

Obituary



Sister Martha Marie Rabaut, IHM, 89, died Saturday, Aug. 5, at her home, the IHM Sisters' Motherhouse.

Martha Mary Rabaut was born in Grosse Pointe, Mich., to Louis C. and Stella (Petz) Rabaut on Nov. 25, 1927. The Rabaut family of nine children was well-known in Detroit, where their father served as a United States congressman. Martha graduated from Dominican High School and then from Marygrove College, Detroit. In 1951, she entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe and received the religious name Sister Martha Marie.

Sister Martha's early teaching career took her to St. John and St. Joseph, Monroe; and St. Mary of Redford, Holy Rosary and Our Lady Queen of Hope, Detroit. She earned a master's degree from Marquette University in Wisconsin and then taught religion at the high school level at Marian, Bloomfield Hills, Mich., and at St. Cecilia, Detroit. She served the IHM community as directress of postulants, novices and in formation, working in the community's houses in Monroe and Detroit. She also spent a year preparing novices in Natal, South Africa.

Returning to the United States, Sister Martha dedicated herself to individual adult and pastoral ministry at Visitation House of Prayer, Monroe; Holy Rosary, Memphis, Tenn.; and for several years at St. Nicholas Parish, Virginia Beach, Va.

She moved to Michigan in 1988 and served as a retreat and spiritual director at Visitation (Monroe) for more than 10 years. In 1996, she became the coordinator of the IHM Eco-Justice Office, staying for seven years before devoting her time to spiritual direction. She was a long-time participant in the IHM Peacemakers and several Earth-focused committees. Retiring to the Motherhouse in 2008, Sister Martha remained active in her interests of spiritual growth and advocacy.

Remembering

Good morning everyone. This is clearly a wonderful gathering of family, community and friends! We are so pleased to have you join us. We are especially mindful of Martha's sister, Carolyn, who is here in spirit for this celebration.

Martha anticipated a wonderful funeral liturgy and in fact, said to me one day while we were talking about it, she kind of minded she wouldn't be here for it! I believed then and I still do, she meant it! She loved celebrations. She loved the liturgy. She loved it all.

You know, I'm sure there is another loving, joy-filled gathering just on the other side of a porous veil, one we can't see, a thin space that many say is all that separates us from those who have already begun their eternity. In fact, some wise people say if you attend carefully, you will experience their ongoing love and care. Martha is reveling in all of this: our celebration of her life and the gift she was and continues to be for us, even as she re-unites with her parents, her brothers; Derm, Louis and Vincent, as well as her four sisters; Celeste, Mary Jane, Joanie and Stella. That reunion also includes her niece, Celeste, and her nephew, Michael; her many friends, colleagues, as well as the countless individuals who were impacted by her, whether as their teacher, spiritual director, adult education instructor, pastoral minister, mentor or advocate. Martha is present with them and with us as together we celebrate her and the God she so loved.

Martha was born Nov. 25, 1927, the day after Thanksgiving. The story goes that as Thanksgiving came to an end, her father, having been very involved in the day's preparations and festivities was looking forward to a bit of a rest. He was not anticipating Mrs. Rabaut telling him she was quite sure their ninth and last child was about to be born. Mr. Rabaut, totally exhausted, told her he had to have a nap first. Martha was born the following day.

Louis and Stella (Petz) Rabaut, her parents, prioritized their Catholicism, their family; the poor; and love of one's neighbor. The family enjoyed each other, stimulating conversations, laughter and "group singing," all of which they did frequently. There was a lot of flux in the household, some of it permanent. Derm entered the Jesuits when Martha was 3; Celeste entered the IHMs when Martha was 8; five sisters and two brothers married and Stella entered the IHMs. It is hard to imagine the impact of these changes on her. Her father represented Michigan's 14th Congressional District from 1935-1947 and 1949 till his death in 1961. Each of Martha's sisters worked in his Washington office at different times. It is likely home felt almost empty to her at times as the older ones left.

Martha attended St. Clare de Montefalco grade school and the newly opened Dominican High in Detroit. She loved school, the friends she made, and the exposure to new ideas and personalities. She noted that while in grade school as well as in high school, the idea of being a nun came to her. Upon graduation from high school, she felt a desire to enter the IHMs.

When she discussed this with her father, he encouraged her to first go to college. She agreed to do this and enrolled at Marygrove. Over the years, she often spoke of her gratitude for having followed that suggestion, sharing how she loved her time there, the friendships she formed and the courses she took. The college invited many lecturers to speak to the students, and in this way, Martha's education was expanded beyond the normal classroom. Upon college graduation, she taught in the public schools for two years and then entered the IHMs.

During her first years in community, Martha taught in grade schools in Monroe and Detroit. Over a number of summers, she was enrolled in Marquette University, where she completed a master's degree in theology. She taught theology at Marian High School which she loved doing. She loved the content as well as the opportunities provided the students to put some of it into action. There were two members of the Marian staff who had a profound and lasting influence on her. Martha's gratitude to both Sister Ann Chester and Father Maurice Geary permeated her work for many years.

Another high school in which she worked was St. Cecilia in Detroit. St. Cecilia's pastor, a charismatic priest dedicated to addressing racial injustice wherever he could, was another influential person in Martha's changing world. She appreciated his zeal and "down to earth" approach to working with the students. Laura Hardage tells this story: One day, the public school in the area had a free day. Some of those students decided to taunt the St. Cecilia kids who were in school. After the taunting had gone on for a bit, Martha told her students to "go chase them away," which of course, they were glad to do. When they returned, they were as proud of themselves as they could be. Martha was sensitive to her students. She was sensitive as well to the issue of justice of all kinds. She had a deep passion for justice her entire adult life. Another IHM, Colleen Sheridan, said of Martha: "She was a pioneer in peace and justice ministry. She was not aggressive. She was right in there. She was peaceful about it and all those with whom she was engaged in the ministry."

Martha was a woman who was "fully alive" in terms of attending to the movement of the Spirit within her. An example is the evolution to Martha's next ministry. Teaching St. Cecilia's students had been both exhilarating and challenging. At the same time, she was convinced that knowing, internalizing and living the spirit of the documents

of Vatican II would contribute to real "Church reform" and at the same time, "open it to the modern world." Believing this and longing to be involved in such an undertaking led her to change her ministry from student-focused to parent-focused efforts. She worked in several parishes pursuing this ministry of adult education, including Mary, Mother of the Church in Burnsville, Minn. While these were wonderful years, it was not to last.

The reason: Martha was asked by the community to work in formation with the women entering the IHM congregation. This invitation provided her an opportunity to engage with young women desiring to embrace the life and mission of this congregation. Martha prepared for this responsibility by making the Ignatian Exercises, a 30-day directed retreat developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola. She took a variety of relevant courses, did supervised spiritual direction and directed retreats. Throughout her years working in formation, Martha's relationship with God was such she was able to hear God's movements in another and help that individual collaborate with those movements. Some of her novices lovingly called her "the velvet whip," which I think was their way of saying "she said the truth when it was needed- directly, lovingly." Her ministry begun during those days working in formation continued to include spiritual direction and directing retreats until she retired. Twice she was on the staff at Visitation.

There were two experiences that Martha considered profoundly life-altering. The first was the invitation she had received to go to South Africa to collaborate on a program preparing African sisters to work in formation programs with women entering their communities. The experience allowed her to live with the community, learning their customs and culture and sharing their concerns and struggles. She learned firsthand about the stresses in the country and the tenuous relationship between the bishops and government. You can imagine how Martha would take in what she was learning; how she would long to assist them in any way she could.

So, when word came to her that her request to renew her visa was refused, and that in fact, she had to leave the country within days, she and the sisters were deeply distressed. She wrote "With sad heart I walked to the car flanked by the silent sisters. We had been praying on the 3rd week of the Exercises. I had intended to stay in Africa after the program was completed." Martha returned to the United States unable to continue a work she had begun.

Twice, Martha had the opportunity to go to Haiti with parishioners of St. Nicholas Parish in Virginia Beach. She had been involved in a program in which a parish in the U.S. "twinned" with a parish in Haiti. The two parish councils would meet, listen, share

ideas and “befriend each other.” She wrote “I loved it!” Those times with the Haitian people touched her deeply and influenced many of her future efforts on their behalf.

In 1996, Martha asked to open an Eco-Justice Office in the congregation. This request originated out of her growing concern for justice for the entire Earth community. She initiated a newsletter titled *Earth Community* and wrote articles such as “Sustainable Living” for it. Martha recognized the value of the printed word and so, used her writing as a vehicle for educating her readers on a variety of relevant topics. She also wrote articles for *Spinnaker*, a community publication, and an article titled “Eco-spirituality Reminds God is in All Things” for the *Toledo Blade*, to name a few.

Martha and Happy Shondell were friends for a number of years. Martha was a faithful friend in the truest sense when Happy developed memory problems and needed Martha’s friendship in a whole new way. Martha, with the help of others, did everything possible to ensure Happy lived as fully as she could with all the dignity she deserved.

In December 2008, Martha moved to G-Wing in the Motherhouse, and in May 2009, following what was suspected to have been a minor stroke, moved to the Health Care Center. She continued to be active in as many of her usual ways as she could be. She continued to do spiritual direction part-time; attend input sessions for the residents as often as possible; served a term on the Residents’ Council; continued membership in her sharing group and advocated on behalf of issues she supported.

Martha had many faithful friends, and over time, allowed them to help her as needed. Carol Krolkowski was particularly faithful and attentive. Martha counted on her in many ways. Others helped Martha keep involved in all the ways she wanted. As Martha’s health diminished, “Women with whom she walked in their beginning days, stayed with her throughout her ending days.”

I would like to conclude this Remembering by using Martha’s words from her page in our *Book of Life*. It is the perfect summary of a remarkable woman:

YOU

Creative God,

You drew the ninth child, born of Stella and Louie’s love, to
Seek you and the good of your people.

Community of Love,

You captivated me.

In prayer, I knew you to be Love.

I knew you to want justice.

Guiding Friend,

You led our community to nurture growth in prayer.
I love companioning others in their search for you.

Compassionate One,

You cry out within our sisters for your people.
With them I participate in civil rights, peace, justice
and environmental movements.

Dark Mystery:

Who are You? Who am I?
I anguished when I lost a sense of your name.

Healer,

You taught that I am them and they are me.
In times of rejection and hurt, I believed: They know not what they do.

Our Breath, Our Life, Our Mother, Our Sister

You tenderly love and energize all that is.
My sense of your body embraces the whole universe.

Community of Love at the heart of all,

Interiority, diversity and interrelatedness
manifest You.

You are for me

Our Hope.

BE

Written and delivered by Mary Agnes Ryan, IHM
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