

**Remembering Margaret Brennan, IHM
Feb. 13, 1924 – April 28, 2016**



The Remembering Service for Margaret Brennan, in the context of liturgical prayer, set forth and integrated her personal and theological gifts.

Mary McDevitt, IHM, her longtime colleague and friend, presented the reflection on Margaret's life and ministry. It follows.

Springtime of Love, Justice and Service in the Church

On Feb. 13, 1924, Margaret Rita Brennan entered this world as the middle child of Henry J. and Ann (Markey) Brennan. The family lived on Glynn Court St. in Detroit, in a Brennan-built house large enough for their nine children: Vincent, Francis, Mary Catherine, Richard, Ann, Henry, Margaret, Ellen and Martin. The Brennans were an Irish-American family in which faith was vibrant and strong. Henry J. reminded the family that they were baptized Irish, Roman Catholic and Democrat.

Margaret noted that "our family was built on the Church, but my father literally built the Church in Detroit." Henry J. constructed many historic Detroit buildings, including St. John Seminary in Plymouth and Marygrove College in Detroit, and this IHM Motherhouse and what I consider an exquisite Chapel.

Ann Markey Brennan, as well as many aunts and uncles, had high regard for education. Ann, as mother of the Brennan clan, was a welcoming hostess when many guests visited Detroit and especially when unannounced friends dropped by their summer home in Port Huron. There was always room for more. Margaret was very proud that her father inscribed on Ann's tombstone in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, "ANN MARKEY Brennan." Most women in those days (the late '40s) would not have their maiden name so recognized.

The four Brennan girls were enrolled at Sacred Heart Academy on Lawrence Ave. They were educated broadly and well by the religious of the Sacred Heart. Margaret recalled that her early education was rich with history, mythology and poetry. When she went to say goodbye to the Sacred Heart Sisters, one questioned: "After all these years why didn't you come to us?" Margaret answered simply: "Because no one ever asked me."

We IHMs are grateful that an IHM, Sister Rose Agatha, asked Margaret if she ever considered entering religious life. It was at Marygrove College that the sense of her religious vocation could no longer be avoided. On July 1, 1945, about a month after graduation, Margaret travelled south to Monroe, south on the two-lane highway called Telegraph Road. No one spoke, neither Henry J., nor Ann, nor Margaret. There was an attempt by all to consider this just a nice little trip to anywhere.

Margaret wrote that entering the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters was not easy for her. As she unpacked her suitcase, she saw that her father and mother had each pinned a letter on her nightgown. Margaret's intuition prompted her to give these letters to a professed friend unopened. She knew it would evoke too much emotion for her on entrance day. Only after 25 years did she open them. They expressed their deep love and an invitation to come home if she was not happy. She confesses that she was lonely the first year. But as the second and third year of formation approached, called the novitiate, a whole spiritual world opened up for her. It was then that Margaret understood what her vocation both offered her and required of her. She was at peace.

As a young sister, Margaret was invited to graduate studies in theology. Her doctorate (a rarity for women in the United States) was the ideal preparation for more than 50 years of ministry within the congregation and the Church. As novice directress for more than 10 years, Margaret instructed 80 young novices with creativity and compassion. She noted that these were among her happiest years. However, as time went on, it was obvious that the new breed of sisters was articulate and educated well to serve in the ministry of the Church. As Margaret guided the 90 or so novices, it was clear that the old answers did not fit the new questions. When one bright novice asked: "Mother, why do we have to sit in rank?" (which means in the order of entrance), the canned answer of previous days was "Sister, because we have always done it," or even a stronger response of: "Little Sister, did you come to join a congregation or to found your own?" Margaret was unwilling to reiterate the old answers. She knew that the *IHM Constitutions* needed revision.

Margaret was a creative influence on the Rule Revision Committee. With the Second Vatican Council's impetus, it was a creative and challenging undertaking. The committee worked diligently for almost 20 years, placing the spirit of the *IHM Constitutions* on renewed Scripture studies and updated theology.

So, it was no surprise that in 1966 Margaret Brennan was elected as IHM superior general. It was a crucial and challenging time, both in the Church and in society. During her 10 years as president (1966-1976), Margaret was troubled that the theological world and discourse were led mostly by men. She envisioned the day when women would contribute a vibrant and educated voice in leading theological conversation. In order to ensure this, Margaret invited one sister every year for 10 years to earn doctoral degrees in theology and related fields at some of the best universities in the United States and Europe.

The young Bishop Thomas Gumbleton had been appointed auxiliary bishop of Detroit around the same time Margaret was elected president. In his estimation, Margaret played a vital role in the transformation of the Church in Detroit into a Vatican II Church. The Bishop wrote: "It was a time of crisis in the life of the Church. Margaret brought enormous energy, great intelligence, and a charismatic presence. We owe her a great debt of gratitude."

The Vatican document on religious life stressed that interior renewal had to be the heart of the renewal of religious life. Margaret committed herself to this task of spiritual renewal of the IHM congregation. Two areas in particular became foundational for this

renewal of spirit: The House of Prayer Movement and the necessity of IHM Sisters being licensed as spiritual directors.

Margaret wished to deepen the contemplative spirit within the congregation. Early in her time as superior general she appointed a committee to help in the founding of a house of prayer in Monroe. In 1970, John Cardinal Dearden and Rev. Bernard Haring blessed the IHM house of prayer, called Visitation. The old academy horse barn had been transformed into a barn Chapel. With Rev. Bernard Haring, Redemptorist, and Ann E. Chester, IHM, the House of Prayer Committee shared their inspiration with hundreds of communities that came to Monroe for a Summer House of Prayer Experience. After living in a Summer House of Prayer, these guests knew how to develop their own House of Prayer when they returned to their own congregations. We wanted the gift of contemplation to be not just for us but for much wider influence.

In the 1970s, Jesuits in Michigan, Ontario and St. Louis sponsored centers designed to serve as internships for spiritual directors. Margaret encouraged IHMs to become certified spiritual directors. She knew that we needed discernment in order to move into a future yet unknown. In 1972, almost 200 IHM Sisters engaged in a directed retreat. Both Jesuits and IHMs were the spiritual directors. We wanted to come to the IHM Assembly/Chapter in 1972 with spiritual freedom.

In many institutions, those with outstanding gifts rise to the top. At the national assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 1972, Sister Margaret Brennan was the obvious and widely respected choice as president of the conference. This was a crucial time in the development of the organization. Some at the Vatican objected to using the word "Leadership" in the new title of the body of superiors general. Could women be leaders?

Women religious took the Vatican documents to heart. This also caused conflict with the same Vatican officials. But difficult times often bring forth hidden reserves of conviction and courage.

In Margaret's term of office, leaders of religious communities were not always welcomed in Rome for their yearly visit. We welcome the pastoral freshness of Pope Francis.

Following her ministry in Michigan, Margaret was invited to teach at the Jesuit institution, Regis College in Toronto. As professor of Pastoral Studies she continued to work in the formation of future Jesuits and lay leaders. Many have called her a born teacher. Beyond that gift, Margaret possessed a gift that few have: The ability to inspire. For her extraordinary work at Regis College, the superior general of the Jesuits conferred on Margaret the title, Professor Ordinarius, an honor that no woman had as yet received.

On a more personal level, in the 1980s Margaret was asked how her image of God had evolved though the years. She responded that three inspirations moved her deeply and influenced her sense of God.

- I discovered the human face of God in others and in myself.
- I grappled with the emerging insights of feminist theologians.
- I came to appreciate the new cosmology, sustainability, and the creation-centered God.

Margaret's lectures and published articles reflect this evolution.

I've had the good fortune of looking at Margaret both from a distance and up close and personal. I learned that Margaret always thought in big terms. Once, when I was given a small monetary gift for travel, I asked Margaret where she might like to go, thinking perhaps a little bit north, maybe Frankenmuth, or a little bit south in the United States, Margaret needed no time for reflection as she exclaimed, "Let's go to Istanbul!" At another time, when she decorated the Chapel for a profession ceremony, Margaret picked out dozens of white roses, white hydrangeas, bunches of gardenias and calla lilies. She placed the florist's bill on the mother general's shelf. Mother Anna Marie wrote a crisp note back. "What do you think you are doing? Decorating for a Briggs wedding?"

Margaret loved beauty and was formed by music, art and poetry. This sense of beauty inspired her to always have flowers in the room. Often she quoted Dostoyevsky: "The world will be saved by beauty." Later, she was in charge of ambience at Regis College. I don't know who paid those bills.

The faculty at Regis recognized her gifts as she taught aspects of spirituality and culture for more than a quarter of a century. They honored her with the Degree of Doctor of Letters with the following citation:

With joy and wisdom, Margaret Rita Brennan has exercised an outstanding career both in scholarship and in the promotion of spirituality. When all is said and done about Margaret Brennan, the word beauty comes to mind. Her constant offering of flowers creates beauty. She has exercised her extraordinary gifts and tasks with beauty. So in the end, Margaret is a beautiful person whose beauty makes beautiful what it touches.

Nov. 17, 2001, Regis College

Margaret had studied and prayed over the mystics since her own novitiate. Teresa of Avila was her special mentor who inspired her to en flesh her spirit in these times. Two of Teresa's sayings appealed to her: First, "to think of being a woman in the Church is enough to make one's wings fall off." And on her deathbed the great mystic and Doctor of the Church said. "I am grateful to be dying as a daughter of the Church." This was no pious statement. Teresa came close to being excommunicated by the Spanish Inquisition. Teresa was grateful to die in the Church. As a daughter of the Church, Margaret is, was and will always remain close to the Church. As one who loved the Church, Margaret was sometimes treated with suspicion by members of this Church she praised and loved.

A quotation from the document that conferred on her an honorary doctorate (one of six honorary doctorates, I might add.) presented by St. Mary of Notre Dame on their

alumna, Margaret Rita Brennan:

Because of her uncommon love for the Church, Sister Margaret's whole life calls the Church to that new springtime of justice, love, and service envisioned by the Second Vatican Council.

In her memoir, *What Was There for Me Once*, Margaret wrote: "I think my whole life has been a love affair with the church." She cited in her *IHM Book of Life* page the poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Spring and FALL to a young child (titled *Margaret, are you grieving?*).

Margaret mentioned some of the personal and institutional losses during various seasons and commented:

Now in the autumn of my life I see more clearly how events tinged with grief or seeming loss have been invitations for the stretching of my mind and imagination, for the deepening of my faith and the widening of my understanding. It is for these blessings for which we were born.

And finally, dear, dear Margaret, we your sisters, your beloved family and innumerable friends recognize how you have blessed us. And, Margaret, even in our loss, we believe that our God promises that our mourning will be turned into joy. You, Margaret, have blessed us and we must be a blessing.

Delivered by Mary McDevitt, IHM, May 1, 2016

Gilmary Bauer, RSM, and Margaret both served in major leadership roles in their congregations and often shared experiences. Subsequently, they developed a close friendship. Sister Gilmary's presentation highlighted six areas in which Margaret had exercised great influence and charismatic leadership. It follows.

Between each of these is a sung antiphon: "We praise you O God, for all your works ..."

We thank God for Margaret's promotion of women theologians.

So that women's voices, scholarship and experience could be heard in a male-dominated Church, Sister Margaret determined that the IHM congregation should have theologians among its members, unheard of at the time. Ten sisters were sent to diverse institutions to obtain doctorates in theology and canon law. They studied at Louvain, Rome, Paris, Toronto, Notre Dame and elsewhere.

We thank God for Margaret's vision of IHM ministry.

As general superior, Sister Margaret oversaw a congregation that was worldwide. There

were IHM Sisters in Vietnam to teach orphans who were among those involved in the Baby Lift before the fall of Saigon, 1975. Other sisters took part in ministries in Brazil, Malawi, Uganda, Kenya, Ghana, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

We thank God for Margaret's leadership in LCWR.

She distinguished herself as a leader in the renewal of religious life with her intense interest in the emerging documents of the Second Vatican Council and her ability to envision new understandings of the Church and religious life. A leader among leaders, she played an active role in LCWR and was elected to serve as its president from 1971 to 1972, a critical period in the conference's history.

We thank God for Margaret's reclaiming of the contemplative-mystical tradition.

Margaret Brennan is an example of a woman theologian who, in her life and scholarship, has understood the challenge to reclaim and reinterpret the mystics and the experience of the desire for God that pervades this country often unbidden and unseen. She began Visitation House of Prayer in the IHM congregation. She had a close involvement with contemplative communities in forming an association that would assist them in having a voice in the Church and renew their way of life. Margaret's presentation: "Contemplation Finding Its Prophetic Voice in the Cultural Context of North America," at a symposium for Carmelites, is a major contribution to the renewal of contemplative life in the United States and the retrieval of the Christian mystical tradition.

We thank God for Margaret's gift of teaching.

We thank God for Margaret's passion for theology, which she shared so generously and effectively during her years in Toronto. For countless students, particularly women and lay people, she became a model of how to seek understanding in faith and hope.

We thank God for Margaret's upholding the values of academics.

Following her years in congregational leadership, she accepted an appointment as professor of pastoral theology at Regis College at the Toronto School of Theology, becoming the first woman professor to serve at Regis College. During her 25 years there, she became one of the institution's most distinguished, celebrated and well-honored faculty members. The recipient of numerous awards and honorary degrees, she published extensively, including her 2009 memoir, *What Was There for Me Once*.