The Potato Famine, which began in Ireland in 1845, lasted for six years. Many stories are told of the great suffering of families who loved and supported one another as they endured the devastation of this time. Fortunately, members of the Houlihan family who had personally struggled through some of the hardships of the Potato Famine were among the survivors.

In 1894, Simon Joseph Houlihan, Kathleen’s father, was born in County Clare, and at the age of 18, he came to the United States. Initially he worked as a streetcar motorman. In 1914 he was drafted into the Army and participated in many of the major battles of World War I.

Before leaving for service, he and Marie Clare Beck, Kathleen’s mother, who was American-born of German descent, a resident of Detroit, had been engaged. Directly after the war ended, Simon returned to Detroit and Simon and Marie were married on Sept. 28, 1919. Mr. Houlihan joined the Detroit Police Department and was a “rookie on the beat.” The family experienced some lean years early on, especially as the Great Depression touched their lives and those of so many others.

On July 3, 1920, Simon and Marie were blessed by the birth of twin daughters, Kathleen and her sister, Mary. Two years later, another daughter, Eileen, was born. Twin sons, Thomas and Simon, soon followed. A sister, Lois, became a Franciscan Missionary of Mary who ministered 12 years in Ghana and Liberia. A brother, Michael, and a sister, Ruth, completed the family group.

Growing-up years were happy ones for the children. The family had moved in 1929 to a new home in northwest Detroit where they had each other for
playmates and plenty of space to play. There was great unity within the family, and family prayers were occasions for regular gatherings.

Kathleen and her siblings attended St. Mary of Redford Grade and High Schools. Kathleen believed that she had received the best possible education she could have had from her outstanding IHM teachers. These teachers were always backed by determined parents at home who wanted all of their children to succeed.

In her senior year, Kathleen decided to join the IHM Sisters in Monroe. This she did on July 2, 1939. The second of January, 1940, marked Kathleen’s reception into the Novitiate. She received the religious name of Sister Ansbert on that day. (Following the ceremony Kathleen’s father is reported to have expressed somewhat explosively, “Ansbert!”. What kind of a name is that?” Kathleen’s response: “It’s the name of an Irish Archbishop, Dad.” To which he replied: “Well, all right, then.”)

While still in her second year of Novitiate, Kathleen was sent to teach at the Hall of the Divine Child in Monroe. After her first year there she realized that teaching eighth-grade boys was not her “area of expertise.” At Blessed Sacrament School in Detroit and at other schools in Roseville, Ionia, Pontiac, Chicago and Mobile, Ala., she “found her comfort zone.” She enjoyed success as first grade and early elementary teacher for many years.

Kathleen was often called upon to give talks, workshops, and TV presentations in the Science for Teachers Programs sponsored by the Archdiocese of Detroit. These programs were for the benefit of student teachers, some of whom Sister herself supervised. She was asked to give science demonstrations in Chicago; also reading demonstrations both in Detroit and Chicago.

Sister Kathleen’s talent for cooking, and especially baking, must have been discovered early in her career, as her charge on every mission except the H.D.C. has been in the kitchen!

Various interests claimed her attention and talents over the years. Teaching CCD in parish schools, Sodality, and vocation recruiting were among these. At one place in her writings, Kathleen states, “I have helped prepare twelve young women who eventually entered Religious Life as Daughters of Charity, Dominicans, or our own beloved IHM Community.”
After many years of classroom teaching, Sister Kathleen joined a group of IHMs endeavoring to serve God’s people through other ministries. These included providing adult education in Monroe; teaching language arts at Marygrove College in Detroit; serving as assistant director of LARC in Monroe; and being a member of the Hospitality staff at St. Mary Center, also in Monroe. During the summer of 1989 Sister had the joy and happiness of participating in the Venture Program in Texas. This summer experience renewed her, she stated, in mind, heart and body. God was with her every day in so many ways. She never ceased being grateful for this opportunity.

For the past few years, Sister Kathleen has been a resident of our Health Care Center in Monroe. Though her health prevented her from being as mobile as she would have liked, she prayed each day with a heart filled with thanksgiving for the peace and blessings that have been hers since being in the HCC. She continued to enjoy visits from Sister Eileen, her own sister, and from dear friends. She appreciated having her visitors share jokes with her and often responded with a witty remark of her own. Being the good Irish lady that she was, Kathleen loved to quote these lines which she claimed expressed very well the heart of the Houlihan family:

“May there always be work for your hands to do.
May your purse always hold a coin or two.
May the sun always shine on your windowpane.
May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain.
May the hand of a friend always be near your heart
with gladness to cheer you.”

An old Irish Blessing

In these years, Sister Kathleen relished having time to experience greater closeness to God. She described her faith as being truly a personal one, which had gradually grown stronger and broader through annual retreats, frequent calling on God for guidance and help, and many opportunities to reflect with her sister and others on God’s mercy, love and caring for her throughout her life. A picture of Christ, the Good Shepherd, had a prominent place in her Health Care room.

We, your family, friends and IHM Sisters and Associates thank you for the life you shared with us, Kathleen. We rejoice with you as you rise with the
Risen Christ in this glorious Easter-time to begin new and eternal life. May you enjoy everlasting peace in the presence of the One you served so well!

Written by IHM Sisters Eileen Houlihan and Marie Gatza