Remembering Sister Catherine Senia

Those of us who knew Catherine Senia through her more than 60 years as an IHM quickly recognized that she was multi-gifted. We also witnessed and experienced how generously she shared her gifts with us, her IHM community, and with the many, many people whom she met and served in her ministries.

Perhaps her greatest gift to us was her commitment to a life of prayer. Catherine was faithful to prayer - to specific times of prayer and to prayer during the many hours she spent mending and altering clothing for the sisters here in the Motherhouse and, at times, for members of the staff.

Catherine inherited her religious fervor from her family and her gift as a seamstress from her mother. She was born into a very Catholic family from Croatia. Her mother was born in Croatia and her father, although born in Pennsylvania, lived in Croatia as a child. Her parents met and married in Lorain, Ohio.

Vincent Senia was employed as a diesel engineer at the U.S. Steel plant of the Lorain-Cuyahoga Works. Her mother, Agnes, was a well-known tailor for Richmond Brothers in Lorain and Cleveland. Catherine was the eldest of four children. She had one brother, Ivan, and two sisters, Wilma Jean, known as Willie, and Mary Ann, who is a member of the Humility of Mary Sisters of Villa Maria, Pa.

The Senia children attended SS. Cyril and Methodius Elementary School and then St. Mary High School in Lorain. As early as the second grade, Catherine felt called to be a sister. Having come to know the IHM Sisters at St. Mary High School, she entered the congregation on June 22, 1948, right after graduation. At the time, she did not realize how difficult this was for her mother and grandmother, who never interfered with her decision.

Taking college courses during her years in formation and then during summer months, Catherine earned a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College. Continuing her education in summer courses at Wayne State University, she earned a master's degree with a concentration in special education for emotionally disturbed children.

In 1960, after teaching children in the primary grades for 10 years in Michigan, Catherine was sent to Puerto Rico. There, she taught in the primary grades and co-
founded Sagrada Familia, an elementary school for children living in Puerto Rican public housing.

During those years, she not only learned to speak Spanish fluently, but at the Catholic University of Puerto Rico, she earned a secondary school certificate and qualifications for teaching English as a second language.

From 1972 to 1977, Catherine did pastoral ministry on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. She continued in pastoral ministry when she went to the IHM mission in Honduras. In 1978, after serving as a nursing assistant in the Motherhouse Health Care Center for several months, Catherine spent 17 years at Nativity Parish in Hollywood, Fla., where she taught Spanish as a second language.

In 2002, Catherine was selected for inclusion in the seventh edition of Who's Who Among America's Teachers.

In June, 2001, at the end of the school year, Catherine returned to the Motherhouse where she used her expertise as a seamstress to mend and alter clothes for sisters in the Health Care Center. Typical of Catherine, she wrote, “When asked if I am retired, my response is, ‘I'm not retired. I'm rethreaded and the Sisters keep me in stitches.’”

In reflecting back over her life, Catherine wrote, “My vocation moment was when I realized that life had a greater meaning - and that helping and serving others is far more fulfilling a task that has no end and keeps me alive.”

The following prayer, which Catherine wrote on one of her recent birthdays, expresses her spirit. She wrote:

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of life - the gift of another birthday. The past years of my life have been filled with signs and evidence of your love for me. I am grateful to you for these gifts, graces, blessings, friends and for the instruments and means you have used to confer these upon me. I thank you also for all those who have peopled my life with love and care. Bless them all! I offer you the coming year with a renewed commitment of my dedication to you. Help me to serve those whom you have given me. Help me to do the best I can.

Catherine, we love – and we thank – you for inspiring us to be women of prayer – always ready to serve others in a quiet and humble way.

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