Remembering Sister Margaret Wiedling, IHM

Margaret carried with her a grateful heart. “The memories and successes of former students are most gratifying for me,” she told me. You might have noticed that in conclusion on her Page of Life, Margaret wrote, “Blessed am I to have been called to LIFE in the IHM COMMUNITY.”

Margaret was the first girl and third of six children born to Josephine Vergon and Eugene Wiedling on March 16, 1916, in Detroit. She had two older brothers, two younger sisters and one younger brother. Mr. Wiedling came from Alsace-Lorraine, Mrs. Wiedling from France. They came to the United States as young adults, met and were married in New Jersey. Mr. Wiedling was a cook and a barber in a hotel there. One day Mr. Henry Ford came into Mr. Wiedling’s shop to have his hair cut and invited him (Mr. Wiedling) to move to Detroit and work in the Ford factory. The young couple came west. However, after two weeks, Mr. Wiedling knew that life in a factory was not for him. He was hired as the chief cook in the original Ponchatrain Hotel in downtown Detroit.

During World War I, Mr. Wiedling felt an urgency to join the army in order to defend his beloved France from German rule. Margaret’s first memory of her father was at 3 years old, standing on the front steps waiting for him to come home from the war.

“We had a nice little house on the east side of Detroit in Nativity Parish,” Margaret told me. Racine Dominican Sisters were Margaret’s teachers from first to eighth grades at Nativity School. She took music lessons, helped with many school events and thought that someday she would be a sister.

Margaret won a one-year scholarship to Cathedral High, later called Girls’ Catholic Central High, in Detroit and was able to finish her high school years there. There she met the IHM Sisters. After graduating from Cathedral in 1933, Margaret worked as a live-in nanny for a year. During all this time,
Mr. Wiedling was ill, having been shell-shocked in the war. This was a hardship on the family.

Margaret had always wanted to be a sister. She attributed her response to the “call” of God to her saintly mother who always interpreted the events of her life in the light of God’s will. When she spoke with her parents about her desire, her mother said, “Go right down and talk to Sister Victorine (Hinds)!”. Her father, having had wonderful care from Sister Marguerite, a Bon Secours Sister, while in Veterans’ Hospital, remarked that he couldn’t wish anything better for her, even though Mr. Wiedling was not Catholic.

On the feast of St. John the Baptist, June 24, 1934, Margaret entered the Postulate. She wrote that her days of formation were extremely happy ones. Margaret was received into the Novitiate on Jan. 2, 1935, and given the name, Sister Ethel. As a second-year novice, she taught primary grades both at St. Michael School and St. Joseph School in Monroe. This began her brilliant and challenging ministry in education. Margaret later wrote, “Entering the Congregation is an experience I treasure.”

In 1939 Margaret was teaching at St. Vincent School, Akron, Ohio, when the pastor asked the sisters to leave. This was most distressing for this young professed. Margaret wrote, “I was deflated, for I loved the children and the Sisters.” Until 1950, Margaret taught primary and junior high students in Michigan and Ohio. Then she began her long and outstanding ministry as a teacher of Latin in various high schools throughout Michigan. Margaret earned a master’s degree in Latin from Loyola University, Chicago. During that time she wrote an article for The Classical Bulletin, published by the Department of Classical Languages, St. Louis, Mo., titled “Horation Echoes in Byron’s Don Juan.” Margaret also helped revise Latin Book II of the Marian Series by The Bruce Publishing Company of Milwaukee. Margaret earned a grant in the summer of 1967 to travel to Rome and study background for the teaching of Latin literature. During this time she was able to visit Paris, London, Switzerland and other cities in Italy.

From 1972 to 1974, Margaret coordinated the high school religious education program at St. Kieran in Utica. She returned to teaching and tutoring for almost 10 years both in Michigan and Florida. In 1988 she retired, lived in Winter Haven, Fla., and continued to be of service by caring for the sick and elders of St. Joseph Parish, tutoring and being an aide for a stroke survivor. Of these years, Margaret wrote “Option for the poor has
been a motivating force in my life… My retirement years have freed me to be ready for God’s surprises be it an elder, a person disabled, sick, (one) in need to share faith in God, in need of education, an encouraging word or in need of my culinary talent.” In 1999 because of health needs, Margaret moved into the Health Care Center in Monroe. During these years she continued her interest in world, Church and community issues.

Margaret had a stellar reputation as a teacher of Latin. However, she told me that her work as a tutor was much more fulfilling. She tutored Haitians to speak English and English-speaking students to read! She spoke of many amazing surprises this ministry afforded her. In 2004, Margaret was made an honorary member of the St. John (Jackson) graduating class of 1954. She had taught these students in grades seven through 10! They were “her” kids, she told me.

One very significant event in her life was when Margaret attended the first solemn high Mass of her student, Father James Vedro, OSC, and was invited to speak a few words in appreciation of her former student. Another was in 1940 when her father came to visit her at Saint Joseph, Erie, Mich. Because of illness, he had not been able to travel since Margaret was a postulant. She noted that this was the last time she saw him alive. Still another significant event was her trip to the Holy Land in 1995.

Margaret practiced the Prayer of Surrender. She said she would surrender into the hands of God people who asked for her prayers. She also had great devotion to the rosary. In 2003, at the age of 83, Margaret wrote a stirring poem thanking God for all of creation and most of all for God’s presence in our lives that helps us love all created things. When asked for her words of wisdom after so many years of life experience, she quickly said, “Don’t sweat it. Don’t get all concerned!”

Margaret, you were given several talents. Seeing so many needs, true to the “spirit” of our founders, you responded generously. God’s promise is fulfilled in you, good and faithful one, to “Come, share my joy!” (Mt. 25/21)

Written by Patricia A. O’Donnell, IHM, July 25, 2005
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