Remembering Sister Joan McGrath, IHM

Sister Joan McGrath, of Irish-German descent, fifth child of Michael McGrath and Elizabeth Ceasar, was born April 3, 1922 and baptized at Most Holy Redeemer Church in Detroit. The name on the baptismal certificate: Winifred Geneveive Jean McGrath. Her siblings were Jerry, Mary K, Elizabeth (Virginia), Ruth, Peggy and Patricia. As a young child, Joan, then called Jean, was sent to live with an aunt in Calumet, Mich., her mother’s home town, to ease the burden of child care. Because there was already a “Jean” in the family up north, Sister’s name became Joan. Mr. McGrath insisted that she return home when he heard Joan call her aunt “Mother.” It always bothered Sister that she was the one separated from her family, even though her memories of Calumet were very special. In fact, for her golden jubilee, her family offered to send her and two of her best friends on a trip to wherever she wanted to go. Sister Kate and I were thinking about Ireland, Rome, or Mexico... but Sister only wanted a car trip to the Upper Peninsula. Oh well, Houghton, Hancock, Calumet, Dollar Bay... we had a great time and she loved every minute.

Educated at Holy Redeemer School, Joan enjoyed sports and formed life-long friendships, including with her next-in-rank, Sister June Denne, a Gabrielite, whose “bacon” she saved many times, and Virginia Reardon and other high school chums who kept in touch all these years. Leaving her home at age 19 was heart-wrenching for Joan, but with faith nourished by her parents, the seed of vocation planted by the sisters at Redeemer and with characteristic determination, she entered the IHM community, May 24, 1941, was received into the novitiate, Jan. 2, 1942, given the name, Gerardine, in honor of her brother, and professed, Jan. 2, 1944. She joined the many girls who came to Monroe from Holy Redeemer, enriching IHM with their well-documented contributions in leadership, education and community.
Joan had a deep love of our Blessed Mother. Even more so because her own mother died on Thanksgiving Day when Sister was only 25. From the time of Sister’s stroke on July 9, 2010, her rosary was often in her hand. Another favorite devotion was to our Mother of Perpetual Help and the song “Order Blue” was a favorite.

“Order Blue, we’ll be true, all through the years to you. We’ll hold your standards high. We’ll never let them die. Live each day, Mary’s way; we’re servants of her heart, and may we ever keep the spirit of Mary’s Order Blue.”

Love of family. As the last surviving sibling, Sister felt a great sense of responsibility for her family. How she loved each member, experiencing their joys and sorrows as if they were her own; always concerned that each would remain faithful to the Lord. She also loved the gatherings at Bill McGrath’s in White Lake and the Christmas parties with that branch of the family in the Milford area.

She was so delighted when included in family celebrations. Over these last few years those of you (you know who you are) who took her out to lunch, decorated her room, mastered the art of the one-way conversation on the phone, as she listened intently, nodding in silent response; or, who sat with her, holding her hand, singing, reading or praying with her, were life-giving and affirming for Sister. Nephew Bobby, who preceded her in death, finally got his long hair cut, just for her. And we can’t forget little dog Henry’s loving gaze, as Sister found comfort in his presence also.

Her faith was great. She placed herself in the Lord’s hands every day, nourishing that faith through the Holy Eucharist, deepening it in prayer and scripture, the reading of spiritual and professional literature. For all the intensity of her life’s desire to do all the good she could even as her body was no longer able to keep up with her keen mind, she struggled to accept the diminishments that come with failing health. She tried to take things one day at a time and loved to hear her nephews Dickie and Mike, sing:

“I’m only human, I’m just a person. Help me believe in what I could be and all that I am. Show me the stairway, I have to climb. Lord, for my sake, teach me to take one day at a time.
“One day at a time, sweet Jesus, that’s all I’m asking of you. Just give me the strength to do every day what I have to do. Yesterday’s gone, sweet Jesus, and tomorrow may never be mine. Lord, for today, show me the way, one day at a time.”

Her mission was as educator/administrator – Sister Joan loved school. Whether as teacher, administrator, or whatever duty, she was driven to excellence and called for the same from her charges, serving at St. Mary and St. Michael, Monroe; St. Mary, Akron; Marian High Bloomfield Hills; St. Mary, Mt. Morris; and Holy Rosary, Our Lady Queen of Hope, and St. Mary of Redford in Detroit.

She considered the highlight of her ministry the establishment of the junior high at St. Mary of Redford in 1966. With five seventh-, five eighth- and five ninth-grade classrooms of 45 + students in each, she relished the challenges presented there. She was extremely loyal to her staff and they to her. Excerpts from a tribute to Sister Joan given during her time at St. Mary’s include:

“We see you keeping us on our toes when we begin to coast, calling us to excellence and to do and be better than we ever thought we could. We see you coming to school many days when you haven’t slept much because of illness or for worrying about things like the budget...or what we can do for the children who are always in trouble or for the teacher who is struggling...

“We see you telling us where we used poor judgment and then trusting us to be wiser in the future. We see you listening to problems, complaints and frustrations... until your head must be splitting and your ears tired, your back bent under the weight of it all, but you keep listening and doing the best for all of us. We see a person to whom we too often bring children when we are frustrated and want you to play the heavy. We marvel at the amount of pain you can endure and still keep going. (The rest of us would be flat on our backs.) And nobody knows. We see a person who is always ready to forgive, who would never intentionally hurt another, who never holds a grudge. We see you backing us up, supporting us... (Do we realize how loyal you are to us?) We see your concern and compassion for the sick and those who suffer. We hear you saying, ‘Give the child another chance,’ and, ‘What will happen to him if we turn him away?’ (And the child never knows you fought for him.) We see a Sister with high ideals and beautiful values.

“We see someone with a big old mushy heart that is large enough to take in all of us and the whole school... We don’t thank you enough or show you the
appreciation and love we feel for all we know you do and for the countless things we never know about. God love and bless you!”

Hers was an incredibly powerful presence. When she appeared on the scene, without a word, instant order was achieved. Others would say, “How do you do that?” We knew what she had: R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Her standards and expectations were high, and for every student and staff member; a “tight ship” was part of that educational environment. John Leach, an alum, who knew her well when she was founding principal at Our Lady Queen of Hope School in the mid-50s, wrote to her in later days. He tells how the students “survived and eventually thrived in this wonderful little school.” He says, “You probably are getting the impression that we saw you as ‘The Enforcer.’ Well, that view is true. We didn’t have you in the classroom every day, so we saw the disciplinarian more often. I do remember one lunch hour in the spring when we were playing baseball. You came out and showed us you could play that game too. It was a scene reminiscent of The Bells of St. Mary’s, Sister Gerardine playing the Ingrid Bergman role.”

Our revered Sister Marie Winifred Kerwin said of her, “Sister Joan’s record speaks for itself, portraying an educational leader who is at once energetic, fearless, creative and inspiring. She is one who envisions the very best education for all students.”

For her, right was right, fair was fair; you never ducked a responsibility; you faced things head-on. How many times we said, “Joan, you are putting us between a rock and a hard place! It can’t be done!” But she was invariably right and we could and we did. And so she poured out her heart and soul all those years at St. Mary of Redford. Hers was a mountain of fond memories, holding a special place in her heart for those involved in St. Mary’s Alumni Association whose love and support meant the world to her. She was overwhelmed with the kind remembrances of so many wonderful sisters, staff, parents, alumni and parishioners.

When she retired in 1999, her letter to Alumni and Friends of St. Mary’s read... “It is with profound sadness that I must announce my retirement as Principal of St. Mary’s. How I wish I could roll back the clock and proceed full steam ahead. The spirit is willing but the body is saying slow down...”

When her failing health would no longer allow her to come over to school, even as a volunteer, but wanting to say a proper goodbye to the children, although she could hardly walk, Joan set her iron will to accomplish that goal which required her to ascend to the principal’s office on second floor. Sure enough, during the last
hour of the last day of the life of St. Mary’s School, she made it up the first five steps, then on up those final steep 18. Over the PA, she told the children of her love for them, desire that they stay close to the Lord, to always value their education and find success in service to others. Then we thought...how are we going to get her back down?

“The Bells of St. Mary’s” had double meaning for her because of her deep love of the IHM community and because of St. Mary of Redford, with its carillon bells inspired by our dear Father Ron Williams and music minister, Patrick Macoska.

“The bells of St. Mary’s, oh, into their ringing goes singing the heart-love of Sisters in blue. Full gladly their echoes keep swelling and telling the union strong which binds our hearts to our convent home.”

Once at St. Mary’s, when she had had a serious brush with death and had just returned from the hospital, we were so happy to have her back, we went to the Chapel. Sister Joan sat quietly as we expressed our gratitude. We looked to her to see if she wanted to speak. Then she sang, so simply and so appropriately, in her lovely voice, a favorite hymn from “Lead Me, Guide Me:”

“Thank you, Lord, thank you, Lord, thank you, Lord, I just want to thank you, Lord.”

Sister Joan was a great friend. Her love and loyalty inspired a return of the same and she was greatly loved by many, especially by her best, best friend, Sister Kate Seidenwand (since 1955). We cherished our years together, the trips to Florida to visit family and the ever-welcoming Sisters Pauline Gorham and June, the laughter and tears that come with friendship. She often expressed her love of her IHM class and the joy of outings and celebrations with them.

Sister was a grateful person. She had great respect for the Church and our IHM community, appreciated the kindness and love shown to her by leadership and our sisters, as well as dear friends, especially niece, Becky Cole, who spent countless hours with her, with unfailing concern and loving cheerfulness as strong and beautiful as the love of a child for a mother.

We used to think Joan had no sense of humor because she didn’t get silly things, but she was a master of the understatement, all the more delightful because she often had no idea she had just said the funniest thing. We were always going to write them down...
Sister Joan had a special love for the staff of our Health Care Center and appreciated so much their incredible love and tender care. This consummate administrator, who gave plenty of suggestions, bore the heavy burden of being unable to speak after her stroke. After each stay in the hospital, Sister was welcomed home with gospel-like joy as many loving hands bathed and dressed her and placed her in her own bed. “Home,” an IHM concept so dear to her, was never more real than when we saw her back with us surrounded by love. We will never forget how she was lifted up on the angel wings of our nurses and aides who must pay a great price for pouring out their love to the last drop only to see their charges slip away. The staff from Eric West Hospice added their loving care to that of our staff.

“A Faithful Friend ... is a sure shelter, whoever finds one has found a rare treasure...beyond price, there is no measuring her worth.”

And Sister Joan responds to the community in her own words, “What great thanks I owe to God for my life, my faith, my vocation... I appreciate so very much traveling this journey of faith with all of you, my IHM companions... thank you for being there for me in faith, in love, insupport... I’m proud to be your Sister, your friend...”

Dear Joan, may God’s light shine ever upon you, may you rest in the arms of God; may you dwell for evermore in communion with all the blessed. Amen

Sister Loretta Schroeder, IHM
March 14, 2012