

Obituary



Sister Joan Lowell, IHM, 81, died Wednesday, Jan. 16, in IHM Senior Living Community.

Sister Joan came to the IHM Sisters of Monroe after 20 years as an IHM Sister of Immaculata, Pa. She was born in Philadelphia on Oct. 29, 1938, to Fred and Lois (Goldstein) Lowell. She attended Grover Cleveland School and Gillespie Middle School and graduated from Little Flower High School. It was at Little Flower that she entered the Catholic faith, met the IHM Sisters and became interested in religious life.

After entering the Immaculata community, Joan earned a Bachelor of Science degree at Immaculata College (Philadelphia). As Sister St. Michael, she taught in elementary grades for more than 20 years at Catholic schools located in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Her interest in human development, behavior and psychology led her to work in human relations, social justice, among the elderly and as assistant chaplain for the United States Army Chaplain's Office in Fort Riley, Ka. Sister Joan experienced a plentitude of cultural challenges, situations and blessings over the course of her life and in service to God.

Sister Joan's desire to fully live out the call of Vatican II led her to enter the IHM Sisters, Monroe, in 1986. She initially lived in community on the Monroe campus, and later in Detroit, on the campus of Marygrove College. She earned a master's degree from Wayne State University and focused on adult education, pastoral ministry and art therapy while residing in Detroit.

Throughout her life, health issues created diversions and challenges. However, in her perseverance, Joan was an accomplished artist and shared her talents with the community via her works, teaching and art therapy. She moved to Monroe in 2002 and continued art therapy and assisted in the campus literary arts and resource center. She moved into the IHM Motherhouse community in 2009.

Remembering

Sister Joan wrote her own Remembering and gave it the title, "The Journey with My Creator; or better titled, "Despite Me, Not Because Of Me." She wanted it to be presented as if she was speaking directly to the community – in her own words. Born from Jewish roots, I know little about my grandparents on either side, except that my father's dad died in WWI fighting for Germany, and dad's mother died in a concentration camp in Germany.

My mother's family was relatively well off until the Great Depression, but they were able to transport Dad and his two siblings out of Germany before the start of WWII. My parents married and gave birth to two daughters, Helen, and myself. The War and the Holocaust were very difficult for them, but we grew up with great pride in our Jewish heritage, which my sister traced back to the tribe of David.

Mom, however, was searching for other ways of finding God, and went on a self-created pilgrimage to several Christian religions, including Christian Science and then Catholicism, even trying to outwit a Jesuit priest in Philadelphia where she found a friendly priest who listened repeatedly and patiently to Mom's scarred childhood and adulthood, bearing accusations of "killing Jesus" and "being condemned to Hell." Father introduced her to a much different interpretation of Scripture, conveying that this person, Jesus, was truly the promised Messiah. Mom was baptized and my sister, Helen, followed shortly after.

I deliberately decided not to follow suit until about three years later while trying to decide what high school I would attend. My sister invited me to try her school. Then I found out I had to be Catholic to go there and that was just the opportunity I needed: decide to take a crash course and be baptized before the school year began, since my religion classes would continue for the next four years.

Our family life was very insecure, and I often found cause for sadness and loneliness. During my freshman year, an observant, compassionate Philadelphia IHM Sister, my English teacher at Little Flower High School, took me under her wing for the next four years. She and a couple of other girls who also loved Sister Martina Therese became my friends and my support. Somewhere in my sophomore year, I told Sister that I wanted to be an IHM. Sister told me to forget it and just enjoy life. By the end of junior year, I repeated my desire to Sister Martina, and she took me more seriously.

Lots of conflict and difficulty continued in my family, and my mom refused to allow me to enter the IHM congregation. After graduation, I half-heartedly found a job and used my extra time to be with my friends and Sister Martina Therese.

By the following year, 1957, I was reluctantly given permission by my parents to enter West Chester with Sister Martina as my sponsor.

My novitiate days were different and difficult, but I was also gaining new strength and deeper faith in many ways. Very excited about being a teacher, I grew to love teaching,

and will always be deeply grateful for the community at Immaculata, Pa., for forming my heart and mind to do this sacred ministry.

Pre-Vatican II days challenged my desire to grow spiritually and emotionally, not knowing then that the Holy Spirit was about to engulf us in the magnificent whirlwind of Vatican II.

I taught in several schools, in metropolitan Philadelphia and four years in Savanna, Ga. I started with third and fourth grades but was unexpectedly whisked into junior high English and religion. The intermediate grades allowed me to challenge my students in the areas of forensics and dramatics in one-act plays.

As time passed, all too quickly, some medical difficulties crept into my active and physical life, challenging me to continue growth in spirituality and life in general. I was delighted by the strong and beautiful saints of the Church, but was also nurtured by contemporary writings in spirituality, self-help and psychology.

In preparation for the next two IHM congregational Chapters, I joined a small group of sisters at a Jesuit retreat center near West Virginia. We were devoted to bring about what we thought to be needed changes in our congregation. It became apparent that the barriers to change were insurmountable.

Poor health continued to hinder me and there seemed to be few alternatives. After having a sudden health episode while celebrating our beautiful feast of the Immaculate Conception, I was taken to the hospital and stayed overnight for observation. When I awoke the next morning, I had decided to leave the community. The following June, I left on the closing day of school and headed south to Maryland. Quite naively, I imagined I could just slip into a college and support myself.

It took almost two months to find a job in a retirement home as an activity director. A priest I knew from Philadelphia was an Army chaplain in Fort Riley, Kan., and offered me an assistant chaplain's job. I was very happy with this opportunity and was sent for a week-long training course in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA), which was held in Tennessee. This was a wonderful experience, giving me a chance to use my teaching skills with the program and to prepare adults at Fort Riley for the sacraments. I learned a lot during my four years at Fort Riley, especially shifting from an all-women's perspective to an all-men's view.

Even though I had no intention of returning to the community in Philadelphia, I did renew my vows. I was also receiving spiritual direction in Kansas from a Sister of St.

Joseph Concordia. I told her I was uncertain about my future, at which point she asked me about the charism of my former community. She then told me that an IHM Monroe sister was coming down to give the sisters a talk and I could call her, asking to talk to her. I said "sure," and called her by phone when I returned to my apartment. Sister spoke of waiting for her visa for overseas travel, but if that didn't come, she would be in Kansas for the scheduled talk. Then, she added an invitation to come to Monroe for Thanksgiving with her and the mission sisters with whom she was living. Sister did make it to Concordia at the end of October. I sat and talked to her for a long time. I also got to the Motherhouse in Monroe, still not conscious about what the Holy Spirit was doing, let alone this beautiful sister who had reached out to me in the middle of the corn patches of Kansas.

Sister Mary Jo Maher and her welcoming sisters had not only prepared a delicious Thanksgiving meal, but Mary Jo had strategically lined up a revealing list of visits with Carol Quigley, Marge Polys, Pat Rourke and a day at the Visitation barn. Yes! I realized that the agenda for the next three days involved a preparation for my 'coming home' to Monroe. (And it was "despite me, not because of me.")

While working with Marge Polys, Pat Rourke, Barbara Weigand, and many other beautiful IHMs during the transfer process, I attempted studying pastoral subjects at Marygrove. Meanwhile, Marge encouraged me more than once, to take an art course. The only one that seemed to fit into my agenda was an introduction to art therapy taught by Sister John Louise Leahy. By the second week in class, I knew it was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. During the day, I attended undergraduate study in art and psychology, and at night I attended art therapy at Wayne State, getting my master's degree two years later.

I did my practicum at Henry Ford Hospital, Wyandotte, under the supervision of an excellent art therapist for an entire year. From there, I started a self-employed business, working with mostly adults and also worked in a grade school in East Detroit under the trusting eye of Sister Marie Cyril, then principal of St. Ambrose Grade School. I picked up clients where and when they became available. Perhaps the most unusual, but quite instructive, was the challenge of working with what was then called "multiple personalities." A young lady called, asking if I would work with a group of people with what is known today as "dissociate disorder." She told me she was a doctor who worked with one [group].

When I told her I had no experience in this area, she assured me that the clients would teach me what I had to know about their mental challenges. All they wanted was a chance to draw, so would I come to her house and meet her and two other friends

with dissociate disorder. When I got to her house and she opened the door, I told her who I was ... She said "Oh. That must have been the doctor who called, but please come in." (In other words, it was the doctor who was inside her!) We talked for a while and I learned that she and her friends rented a house in Trenton. They used the house in the daytime just for others like herself who needed a place to go and talk with each other, and they hoped to draw and color with others like themselves. An art therapist would be a great person with whom to work.

Long story short, I did work with approximately 10-12 people for several months. Very interesting!!! I'm sure I learned more than they. The art was enjoyed by them almost as much as it was by me.

The use of art to help people express themselves IS very beneficial!! I am grateful for the years I was able to give to this ministry – a good fit for me both personally and professionally.

I am now retired and live in the health care center of our Motherhouse, but am able to stay active with my own drawing and ceramic art. I have been greatly enriched by my artistic companions, especially Dorothy Eddy, Barbara Jennings and the continued attentiveness of John Louise Leahy while she was able.

My journey had led me up mountains and down canyons – very few were my choice of direction, nor were the outcomes. So I continue to learn the secret of my life. ... It is "Despite me, not because of me." I am deeply grateful for this continuous and creative work of God, as well as for the support I have received all along the way. Deep in my heart is my love for the IHM Sisters who welcomed, loved and companioned me, first in Philadelphia, and longer here in Monroe.

Written by Joan T. Lowell, IHM, and completed in December of 2016. Delivered by Rita Fisher, IHM, Jan. 22, 2020.