Remembering Sister Margaret Rottach

Marine City, Mich., was the place of birth of Richard Jacob Rottach and Margaret Rose (Bammel) Rottach who were the parents of Sister Margaret Rottach.

They had grown up, gone to school, and then, had been married in June of 1916 at Holy Cross Catholic Church in Marine City. Following their marriage, they moved to Highland Park, Mich., where they made their home.

Mr. Rottach was an employee for the Ford Motor Company for many years. As a head electrician, his expertise and skills were much in demand. During the Depression years, Mr. Rottach’s position at Ford continued to be open to him, a blessing that was not available to a number of other workers during this challenging period of our history.

In 1917, Holy Thursday fell on the 4th of April. This day was already beautifully meaningful to all Catholic families because of its religious significance. It became doubly so for Margaret and Richard Rottach because it was the day on which their first daughter, Marion, our Sister Margaret, was born.

Just a few days later, on April 9, little Marion was carried to Blessed Sacrament Cathedral in Detroit, Michigan where she received the Sacrament of Baptism. Her uncle, Rev. Walter Rottach was the officiating priest on this occasion. In time, Marion was joined by two sisters, Eleanor Ann and Marjory Rose, and a brother Richard James.

As a child, Marion’s health was delicate. There is a record of an occasion when, as a tiny infant, Marion was dying of plural pneumonia. No hope was promised by the physician. At the moment when both mother and grandmother feared that the child was dead, some Lourdes Water arrived from Sister Mary Lawrence, IHM, Marion’s aunt. When a spoonful of this Water was fed to Marion she gasped and came to!

At Visitation School in Detroit which Marion attended for twelve years, she had Adrian Dominicans as her teachers. Joining the Sisters in Adrian had been her ever-present dream for quite a while. When, as a twelfth-grader she was invited to spend Senior Day at Adrian she was all set to go! However, Marion’s father would not hear of it. He definitively stated: “You aren’t going any place for a year!”

But, shortly thereafter, Fr. Walter Rottach, her father’s brother, made her an offer that caught her interest: “Would you like to go to Marygrove College for a year?” He promised to make arrangements to pay half of the tuition if Marion would work for the other half. When Marion talked this plan over with her parents, her father relented on his strong earlier statement.
And so it happened. Marion enrolled at Marygrove and worked in the Dean’s office for the rest of the tuition. In her daily relating with the IHM Sisters, she came to love them, and to appreciate their values and mission. By the year’s end, Marion had fully decided to enter the IHM Postulate, a step which she never regretted. Marion arrived in Monroe on June 28, 1936. It was the day of her parents’ 20th wedding anniversary.

On January 2, 1937, she was received into the novitiate, receiving the name of Sister Margaret. The very next day she was inducted into Practice Teaching at St. Mary Academy, and after six months was assigned to begin her teaching career at St. Mary Parochial School in Monroe. After Final Profession, her next assignments included teaching in the upper elementary grades at St. Agnes, Gesu, Epiphany, and Our Lady of Good Counsel Schools in Detroit, Michigan.

Then in 1951, Sister’s assignment was to St. Martin High School. There for three years, she enjoyed teaching religion, mathematics and science to her students.

The summer of 1954 saw her at St. Louis University working toward a master’s degree in physics. In the fall, she continued studies full time at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

With her recently acquired master’s degree in hand, Margaret brought her new learnings in turn to St. Cecilia, St. Francis de Sales and Immaculata High Schools in the next several years where she very much enjoyed teaching the students chemistry, physics and math. During one of those years, Sister Margaret recalled taking a group of students to the University of Notre Dame in South Bend for a CSMC (Catholic Student Mission Crusade) rally.

Thousands of young people were gathered for the event, and Sister was impressed with the seriousness and maturity of the students during those days. At one point, Sister Margaret and her companion became separated from the students that they had brought to the rally. However, to their surprise and relief, they found their responsible and mature students all waiting for them, as planned, in the foyer of the hotel. “Were you lost?” the students called out, fully enjoying their teachers’ obvious embarrassment.

Margaret loved each of her missions. In fact, she once stated that she hated to leave a place she had learned to love. However, once she had made the move, it didn’t take too long for the new mission to be just fine! Being assigned mostly to large convents, Margaret considered herself blessed in not being given the kitchen as a charge. Cooking was definitely not in her line of competency! However, with a sewing machine she could work wonders! She easily made up new nightgowns or aprons, as requested. Above all, her talents in the sewing line were often sought by those who needed assistance in the making of new habits.

Handling school finances requires a lot of patience for detail. This quality of patience was one of Sister Margaret’s gifts, and so she was often given this charge. Eventually, she became the business manager at Immaculata.

In 1980 a new opportunity to work with numbers opened up to her. She was asked to join the staff of the general business office in Monroe. Here she was engaged for the next four years at
the Motherhouse. During these years she experienced living with a few companions, not in a large convent, but “in the little white house across the street.”

Margaret moved to the Motherhouse in 1984. She was immediately sought by Sister Marie Agnes to assist with special sewing. The IHM Sisters were no longer wearing the traditional blue serge habits, and many sisters who did not sew were asking for help in making skirts, jackets, and jumpers more in line with the clothing styles of the day. Her sewing room was very popular and sister had much business!

Later, towels and crafts for the Gift Shop and for the Christmas Sale were in great demand, and Margaret knew how to supply this need. In time, covers artistically created for Puffs and Kleenex boxes became very popular. Well into her retirement years, Margaret came up with new designs which were always made available for the Gift Shop.

In 2012, Margaret’s eyesight changed significantly for the worse and she found it difficult to see well enough to continue her craft work or to do her Sudoku puzzles. However she was not ready to quit! With the help of a reading machine which magnified the print and the patterns for crafts, she resumed her puzzles and continued doing her creative crafts. “I don’t need to have boring days,” she stated.

Margaret, through the years, was always interested in community happenings. She was an active member of her mission unit and appreciative and supportive of decisions made on behalf of the common good of the community. Being a science teacher, she loved nature, and found in nature ways to lift her spirit to God. She loved and had devotion to Mary, always mindful of and grateful for Mary’s intervention through the Lourdes water that had helped her so early in her life.

Asked in one of her commitment forms how her spirituality as an IHM enhances her ministry, Margaret wrote: “My spirituality is nourished by the many opportunities for Eucharist, special prayer times, and retreats offered here at the Motherhouse. Doing needlepoint with plastics keeps my mind off pain, and the finished product brings pleasure to me and others. I appreciate going to the dining room where I meet and enjoy the company of other residents. I love, and try to practice, the thought from the Gospel of our being shepherdesses to one another.”

Margaret has been a peaceful, loving presence among us all down the long years of her life. We are grateful for the gifts and talents that she generously shared with us and with all she met in her various ministries. Our prayer now is that she may experience the radiance of peace and joy that she has hoped and trusted would be hers because of God’s unbelievably wonderful promise!

Sister Marie Gatza, IHM
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