

Obituary



Sister Letitia O'Connell, IHM, 103, died Friday, Oct. 4, at IHM Senior Living Community.

Sister Letitia was the eldest of five children born to John and Letitia (McGinnis) O'Connell of Tulsa, Okla. Born on Nov. 2, 1915, she was baptized "Letitia," a namesake tradition throughout her mother's family. Young Letitia attended several elementary schools and two high schools before graduating from Sand Springs High School. A family move to Illinois led her to attend Springfield Junior College, Ill., then to

relatives in Michigan and attending Marygrove College, Detroit. She completed a Bachelor of Philosophy degree at the University of Detroit. In 1937, she entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Monroe) and received the religious name, Sister Florence.

Her ministry in formal education spanned 56 years. Early on she taught at the parishes in Monroe and spent the majority of her career in secondary education at St. Patrick, Blessed Sacrament, St. Francis de Sales and Immaculata, Detroit; St. Vincent, Pontiac; and Marian High School, Bloomfield Hills. During those years, she earned a master's degree from the University of Detroit, but her interest in learning of literature, arts, history and political affairs was life-long.

Her interest in Asian culture led her to a teaching position at the Stella Maris International School in Kobe, Japan, in 1973 until the school closed and later at Nanzan University in Nagoya.

Returning to the United States in 1984, she accepted a faculty position at the Lado Institute of Language Development and Lado College, Washington, D.C. She returned to Michigan in 1994, serving in Student Support Services at Marygrove College before retiring to the Motherhouse in 1996. She remained active in community events and ministry outreach well into her 90s.

Remembering

At age 103, Letitia O'Connell was still vivacious, loquacious, intelligent and interesting. She lived her life in superlatives, and the vitality of her youth did not abandon her in her elder years. I was her 10th grade student at the Academy and lived with her for a year while she was teaching in Japan. I'm grateful to be

invited to do her Remembering because she was truly a remarkable woman – unique in all the world.

Letitia Ellen was the firstborn of five children, three girls and two boys. Born in Tulsa, Okla. on Nov. 2, 1915, she was the daughter of John O’Connell and Letitia Rutherford McGinnis. Both her parents were from small towns in southern Illinois, Collinsville and Alton respectively. It happened that a doctor advised young John O’Connell to move to Oklahoma for health reasons. At that same time Letitia McGinnis was in Tulsa visiting her sister. The two met at a K of C dance, and it was love at first sight! They married and remained there until someone tried to kill Letitia’s father because Mr. O’Connell had fired him. Out of fear of this happening sometime in the future, the family moved to Alton, Ill., Mrs. O’Connell’s hometown. The move to Alton was the beginning of an early life filled with change.

Letitia’s mother’s hometown was where she went to first grade and where she was prepared for and made her first Holy Communion. She tells a story about that early graced experience. Her classmates’ families had prepared a party for the children. However, after Mass was over, Letitia only wanted quiet time to talk to Jesus. She found a private place and began to thank the Lord whom she had just received in this intimate way. The other children came to find her, because they wanted to have their party. She was really annoyed because she had to leave her communion with Jesus and join the others. A 6-year-old who preferred prayer to a party was very unusual.

After a few years in Alton, the family moved again to Sand Springs, Okla. There, Letitia went to a public school for second grade. When she was ready for third grade, the parish in town opened a small two-room school with four grades in each room. Letitia transferred to this new Catholic school staffed by Mercy Sisters. She greatly loved them, finding them to be very gentle women. At the end of third grade, Letitia asked to skip to fifth grade. She did and loved it because then she could listen to all the lessons taught in fourth through eighth grades. When it was time for eighth grade, she asked to skip to high school in order to keep up with her cousin, John, who had also skipped eighth grade. The high school principal said “yes,” as long as Letitia could keep up. “It wasn’t very difficult, so I went to high school,” she wrote.

The Catholic high school was in Tulsa where her father worked, so he drove her to and from school each day. "Those were great days, filled with lessons, glee club, music lessons and reading," Letitia wrote. Then in her senior year, two things happened. The Great Depression struck, and her father became too ill to continue working in Tulsa. Because of this, Letitia spent her senior year in a public school back home in Sand Springs. Once again, she wrote that she "loved it!"

Soon after Letitia's graduation, her father had to go to Oklahoma City for an operation. The three girls moved to Collinsville with their parents. When Mr. O'Connell was better, the rest of the family moved there too; but on Dec. 3, 1932, Mr. O'Connell died. After his funeral, the family moved to Dallas to stay with extended family members. "Through all this time," Letitia wrote, "(we) had wonderful times together. We were a happy family." Mrs. O'Connell read children's classics to the girls. The children made up games, had sing-a-longs with Mrs. O'Connell playing the piano and Letitia the violin. The three girls would sit on the front porch for hours and argue politics with the boy next door!

Letitia was determined to go to college. She won a scholarship to a small junior college in Springfield, Ill. where she could work her way through. However, some members of the O'Connell family had long before moved to the Detroit area for employment and our IHM Sister Ursula O'Connell was Letitia's aunt. Another relative, Aunt Julia, who lived in Detroit, wanted Letitia to stay with her and go to a wonderful small college called Marygrove. With her mother's permission, Letitia went to Marygrove, majored in Spanish – and loved it!

It was the Depression, so she worked at the switchboard. While she was learning how to manage it, Letitia accidentally hooked up one of the students' boyfriends with Mother Ruth in Monroe! Sister Honora, Marygrove president, immediately called her back and said, "What are you doing?!"

Letitia's call to religious life was fostered at Marygrove. She had been inspired by the Mercy Sisters in Oklahoma from an early age. An assignment in her Spanish class at Marygrove led her to read Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle and Mansions in Old Spanish and to write a paper on the topic of Teresa's mystical writings. She said that this experience was very influential in her "call" to religious life.

Just a few weeks after graduation, she entered the IHM community. Her mother's sister, a member of a New Orleans Ursuline community, was disappointed that Letitia didn't enter there. However, Letitia convinced her mother that she felt a definite "call" to the IHMs. "About the Postulate and Novitiate," she said, "I don't remember too much. I read all I could possibly read, went to 'berries' with the other young sisters, to other common tasks, to recreation."

At Reception, Letitia was given the name Sister Florence. The very next day she was assigned to teach at St. John School, Monroe. In those days young sisters learned to teach by teaching, meaning that the new Sister Florence had no particular preparation for this work. From 1938-1940, she taught elementary school children and wrote that it felt like being "lost in a fog!" She had hoped to be a Spanish teacher; but at that time in our history, she learned that we didn't have need for teachers of Spanish. Of course, Letitia's teaching skills improved and in 1944 she began a long and brilliant career as a secondary school and university teacher in Michigan, Puerto Rico, Washington, D.C. and Japan. She also taught business courses and some math. However, her forte was English composition, literature, drama and so forth. When Vatican II happened, she embraced all the new ways of thinking that it made possible both for lay people and religious.

For some time, Letitia had longed to go to Japan. She thought the country was fertile ground for Christianity. When she shared this dream with community leadership, they thought she was crazy; and besides they had no contacts there. However, they did give her permission to go if she could find a job. After much searching, she located a relative of another IHM Sister, a Franciscan Missionary of Mary, who taught at Stella Maris International School in Kobe. She was offered a position, and in August 1973, she went off with the congregation's blessing.

Letitia taught in Kobe until the school closed five years later. During her job search, she contacted the president's office at Nanzan University in Nagoya. The president answered the phone. Fr. Robert Riemer, an American Divine Word missionary priest, knew some of our sisters and thought highly of IHMs. He helped her find a position at Nanzan. In Nagoya, Letitia lived in a small Japanese-style house with one or two other sisters. She loved working with her students in and outside of class and made many good friends. In 1978 she wrote, "My reason for remaining ... is that I think it is the only way that I can contact and

influence Japanese youth, many of whom have never heard the Christian message or seen Christians living.”

Teaching was not her only interest though. I lived there with her for a year as a language student, and I learned firsthand about Letitia's gift for shopping. She would go out to the best stores in town and head for the mark-down racks. She invariably found an excellent suit or some other garment. Then, she would return again and again until her "find" had been marked down to a ridiculously low price. She would come home delighted with her new acquisition and add it to her collection. Needless to say, she always looked wonderful at special events.

In March 1984, after nearly 11 years in Japan, Letitia thought it wise that she return to the States since she was "alone" in Japan and had reached the age of retirement. After returning to the United States, Letitia taught English as a second language at the Lado Institute in Washington, D.C. Our own Sister Bernadette Sheridan had started this school, which serviced adult students ranging from diplomats and theologians to undocumented immigrants from all over the world. The conversation sessions among this disparate group of people gave her insights about the breadth of political, theological and social perspectives found in different cultures and classes. It was a rich education for her and permanently influenced her awareness of worldwide issues.

In 1994, Letitia returned to Detroit where her final active ministry was back at Marygrove in Student Support Services. Two years later, just as the community was making decisions about Motherhouse renovation, she returned to Monroe for health reasons. She and I were in the same Mission Unit – the Firekeepers – and she continued to participate in everything she could.

Letitia was an inveterate "news junkie," keeping up with *America*, *NCR*, the daily newspapers, *CNN* and the *PBS News Hour*. All this information made its way into her conversations and miraculously, she seemed to remember whatever she read or saw. She was always ready to talk about what she had learned with anyone who was interested. She saw all her news-gathering and sharing as a ministry. When the congregation called for conversations around the concept of God, she joined a small group to explore other sisters' religious experience. When the new pope wrote *Evangelii Gaudium*, she started a group to study his ideas and his wonderful new way of talking. Over time, she had to slow down in some of these activities, but she never stopped.

Letitia had a very free spirit. From her varied teaching experiences, it is obvious that she was always anxious to delve into new adventures. During her teaching career, she won scholarships that took her to Korea, Hawaii, Europe and various places in the U. S.

Apart from her continual learning and teaching, what she most loved was designing her own clothing. She found great artistry in matching outfits.

The story about 6-year-old Letitia's desire for prayer rather than a party on her First Communion day illustrates her deep awareness of God's presence in her life. She loved the liturgy and nourished her prayer life by reading and reflecting on books that gave her new insights and wisdom. When Sister Patricia A. O'Donnell helped her develop the "first edition" of her Remembering she said, "It's been a marvelous life! My whole life has been a miracle!"

Dear Letitia, what a ball of energy you have been throughout these many years. Without fear or hesitation, you've moved from one opportunity to another. "Here I am. Send me!" seems to have been your mantra. Now Jesus is saying to you, "Letitia, here I am! I have a special place for you. Enter into my reign!" Without fear or hesitation and with great joy, we send you off to your reward. Letitia, remain in God's love.

Written by Patricia A. O'Donnell, IHM (November 2005) and Angela M. Hibbard, IHM (October 2019). Delivered by Angela Hibbard, IHM, Oct. 11, 2019.