

## Obituary



Sister Margaret Dowd, IHM, 84, died Sunday, May 28, at ProMedica Monroe Regional Hospital, Monroe, Mich.

Sister Margaret was born on Nov. 27, 1932, in Port Huron, Mich., to John M. and Mary A. (Kennedy) Dowd. Her parents and 10 siblings were members of St. Stephen Parish and the children attended St. Stephen Grade School and High School in Port Huron. After graduation in 1950, Margaret entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, and received the religious name

Sister Joseph Raphael.

As a young IHM, Sister Margaret earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Marygrove College, Detroit. She entered the field of education in 1954 and taught at St. Hugo of the Hills, Bloomfield Hills, Mich.; Christ the King, St. Martin and St. Rose, Detroit; and for five years at St. Mary, Akron, Ohio. From 1966 to 2013, Sister Margaret's ministries remained in Port Huron: as a teacher at St. Stephen High School and as a campus minister at St. Clair County Community College and the John Courtney Newman Center. In 1991, she became co-director of the John Courtney Newman Center and continued in this ministry until 2004. She then spent several years as co-director of Campus Ministry for the Archdiocese of Detroit.

Sister Margaret remained in the Port Huron area, ministering as a volunteer where needed. In 2016, she retired to the Motherhouse and joined IHM Senior Living Community.

## Remembering

Anyone who has ever had a sustained conversation with Margaret Dowd will have come to the conclusion easily that she was excessively loving, magnanimously generous and relentlessly witty. And so many other wonderful gifts she had, too! She was a keen observer, very creative, organized and a woman who carried out her inspirations and ideas and responsibilities with determination and in careful and loving detail. "She was loads of fun and full of faith," her nieces and nephews told me this week. "She supported all of us, in

whatever human condition we were in, with understanding and care and also at times with a loving *no nonsense* approach, too!"

And what sourced this generous and joyous life? Well, certainly Margaret blossomed from deep and sustaining roots in a large and loving family. She spoke often of the open-ended hospitality that her parents, John Mortimer Dowd and Mary Agnes Kennedy Dowd, extended to all who entered their home, and especially to those in need who were undergoing hard times. She had another source, too: her deep and abiding commitment to our ever-creating God, which she expressed so fully in her loving attention to the words and deeds of Jesus and to the empowering and ever comforting presence of the Holy Spirit in her life.

At a recent gathering of our Storycatchers Mission Unit, in the midst of an animated discussion on our IHM calling, Margaret stated so simply and so clearly: "Well, it's all there, right there, in our IHM Constitutions and Chapter Directions. It is all about the liberating mission of Jesus Christ." She was referring to our IHM Constitutions, which proclaims in Chapter 1: "The love of Jesus Christ unites us in community and impels us to proclaim the good news of salvation. ... we rely on the Holy Spirit to preserve the bond of unity and to empower us to serve God's people." And today, we add with Pope Francis, to care for our Earth, our common home, God's own creation – a commitment that Margaret also took seriously.

Margaret Mary Ann Dowd was born on Nov. 27, 1932 in Port Huron, Mich., the youngest in a family of 10. She enjoyed telling stories of growing up with her beloved brothers – Bill, Patrick, Chuck, John and Joe – and her sisters – Genevieve, Mary, Ellen, and Madeleine, who became Sister John Baptist, OP, of Adrian, Mich. Margaret often described the high-pitched and highly competitive Euchre games they enjoyed as a family and also the fierce loyalty and care that they had for one another. Originally from a farm in Emmett, Mich., the family had moved to Port Huron by the time the last several children were born, but they always loved and celebrated their Emmett roots and especially in family reunions that Margaret's 33 nieces and nephews still recount as so special. One of them told me recently, "They were absolutely hilarious gatherings! Everyone talked at once! There was no designated listener! But such love! It was palpable! What a legacy we have all received from our aunts and uncles and we are committed to passing it on to our kids."

The Dowd family belonged to St. Stephen Parish in Port Huron and Margaret went to the parish school. It was there that she met the IHM Sisters and gradually came to recognize her calling to become a Monroe IHM. She joined the congregation on Aug. 22, 1950, and upon entrance into the novitiate the next year, she received the name, Sister Joseph Raphael. Now hers was indeed a special calling, for she had an aunt and a sister who were Dominican Sisters of Adrian, Mich. A few years after Margaret joined the Monroe IHMs, her niece Carolyn Dowd, whose funeral we celebrated together in this Chapel just six weeks ago, also entered our IHM congregation. Indeed the Dowd family maintained a healthy balance with love and loyalty enough to embrace fully both the Adrian Dominicans and the Monroe IHMs, situated as they are at both ends of the River Raisin.

Margaret's early years in Monroe unfolded well, although she did hit a few bumps along the road. She missed her large and loving family and she found many of the rules of IHM life in those days hard to understand and certainly hard to follow. She loved talking about a time when she struggled with her call to stay, telling us that she visited with the Motherhouse chaplain of the time, Rev. Stanley Bowers, and laid out her doubts. After a good and open conversation and careful listening, Rev. Bowers said: "I have no doubt that you have a call to be an IHM Sister." Margaret said that she then joyfully walked back to the novitiate, saying to herself, "Ok. That's it. I have a vocation. That settles it." She proceeded then to tell Sister Mary Hubert, the novice director, that indeed she planned to stay! And what a wonderful life of loving prayerful service unfolded from that day forward!

Margaret's life in IHM ministry began in 1954 and continued literally until the day she died, so suddenly last Sunday, right here in this IHM Motherhouse Chapel. From 1954 to 1970, she taught in grade and high schools in Bloomfield Hills, Mich.; Detroit; Akron, Ohio; and Port Huron. In her grade school experience, she taught every subject – English, reading, spelling, handwriting, arithmetic, science, health, music, art and religion. In high school teaching, she focused on religion, history, English, French and a course called *Moral Guidance*. We can be sure that she was very good at teaching *that* subject to adolescents, given her own large family experience, and I suspect she injected a good bit of reasonable common sense and humor into that class, too! She loved immeasurably all of her students of those years.

In 1970, she responded to another challenge, to serve with Rev. Rene Desmarais as co-directors of Campus Ministry at the Newman Center of St. Clair Community College in Port Huron, where she labored with love and zest until 2006. As a campus minister, Margaret met students and their families from all kinds of faith and social backgrounds and geographic locations. She educated them in how to grow in prayer as young adults. She nurtured them in sacramental ministry, assisting in baptizing, confirming and marrying them. She helped them to heal through personal pastoral counselling and she extended this loving care to their families in times of intense suffering and grief. As well, she and Father Rene set up a wonderful and very successful annual lecture series. They invited well-known speakers from all over the country to set forth the renewed vision of our Church and its relationship to the cultural, racial, economic, social and religious challenges of our times as set forth in the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s. The encounters with these scholars and teachers encouraged a newly vivified and more engaged practice of our Christian faith, proclaiming that *everyone* is called to holiness and service to each other.

In 1980, through Catholic Relief Services, this loving Port Huron Newman Center Community reached halfway round our Earth to extend hands of help and hope to a small and very young family who were languishing in a refugee camp in Thailand. Two years earlier, recently married and very young, Nikone and Vannaly Sonsynatha had crossed the Mekong River, escaping from terror in their homeland of Laos. Their first-born child, a daughter named Darouny – affectionately called *Da* – was born in the camp and so we can imagine their relief when they heard one day in 1980 that they had a promise of freedom and a home waiting for them in a place called Port Huron, Mich., USA.

Vannaly told me they were warned that it would be very cold where they were going, but she added quickly: “The warmth of welcome that we received from this community cancelled the cold, and it was especially Sister Margaret who became our advocate, teacher, friend, mother and grandmother!” In subsequent years, Nikone and Vannaly had three more children– Lasmy, James Rene and Savevone, affectionately known as *Amy* – and Sister Margaret was the birthing coach in the delivery room for each of them.

Vannaly described how Margaret helped her personally as a young mother in this very new and more open culture and she also helped the whole family to

adjust and grow, tutoring all of them in English, introducing the youngsters to popular music and sports, and most especially, “caring as well for our future. She led us to see that education was the key to our ongoing life in this country.” Margaret helped Nikone to get a good job in skilled labor and Vannaly to get certification as an LPN. and then employment in the Port Huron hospital. She made sure as well that each of the children found the path and were ready to be successful in their respective university educations. And they were, all four of them, Amy completing her degree this year. Just a month ago, Margaret enjoyed four full days of celebrating this great event with the Sonsynatha family. Vannaly told me that “Sister Margaret is everything to us. We are who we are today because of her.”

From 2006 to 2016, Margaret continued to serve the Port Huron Catholic community by working in marriage and family ministry in several parishes and in other forms of volunteering. In 2016, she made a graceful transition to the IHM Motherhouse in Monroe and continued to contribute to the life of this community in so many ways: Eucharistic minister, library assistant, welcoming visitors, visiting the sick and delivering the newspapers around the house, which of course always became great social occasions as she stopped along the way for chats and some good story-telling. She told us regularly, and with that twinkle in her eye, that it wasn't what you could call a regular paper route “where you could just throw the paper up on the porch.”

Margaret's heart of love, her dedication to the liberating mission of Jesus Christ, gave out right here in this Chapel last Sunday shortly after she had served as Eucharistic minister in the liturgy. How shocked we all are: her IHM family, her Dowd-Kennedy clan and all their children and children's children, her Sonsynatha family, and all her friends and colleagues from a lifetime of service. How much we will miss her: on her paper route, in the dining room, in the hallways, on the telephone with one or another of her many nieces and nephews and her friends and at the Sonsynatha family holidays. And yet we know too that, as it reads on her funeral program, hers was “a heart that was always grateful to her ever-loving God” and that it was the time to be taken now more fully into the very heart of God.

The ancient Celtic peoples had a practice in their culture of going to what they called, the “thin places.” These are mesmerizing places in nature where they believed that one could sense easily in wonder that the distance between us in

our earthly existence and those in the spirit world was only three feet! Later, the Irish modified it, saying it was much shorter than that! They went to these places to connect and for lively and consoling conversations between people in the two worlds.

I invite you to go now with me in our religious imaginations to see that indeed such an event happened this week for our dear Margaret. She told one of her nieces recently at Carolyn's funeral that she was beginning to get tired of always saying *goodbye* to the people she loved so much, that it was time for her to be saying, *hello!* Well, I suspect that our loving God and Carolyn and Margaret's nine brothers and sisters and their spouses reached across the short "thin place" to bring her home! Can you imagine the eternal Euchre game going on now and the joy of that family reunion? And we can indeed wonder if there is "any designated listener!"

Our dear Margaret, – *Aunt Deedle*, as you were affectionately called by your nieces and nephews and your grands and great-grands – how we will all miss you. At the same time we rejoice in the fullness of life that you enjoyed and in all that you have given to us!

The road has risen to meet you now, Margaret, and the wind is at your back.

The rain has left you softly and the sun shines warmly on you.

And *THE* Son, the Son of God and eternal Word made flesh,  
who made you and gave you your many gifts  
of teaching, mentoring, loving, laughing, consoling, and caring so fully  
holds you gently now in the palm of His hand.

May you know now fully your own loving goodness,  
so generously shared with so many  
in your life of living the liberating mission of Jesus Christ,  
and especially with all of us, your IHM and Dowd-Kennedy and Sonsynatha  
families  
as you are drawn now into the fullness of God's love!

May you feel fully the joyous welcome of your IHM Sisters,  
and all in your Dowd-Kennedy family and your friends and students  
who have gone before you!

May you continue to love and teach and mentor and sustain all of us,  
calling us always, as you called yourself,  
“to have a heart that is always grateful to you, our ever loving God!”

Written and delivered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM, May 31, 2017