. My mantra now is 'Too blessed to be stressed.'"

Today, we celebrate the gift of Mary among us these many years. We are grateful for her long tenure as an IHM Sister. We will mourn her absence, but we are heartened by so many good memories. We surrender her to the embrace of the good God and we are confident that she remains a powerful advocate for those she leaves behind.

We thank you, Mary, for being a friend to us and to so many others. We are bound to you in love and gratitude. An eternity of love, peace and joy be yours.

Written and delivered by Joan Glisky, IHM
June 12, 2019