

Remembering Helen Walling, IHM
Aug.19, 1924 – July 31, 2021

Before I begin this rather formal remembering, I would like to invite each of us, both those in chapel and those gathered with us by technology, to quietly bring to mind your own remembering of Helen, that her presence may be here in the myriad of ways that we hold her in our hearts.

I would like to begin with a letter that Helen wrote following her final vows:

January 1947:

Dear Reverend Mother,

A week has passed and yet I can hardly believe this ring is really mine. It is a constant reminder of His presence and a symbol of our union for time and eternity ... A portion of the letter I received from my mother on profession day has summed up our retreat very well, "Trials, my dear, we will always have, but if we use them as stepping-stones to perfection they cease to be trials but tools with which to earn our eternal salvation..."

So many times, I have stopped during the day to try in a feeble way to thank God, but somehow there aren't any words to say what's in my heart...

Thank you, Mother, for giving me an opportunity to better serve Jesus, my Spouse, through Mary, as her servant. Our rule is the way, and I can, as you said, "repay the order, by keeping it and becoming a saint." Again, thanking you, Mother, I remain gratefully 'for the rest of my life' in Mary's Immaculate Heart, Sister Edward Marie, Servant of Mary



Helen Mary Walling, (and she would always add, "Helen with ONE L"), was the third child of Edward and Hilda (Rottach) Walling. Dorothy and Ted came first and then Florence, Jack, and the twins, Janet and Joan followed.

Being a story-teller by nature, Helen would often recount stories of the family which were probably a bit embellished in order to capture, not only the 'facts' of the events, but the family spirit of love that enlivened them. Helen shared a particular closeness with her dad whose faith impacted her deeply. Even in her later years, she would quote his words of advice. One that she would often repeat was, "Skip be who you are."

Helen sensed a call to religious life and began searching at the end of her high school years for the right 'fit.' With two aunts in our IHM community, one from each side of her family, Sr. Mary Lawrence Walling, and Sr. Clea Rottach, as well as cousins, Sr. Margaret Rottach and Sr. Francina Walling, it is not surprising that when she walked into our Motherhouse that she felt welcome and right at home.

From that entrance day into the IHM Community in 1941 until her entrance into the fullness of Life last Saturday, Helen's exuberant, intense, joyful spirit has impacted so many lives. I am

certain that the children whom she taught over the span of twenty-six years felt her love for them, particularly those who struggled to learn.

But I believe that the richness of the gifts that were given to her came to fruition in the years that followed leaving the classroom. There was suddenly the possibility of choosing to respond to the call to serve the poor and abandoned that is the core of IHM that freed her spirit in wonderful ways. Jesus, who was all-in-all to her, was all she wanted to bring to others, that they would know His love for them, as she had come to know Jesus' love for her.

It may have been in knowing her own woundedness and the love of her Jesus that accepted her entirely that Helen responded to the call to offer that same love to all she met, especially the poor and abandoned.

In reflecting on her ministry, she wrote:

“There are so many who had ‘no glad tidings’, were so bound, and so imprisoned in so many ways; so blind and deaf that if I could bring Good News to show them Jesus’ way, the kingdom would be built better where they are.”

And:

“Each day my prayer is that I be used to bring those whom I met to Jesus. I offer my mouth so He can speak and free those bound down by pain so they can praise and thank Jesus for touching, healing and loving them.”

No matter the title or role, it was her relationship with Jesus and her desire that all would know of that love that made the difference. One parishioner shared:

“And the best thing about you is the exuberance with which you spoke of God and his meaning in your life and ours! I have become a better person, Catholic, mom, wife, etc. I learned to accept His peace in my body and in my heart. (My husband) and I repeat ‘Thank you Jesus’ many times a day. It is a part of our breathing, praying, thinking, etc. – and you gave this to me! I am eternally grateful to you.”

And, yes, there were rocky and painful moments when in her eagerness to let the Gospel be known in all its joy and challenge, she was misunderstood. As her mother wrote her on the day of her profession, they will come, use them as stepping-stones. And so, she did.

Her ministry and relationships were always filled with a joy that was contagious. There was always a ready quip to any question that would bring a smile. Letters and cards always had happy words, “yippee, yea God” and always, “Thank you Jesus!”

And, as we well know, one of the greatest joys of her life were her animal friends, Fritz, Torrie, Penny, and so many more. There’s hardly a picture of Helen without one of them with her. It was deeply painful for her to move home to the Motherhouse without her faithful companion.

Alzheimer’s disease became an unwelcome companion over the last years of Helen’s life. Many friends found her not like her old self, and she became unable to do some of the things she loved like singing in the choir or playing the handbells. The isolation of these past eighteen months because of COVID only exacerbated its effect. There were times when she would wonder if she had done enough, pleased God enough, and there were tears. And there were also deep moments of joy, receiving Jesus in the Eucharist, with deep gratitude to the sister

who brought Him to her. And there were, what I would describe, as moments of mystical presence as she shared the beauty and joy of God's deep love for her and for all.

In closing, I would like to share one of the very last conversations that I had with Helen, a couple of days before her death. I had brought her a blue bunny that she had received at Easter that I knew she loved. She said, "Have I told you the story of the Blue Bunny?" I answered, "Is it a once upon a time story?" "Yes," she said, and she went on to develop quite a tale. Finally, she said, "The bunny has a very sad heart because so many people are trying very hard to understand him, and they can't, and that is very sad." I said, "Do you feel that way sometimes?" And she nodded.

Helen, we will never fully understand, but you are not sad anymore because you now know the One who is the **only** one who REALLY needs to understand...the one whom you have faithfully followed for 79 years as a servant of Mary.

And as you would probably say: "Yippee! Yea God! Thank you, Jesus!"

Written and delivered by Paula Cooney, IHM
August 5, 2021