

Remembering Mary (Mary Immaculate) McDevitt, IHM
April 1, 1935 – Dec. 22, 2020



When anyone entered Mary McDevitt's room here in our IHM Senior Living Community, the first thing you would see is a little sign in the entrance alcove that read, "Time for Tea," and then of course Mary *herself* there to welcome you with arms up, special words for the occasion and her ever-gracious smile. On the far side of her room, between the three windows that faced out over the front campus onto the River Raisin, there were two icons on the wall. One was the glorious *Risen Jesus the Christ* looking right at you in peace and the other was *Mary, the Mother of Jesus*, looking downward, softly and gently.

Just below on small tables were photos of her lifelong IHM and Jesuit friends and albums full of photos of family and friends. On the opposite wall were framed photos of her mother and father and all of her brothers and sisters and their families. Light and warmth and presence, in other words, filled the room, even on the darkest and coldest of days. And that was Mary, present, always light and warmth for all who entered her life, and *especially* for those in darkness and in *need* who entrusted themselves to her.

Nancy Ann McDevitt was born on April 1, 1935 in Detroit, the youngest child of Florine Dumouchelle and Eugene McDevitt, both of Ontario origins. Nancy's mother, Florine, had travelled from Windsor to Toronto in 1918 to become a dental hygienist, and there at a college dance she met Eugene, whom she married in 1925 at St. Clare Church in Toronto. The McDevitt's first three children – John, Mary and Richard – were born there, and then the young family moved to Detroit where Frank, Betty and Nancy Ann were born.

The family settled in the northwest part of the city in Gesu Parish, one well served by energetic and creative Jesuits and also by our very own equally qualified and inspired IHM Sisters at the elementary school. After Nancy's grade school years, she attended Immaculata High School, where she continued to imbibe that special IHM charism of competence and commitment to service and also the Jesuit connection. Every year at Immaculata High, there were silent daylong Jesuit-guided retreats and also on a regular basis, a strong presence of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary, founded in 1563, promoted universally by the Jesuits and then also by our own Sister Loyola and many other IHM Sisters in several of our schools. In fact, in her senior year, Nancy became the Prefect of the Sodality. These two active religious communities – the IHMs and the SJs – marked her profoundly for the rest of her life.

But as one of Nancy's lifelong high school friends and sodality co-prefect herself told me on a recent phone call, "We were no angels, Nancy included!" Fully committed with her friends always to a very active social life, Nancy's family and many high school friends were a bit surprised when she expressed her desire to become an IHM Sister. About her decision, Nancy related that one of her IHM high school teachers once said to her: "Don't ever love anything so much that you can't let it go if God asks." And so, after

thoughtful reflection, Nancy Ann joined the IHM Sisters in September of 1953, receiving in due time the name *Mary Immaculate*. After five years of spiritual and academic formation in Monroe, she received her B.A. from Marygrove College and set off on her path of ministerial service.

Mary taught seventh and eighth grades at Our Lady Queen of Peace School in Detroit for three years and then for one year she taught at IHM High School in Westchester, Ill. During these years and to her sheer delight, she also began summer school studies in theology at Marquette University. In 1962, she returned to Monroe to serve as assistant to Sister Benedicta (Margaret) Brennan, IHM Novice Director. Mary also taught Scripture and theology to IHM Sisters in their formation years and then having completed the M.A. Degree in Systematic Theology at Marquette University in 1966, she was appointed the IHM Novice Director.

Between 1970 and 1983, Mary served in many other IHM ministries, including the co-founding and staffing of Visitation House of Prayer on the Monroe Campus, provincial of the Northeast Province, and a member of the IHM General Council. At the invitation of Cardinal Dearden, she also served the Archdiocese of Detroit as delegate for religious. She studied counselling at Oakland University and engaged in Jesuit-guided depth study and practice of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, becoming in due time an accredited spiritual director.

In one of my explorations of the bookcase in her room, I found one of her bibles with an attached ribbon marked at Psalm 27 where she had underlined these verses:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom should I be afraid?
I have asked one thing from the Lord: it is what I desire:
to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
gazing on the beauty of the Lord ...
On your behalf, my heart says to you: "Seek my face!"
Lord, I say, "Yes, I will seek your face!" ...
I am certain I will see the Lord's goodness in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord; be courageous and let your heart be strong.
Wait for the Lord. (next to which Mary wrote the words, "STAND TALL!")

And another text from Isaiah 43:1-2:

Do not fear, for I have made you whole.
I have called you by your name and you are mine.
I will be with you always,
even in the troubled waters that you pass through.

There is no doubt that during these years Mary welcomed deeply the truth of these words into her own heart, contemplating them and becoming them in a certain way, a grace that prepared her profoundly for the next phase of her ministerial life.

In 1983, Mary moved to Toronto to begin study for the Doctor of Ministry degree, a course of studies that occurs while one is already in the practice of ministry, with Mary serving at nearby Southdown Residential Therapeutic Center as spiritual guide and counsellor for men and women going through intensive suffering and life change. No wonder, then, that her D.Min. thesis was titled “*Aloud and in Silent Tears*” (Heb 5:7): *The Prayer of Suffering People.*” And here in this context, two more Scripture texts from Mary’s page in our *IHM Book of Life* help us to know her heart. The first is from the Epistle to the Hebrews, Chapter 5, verse 7:

Jesus, while in His flesh offered up prayer and supplication,
aloud and in silent tears ...
and He was heard because of his reverence.

The second is from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25, on caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the unclothed, the ill, the prisoner, about which Mary wrote: “In the neighbor, actual or distant, I can see the face of Jesus ... to love another person is to see the face of God.”

Mary served for another 10 years in Toronto at the Catholic Children’s Aid Society as a spiritual guide for staff and social workers engaged in caring for troubled children in challenging family situations. She then returned to the Detroit area in 2001 where she taught practical theology at St. Cyril and Methodius Seminary for six years and then co-created and staffed Visitation North on the Marian High School campus in Bloomfield Hills. In 2016, she returned to Monroe to reside with her many IHM friends in IHM Senior Living Community, where she continued to serve as a spiritual guide to many, in person or on the phone, and also as a reader and preacher in our liturgies, right up until the time of her recent illness.

In every single setting of her long and full life, Mary had the exceptional quality of being a significant part of small group relationships, and while many friends from these groups have passed away, Mary kept continual connection with her friends from these special times in her life. She enjoyed all the good times of celebration and she also mourned and consoled in the challenging times of suffering and death.

Mary’s family links, for instance, were intergenerationally strong. Her sister Mary, expressing that family connection, once wrote to her: “I love you forever, for always! Carry on, my sweet sister.” And how Mary loved all her nieces and nephews, their spouses and partners, and their children and grandchildren! Another group, her Gesu and Immaculata pals, called her “Mac” and one of them told me on a recent phone call:

All our lives Nancy has been our “go to” woman and we all thought that she would outlive us. We asked her once: ‘What happens when we die?’ She said without hesitation: ‘We will see God!’ We met every summer until just recently at a cottage in northern Michigan for four days! No sleep either! Mary was so wise and loving and also outrageously funny! We are connected forever to Mary. She is pure gift to us!

Another group, her IHM 1953 Entrance Class, recalled her evident leadership qualities and how even then, she was a listener with whom you could entrust any part of yourself.

Several in one of her Novitiate Classes commented on how she made the season of Advent and Christmas alive for them, explaining that they too were on journeys searching for God, that the road might take twists and turns, and that in different times in their lives they would find God again, our loving God always there for them. And one member spoke of how when she was a student at IHM Westchester at a time when her father had unfortunately lost his job, that her teacher, Sister Mary Immaculate, somehow produced a “fairy Godmother” so that her family’s Christmas was a joyous one that year! Still another novice told Sister Mary Immaculate about a dream she had in which she wrote a letter to Thomas Merton. Mary told her to write it down and send it to him. She did, and a response came back to her from Merton, as well as one addressed to Sister Mary Immaculate concerning a meeting with Merton in California.

In her Toronto years, Mary related widely in several groups. With her ecumenical D.Min. group, she worshipped in their respective churches, met them regularly for reflection, and of course enjoyed plays and movies and jazz concerts and good meals with them, too. Her Catholic Children’s Aid Society co-workers wrote in a photo album they gave her that she offered them “wisdom, the gift of the soul and humour, the gift of life’s goodness.” A Southdown colleague told me on the phone last week that “Mary had an uncommon kindness, matched with wit and wisdom. She knew well the secrets of matters of the heart and guarded them in sacred goodness. I will miss her terribly.” And another friend said that her own memories of Mary are just “too tender for words.”

Mary McDevitt indeed knew experientially the tenderness of the heart of Jesus. She knew *beauty*, too. In fact, in a book titled, *On Beauty and Being Just* inherited from her dear friend, our Sister Margaret Brennan, there is an underlined sentence that reads: “Beauty brings copies of itself into being.”

Our dear Mary, you have indeed shown us the tenderness and beauty of God. And you have helped so many to see that tenderness and beauty of God in themselves, and especially in troubled times. We let you go now into that absolute Fullness of Love, and we can see you welcomed by all in your family, your IHM sisters, your Jesuit brothers, and all your friends who have gone before you. We see them saying, “It’s time for tea! – or perhaps something even a bit more stimulating!” What a welcome for you!

We send you off now in joy with a prayer you marked from another of your favorite books, *Celtic Prayers from Iona*.

On my heart and in my house, the Blessing of God.
In my coming and in my going, the Peace of God.
In my life and in my seeking, the Love of God
At my end and new beginning, the Arms of God
to welcome me and bring me home

And, Mary, stay near us, too, so that we can always find you and have a cup of tea – or maybe something even a bit more stimulating – and a good long gab with you!

Amen! Alleluia!

Written and delivered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM, Dec. 28, 2020