Remembering Rosemary (Leona) Creteau, IHM

Our dear Sister Rosemary was proud to have reached the age of 95 years, and even though she reiterated many times that she wanted her Remembering to be short, we cannot resist a few words in her memory.

Sister Rosemary loved, and was extremely proud of, her family. She was the fourth child of seven, born to Edna Murphy and George Creteau, May 3, 1917, in Latrobe, Pa. The family lost their oldest child at age 5 and the youngest died as an infant. Rosemary always maintained that, in spite of her last name, she was Irish through and through. All but one grandfather was Irish and her own mother lived in Ireland from age seven to 15. Rosemary learned much about Ireland, its customs and songs from her mother. Both of Rosemary’s parents had college degrees; her father was a bio-chemist and her mother, a bookkeeper. Math and science ran in the family.

Owen, her brother, and his family were very close to Rosemary. His family provided care for their mother after their father died. They were also loyal and brought great joy to Sister.

The family moved to Detroit in 1921. Rosemary attended St. Leo School for grades one-10 and then attended Girls’ Catholic Central her junior and senior years. While at Central, Rosemary was encouraged by Sister Loyola Engelman to become an IHM. Rosemary had a great desire to be a teacher. “There is no doubt that the first turning point in my life was entering the IHM Community,” so wrote Rosemary in her Book of Life Page. “My theological background was solid. I had memorized the Baltimore Catechism, Laux Church History and Glenn’s Apologetics.”

Rosemary entered the IHM congregation on June 21, 1935. She was received on Aug. 15, 1936 and given the name Sister Leona; she made her first vows in 1938 and final vows on Aug. 15, 1941.
Although Rosemary was told as a postulant in 1935 that she would not be strong enough to do the work of the community because of a serious thyroid problem, Sister Gertrude informed Doctor Douglas to take care of her anyway.

For 65 years Rosemary “did the work of the community” in Catholic education, fulfilling ‘her cherished dream of teaching math to teen-agers.’ Young people from all areas of Detroit, Wayne, Marine City, Birmingham, Riverview and Jackson learned well their algebra, trig and geometry.

For seven years, Rosemary was principal of Most Holy Redeemer High School in southwest Detroit. She knew all 800 students by name and was teased for the fact that she could simply raise her hand at assembly and all 800 would become silent and attentive. Scheduling for the 800 was a breeze.

Rosemary was ahead of her times. She taught IBM data processing to ADC mothers who later would be employed by the IRS. Frequently called “the walking encyclopedia,” Sister’s gifted mind and unusual memory assisted many students and teachers alike. Her keen wit broke the tension at many faculty meetings, when after lengthy discussion and confusion, Rosemary calmly would offer a simple but effective solution.

Rosemary loved the poor, often times going to their homes and supplying food quietly to those families who were in dire straits. Many times, unbeknown to anyone, she accepted very needy students from parishes like Trinity, without charging them tuition. Rosemary took literally what our patron, St. Alphonsus Liguori, taught us about serving the poor and the most abandoned.

For two years, Rosemary was business manager at Marian High School in Bloomfield Hills. Her mathematical skill, her perceptive understanding of stewardship and her confidentiality and loving respect of her sisters in community would inevitably lead to Rosemary being appointed treasure of community goods at most of the missions she served.

After some serious medical problems were discovered while teaching at Lumen Christi High School in Jackson, Rosemary continued “the work of the community.” She began tutoring students with dyslexia, or those who had difficulty obtaining math credit in a larger class setting. One day Sister Rosemary said to one of her students who did not like math and who was not very good in math, “I am going to pass you on one condition.” The student thought, “Oh I am probably going to have to re-take the test or maybe I am going to have to go to summer school.” Then Sister continued, “I am going to pass you on the condition
that you never take another math course.” When that same student heard of Sister Rosemary’s death she posted it on Facebook and immediately she had 17 hits all with basically the same messages: What a wonderful teacher! We all loved her! She also worked in the learning center, assisted the coaches in entering their grades into the computer who in turn encouraged her gambling spirit by thanking her with gifts of lottery tickets!

In her personal life, Rosemary yearned to learn more theology. In her page of life she tells us that

“…twenty some years after entering religious life, there was an update of theology offered at Marygrove. I wasn’t chosen to participate but continued courses in Math. However, as a Math teacher, and being fascinated by numbers, I felt my theology was accurate as I often used the motto, ‘God eternally geometrizes, humankind wisely utilizes.’

“As I approached my diamond jubilee, what a glorious gift the Community gave me in the opportunity to understand theology today. My three years of exploring and learning, plus the reflection and readings have brought my theology education to quite a new level. Although I was comfortable in what knowledge I already had, in no way am I weeping for the past, I am joining in the joyful shout of what is and is yet to come.”

In June of 2002, Sister Rosemary retired. The community at Lumen Christi gave her a magnificent farewell. With her faithful companion and dearest friend of 44 years, Sister Jean McInerney, Rosemary moved to Norman Towers in Monroe.

After one year and five months, Rosemary received what she described as “THE LETTER” from the congregation’s Leadership encouraging retired sisters to move to the Motherhouse.

“I realized I was the third oldest retired sister still ‘out,’ so maybe I should respond and move to the Motherhouse. This, we were told, would save the community money.”

In March 2005, both she and Jean moved into the Motherhouse.

Although quite a physical and emotional change for Rosemary, she adjusted well to the large groups again, regularly visited sisters and old acquaintances of the past. Often, she would sit with sisters as they journeyed their last moments. As always
Rosemary appreciated all the amenities Motherhouse living offered, especially the care provided by the nurses, nursing assistants, housekeepers and staff.

A woman of strong faith, deep prayerfulness and even temper, it was not difficult to call Rosemary a dear friend. She loved the congregation. She was committed to the ministry of Catholic education. Always cheerful, Rosemary had so many amusing, sometimes quaint stories and jokes to share. With this keen sense of humor, Rosemary easily adjusted to all forms of community living; kind and thoughtful of those with whom she lived and worked, Rosemary became an inspiring, supportive religious influence to many.

So Rosemary, we bid farewell to you, our gentle, kind and loving sister, aunt and friend…whom we will continue to remember in our hearts and minds as a true blessing to many of us.

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