Remembering for Sister Virginia (Casimira) Parker

Dear Virginia, how can we ever do justice to your energetic and colorful life story!

Virginia was born in Detroit on June 22, 1922, the fourth of seven children: three boys and four girls. Their parents were Casimir Parker and Mary Hill and they were of Polish and German descent. By the time the children were school age, it was the Great Depression, so the family moved several times. Therefore, Virginia had exposure to IHMs at Holy Name, St. Francis de Sales and St. Gregory schools. She was entranced by the sisters from the very beginning.

As a child Virginia was just as energetic as we knew her – she belonged to the Rinky Dink Boys Club in her neighborhood, played baseball, and basketball, took dancing lessons and loved the movies. She wrote that her mother was worried about her becoming too worldly, and took her to see the parish priest about her love for the movies. Thank goodness Fr. Doherty recognized a healthy American girl in Virginia.

On her 17th birthday, June 22, 1939, a week after graduation, Virginia entered religious life here in Monroe.

“I remember Mother Vigilia taking me up to our Blessed Mother’s altar and I prayed to her, ‘Please help me to be a swell religious.’ This new life held out many hopes and challenges, and I have never been disappointed,” wrote Virginia. She was received in 1940 and was given the name Casimira.

Virginia tells that she had exactly 30 minutes of instruction and advice for teaching, and was assigned a second and third grade with 50-some children. The next year she was moved to Flint, and then to Marine City. Due to these factors she felt really insecure about teaching and asked to do something else.

So, after just four years of teaching, Virginia was assigned to HDC kitchen and cafeteria service. She did this wonderful work for 12 years, getting to know the boys informally. They really loved her. Sister Joyce Durosko tells us that Virginia opened a little shop and sold candy and other snacks to the boys after classes before they went out to play. During these years Virginia also took courses in classroom teaching in the summers.
In 1957, she returned to classroom teaching. It was in the ’60s, while missioned at Holy Trinity, that Virginias first felt a desire to work with mentally handicapped youth. Consistent with our desire to work with the very poor, the community provided further education in this field. One of Virginia’s treasured experiences was to spend a summer with the Scranton IHMs at Marywood College taking a course in special education. Other classes were at Wayne State University.

In 1969, then, Virginia began her work with developmentally disabled youth at Robert F. Kennedy School. Virginia wrote, “professionally my objectives were to be effective in helping students with learning disabilities of all ages to obtain a job and become useful citizens. By correlating art with regular subjects, I found the students able to relax a great deal more in a classroom situation. Art requires of the students, growth in perseverance at tasks, promptitude, earnestness, neatness, and the qualities of spontaneity and ability to cooperate and get along with one’s peers. These qualities are all part of necessary elements in our work world. I try to instill these qualities into the students in order that they can be themselves as tremendously creative and responsible people.”

Virginia worked as a program director for the Riverview Day Care Program for five years. Here she was working with the staff and children at the Jeffries Project.

In reading Virginia’s Ministry Commitment forms, one can’t help but see what a happy person she was. In 1983 she wrote, “By helping the Lord’s crippled poor to obtain resources provided by many programs (e.g. wheelchairs, crutches, ramps, special shoes), I feel I am helping to alleviate poverty with mercy, justice and love. Since I teach children of all nationalities, (Spanish, Polish, Moslem, Lebanese and African Americans), I try to teach them peace, tolerance and justice for all; and that they are all children of one God. I feel called to serve the poor in the day care children I serve, as well as my staff workers. Since 90 percent of the children I work with are below poverty level, I can give much to the Lord and to them with my love and my talents.

“What calls me to remain in this ministry is the fact that I have found myself in this ministry and feel free to be myself. I feel happiness in my IHM heart in working with students of all nationalities who find school difficult.”

From 1992-98 Virginia worked at Holy Redeemer as a substitute teacher and a volunteer tutor in the GEM Program. This program, Getting Educationally Motivated, was for children who disliked school, for those who needed special help through tutoring and for those who had home problems. In addition to all this, Virginia was a Eucharistic minister, and she visited the elderly in several homes for the aged.

As you can see, Sister Virginia didn’t wait for life to happen to her – she took charge and created so many aspects of her beautiful life.
While she was living at Holy Redeemer, *The Rosary Murders* was being filmed on-site. Because their schedules were similar, Virginia and the movie star, Donald Sutherland, ate their dinner together. This was such a highlight for her.

It would be incomplete not to mention Virginia’s love for animals. She wrote, “I visited the Anti-Cruelty Society twice a week and enjoyed petting the friendly dogs and cats and kittens.” Around here, at the Motherhouse, it may be remembered that she wanted to feed the wild animals, until it was pointed out that one loose squirrel could create a lot of havoc.

At some point in her life, Virginia wrote a poem titled “Today is the Day I Was Born.”

Lord, when the doctor slapped me on my back,  
I brought forth my first cry to show everyone  
I was glad to be alive.

I hope and pray that I will always be a joy to others;  
and I’ll be in Heaven someday with all my family members and friends,  
to celebrate that special day.

I thank you, Lord, for thinking of creating me,  
with all You had to do.

Thanks for the wonderful parents I have had  
as my mother and dad.  
Thank you, Lord, for all the terrific friends and relatives  
you’ve given me in my life—  
young and old, women, men and children.

Thanks dear Lord, for all the precious animals  
You have enabled me to encounter in my life:  
friendly big dogs, puppies, cats and kittens, and others.  
You know how much, Lord, I love animals —  
with all their types and sizes.

“Ginny”

Virginia, your beautiful smile witnessed to your happy and loving spirit, manifested in so many ways. We thank you for being so true to yourself, and to the IHM spirit.

Prepared by IHM Sisters Virginia Parker, Roberta Richmond and Ann Currier