

Remembering Sister Mary Copperstone
May 24, 1940 – Jan. 31, 2014



Mary Sammut and John Copperstone were both from different cities in Malta and came to the States at an early age: Mary was 16 and John a few years older. They connected in the Maltese community in the Detroit area, married and settled there.

Their first daughter was mentally challenged. Prior to Mary's birth, their fourth child, they had lost a daughter in childbirth. Mary, born on May 24, 1940, was indeed a welcome blessing. Theresa, John, Joseph, Eleanor and Linda followed in time.

When Mary talked about her first 11 years one could easily surmise that they were care-free and very happy ones. She loved school at St. Gregory, and –no surprise to anyone here– she made many friends in the neighborhood.

Life took an abrupt turn when her father suffered a paralyzing stroke. Because Mary's mother had to go to work for the first time in her married life, Mary, now age eleven, helped out as caregiver to her father and housekeeper for the family. She found much to do before and after school each day fulfilling her family's needs.

Lest we think it was all work and no play, Mrs. Copperstone, a true mother, began to see after a period of time that her 11-year-old daughter needed a break. She made certain that Mary was on the list of children going to CYO camp in the summer. It was indeed a good break for Mary. It did not take long for Mary to flourish in that setting and develop her native abilities to work and play in a group setting. It is obvious that Mary carried that newly developed talent into every aspect of her life. Many of us have been touched by Mary's ability to create community wherever she lived and ministered.

The parish community of St. Gregory, her family life, and the many Catholic neighbors helped to nurture Mary's faith. The family prayed the rosary together each night after supper, as did many Catholic families at this time. Living across the street from the school and convent enabled Mary to be very much at home in a typical Catholic Church setting.

When it came time for high school, Mary's mother wanted the best education available for her girls so Mary applied at Immaculata High School. The process of testing, interviews and registration went well. However, when Mary showed up on the first day, her name was not on the freshmen list. Mary marched to the principal's office and Sister Joan Therese suggested Mary wait while Sister called those who failed to appear that day. In the end, Mary was accepted.

Mary wasted no time getting involved in and beyond the classroom. She joined the Sodality, the future teacher's club, and was a cheerleader for the girls' basketball team. In addition, to help with the tuition, she worked at Marygrove College on the weekends in food service for 39 cents

an hour. It was not long before Mary questioned the value and probably the justice of such an arrangement.

She did some research at the beginning of her sophomore year and found a position at Kline's Department Store in the new Northland Mall. Keeping up with homework, work, and duties at home was challenging. There was not much time for fun although Mary insisted that she never missed a school dance.

In her senior year, she knew it was decision-making time. Mary had grown to love the IHM Sisters and wanted to join them. She readily took part in the yearly school retreat and also took advantage of the retreats at nearby St. Mary Reparatrix. Sister Rosalie Omans, one of the senior teachers, and a priest friend were very supportive. Mary shared her thinking with her parents. Initially, her mother was reluctant to have her go, but later withdrew her objection. Her father, who had a brother who was a priest, was delighted. Mary herself, at a later time during the Novitiate, had some doubts about whether or not she was being selfish. It was her mother this time who assured her that she needed to follow her vocation if she was to be happy and live a productive life. It was shortly after her first vows and just before her first mission experience that Mary's father died.

Although Mary's ministerial life began at a time of great personal loss, her assignment to St. Regis turned out to be a lively, rich, happy and productive experience. The sisters lived their first year at Marian until the new convent was completed. In the eight years at St. Regis, Mary taught second and third grades and also prepared children at St. Ives Parish for First Communion. It was Sister Kate Siedenwand who recognized Mary's skill in teaching and soon she became a directing teacher for education students at Marygrove and the University of Detroit. It was while Mary was at St. Regis that she was named Teacher of the Year by the *Detroit News*.

Open placement went into effect and Sister Janet Sullivan, principal at St. John in Fenton, invited Mary to join the staff there. It does not take long for talent to be recognized. After two years at Fenton, Mary's provincial asked her to consider a different ministry. Would she reside with the Novices living at St. Bridget and teach full time at St. Mary of Redford? Mary agreed, but it was not long before her good common sense made it clear that she could not do justice to both efforts—the schedules did not allow for that.

Within the next year, St. Ives parish had reached the stage when the need for a coordinator of religious education was evident and upon request. Mary remained there four years. While there, she also prepared the children at Sarah Fisher Home for receiving the sacraments.

Following these teaching experiences, Mary felt the need to work more directly with persons who had special needs. Mary found the place to put her energy. She worked as the training coordinator for the mentally challenged in a sheltered work-skill environment. While training persons in the work environment, she also became skilled as a job developer as well. Mary loved this opportunity to assist persons with special needs to adapt more comfortably to their environment.

When the sheltered workshop with the mentally challenged found it necessary to close, the refugee program sponsored by the Archdiocese called for Mary's talents. The challenge given her was to create an employment service for the refugees all of whom came from incredibly diverse areas of the world. Mary met a considerable challenge. Over time Mary saw the need for the refugees to become literate if they were to survive in this culture. So her next step was to become involved in the Ferndale adult education program. Soon she was teaching at night. At the same time, she began to teach English to the Japanese at the Mazda plant in Flat Rock. Many of us were aware that Mary was involved with the Japanese in the plant but few of us knew she also worked with their wives and their children for 10 years. Mary also introduced the English language to many individuals at Freedom House, Detroit. It is not hard to imagine how much she helped all these individuals adjusting to living in a new culture. At Mercy Center, she taught in the GED program for a time.

During this period Mary also decided to become trained as a tutor for children and adults with dyslexia. Soon she chose to work-part time at the Michigan Dyslexia Institute (MDI). No one who really knew Mary was surprised that after three years with MDI she decided to start her own business for children and adults with dyslexia. She chose the title "Tutoring for Success" for her new business venture. She had no trouble finding Students. It was a bit more challenging to find a space for the program. All her supplies were kept in the trunk of her car as she traveled to homes, libraries and schools! An IHM ministry grant finally helped her initiate a computer program called "Fastforward" to help her students develop word-processing skills.

Many people at age 65 are beginning to think about cutting back. Mary thought it was a good time to get retrained for a new career. She registered in an eldercare program at Madonna University and began working at Henry Ford Village with persons with Alzheimer's. While there, news reached her that there was some need for help at the Motherhouse and so Mary worked for two years as a receptionist while she was also involved with some in-home care for the elderly. Margaret Chapman was happy to have Mary assisting with the Compassionate Companions ministry.

Lest we think that Mary's ministerial record stemmed from physical and intellectual energy only, let us listen to Mary's own words describe the deep spiritual journey that was the foundation of her ministerial life.

My concept of God didn't change over the years, but my approach to prayer did. Formal prayers I had memorized as a youngster I always valued as part of our religious tradition, but gradually over time they were no longer meaningful and even seemed to stand in the way of deep prayer. The Scriptures, favorite spiritual writers and selected music nourished my soul. Directed Retreats became opportunities to develop a deeper Personal relationship with God. As my prayer deepened, fewer words were needed. Silence and solitude became essential to My prayer. Contemplative time spent outside in nature also deepened my connection to God.

Two of her favorite titles for God were "The one who provides" and "Companion Presence."

It was a wonderful time for Mary and for many of us when she moved to the Motherhouse to assist in many unique ways her own IHM Sisters. Mary moved into the life at the Motherhouse with the same energy that she brought to teaching and the diverse ministries she developed over the years. She exercised her skills in caring for Sisters who she knew, had worked or lived with. She came to know sisters that were not so familiar to her. She was elected to the Elder Council and was enthusiastic about the possibilities she saw in the newly-revised House Council.

There was, however, one more journey in store for Mary. As some physical changes prompted seeking medical attention, tests revealed a cancer condition that was inoperable. Mary agreed to treatment that hopefully would reduce the size of the tumor. The effects were short-lived and over time the discomfort heightened. The need to move to the Health Care became clear and Mary soon felt the benefit of the thoughtful, thorough loving care of the nurses, CENAs, housekeepers, dietitian and Pastoral Care staff.

Mary's story reveals a woman who had remarkable capabilities not only in teaching but also in the new unfamiliar ministries that she so successfully carried out. The final part of Mary's journey was difficult for one who had mastered every challenge. At this stage of her journey the call was to SURRENDER, something that can be confusing and painful. And it was!

Mary, we rejoice with you that suffering is finished. We thank God for the great gift you have been to your family and friends, to those to whom you ministered and to us your IHM Sisters. Mary, we have one more request to make of you and we chose John O'Donohue's words to express it:

May you continue to inspire us:
to enter each day with a generous heart
to serve with courage and love
until we see your beautiful face again
in that land where there is no more separation,
where all tears will be wiped from our mind
and where there will be no space between us.

We give you back to God who first gave you to us and to so many whose lives were richer for having felt your presence.

Written and delivered by Donna Hart, IHM
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