

Remembering John Mary Baker, IHM June 13, 1920 – July 24, 2014



Much of this information has been gathered from Sister John Mary's page in the IHM Book of Life and from her autobiography written in 2005 titled, "The Nun's Tale (with apologies to Chaucer)."

Mary Ellen Baker, Sister John Mary, was born at home on June 13, 1920, the third of six children born to John Jr. and Estella (Crane) Baker. Her siblings were four brothers, John, Joseph, Francis and Thomas, and her sister Anne. She remarked that they lived on LaSalle Gardens, six blocks from St. Agnes School, and that the six of them made the round trip to St. Agnes twice daily.

John Mary notes that in the summer before her senior year, she secured a job with Lever Brothers, the makers of Life Bouy soap and Crisco, and that she worked the entire summer going house to house explaining their commodities to housewives. During her senior year, she worked Saturdays as a runner in the advertising department of the *Detroit News*. For this, she received \$5 per half day.

Upon graduating from St. Agnes with 12 years of IHM teachers, John Mary thought about entering the IHM community. Her mother, as well as three aunts, had also been educated by the IHMs at Cathedral High in Detroit. When John Mary told her family of her desire to enter the IHM community, her mother insisted that she attend Marygrove College for at least a year in order to be sure of her decision.

And so, John Mary entered Marygrove College with a scholarship from the National Youth Administration, which required her to work 15 hours per month for the college. Her task was correcting intelligence tests, mentored by Sister Florence Louise, who was then dean of Education. Having fulfilled her mother's wish for her to experience Marygrove, John Mary responded to the call to live out her life as an educator in the IHM community and entered the postulate in Monroe on July 2, 1939. What a gift she has been, not only to her IHM Sisters but to the many, many people with whom she has shared her life in ministry these many years.

Cardinal Newman once said, "Alas, what are we doing all through life, both as a necessity and a duty, but unlearning the world's poetry and attaining to is prose." For Newman, poetry meant aspirations, dreams, and prose meant the struggle to realize and accomplish the ideal, to reduce the hope and ambition to actuality. This seems to apply so well to John Mary's life among us as a poet, dreamer and "actualizer."

She began her ministry in education at St. Mary's, Monroe teaching third grade. This was followed with teaching elementary school children at St. Gregory and St. Charles in Detroit. From 1949 to 1955, John Mary taught junior high students at St. Michael in Flint. Returning to Detroit, she taught high school at Holy Redeemer from 1955 to 1961 and became assistant principal in

'61-'62. Many of her students still treasure the experience of her English class. John Mary once remarked that "teaching English was the love of her life."

After completing summers of study at Notre Dame and receiving her master's degree in English in 1958, John Mary spent seven summers administrating a camp for blind children sponsored by the Lions Club in the mountains of Pennsylvania. She describes this experience as a time of peace in the midst of some "not so memorable moments."

In 1962, John Mary was chosen to continue her educational ministry at our new High school, Immaculate Heart of Mary in Westchester, Ill. Here she served as English teacher, department head and school paper advisor. From 1967 to 1969 she was assistant principal and from 1969 to 1971, John Mary was the principal.

Her new ministerial ventures led her to Ohio where she served in education at Cleveland Central Catholic from 1971 to 1975 and as principal at Lorain Catholic from 1975 to 1978. In 1978, still offering her gift of administration, John Mary relocated to Freeport, Ill., to assume the task of administrator at St. Vincent Residential School for mentally handicapped adolescents. The school closed in 1987 for financial reasons.

In 1991, John Mary moved to Ann Arbor. Here she joined five of her IHM friends living in government housing and doing part-time work. Although she claimed that she was beginning retirement, her days were filled as she got a job as substitute teacher in the Ann Arbor public schools, became a hospice volunteer, became a mentor for students in the master's program at Marygrove via phone and mail, served as a homebound instructor, assisted at meals for the homeless, helped at a St. Vincent de Paul store, visited those who could not see and made phone calls for those whose English was limited.

In John Mary's own words, "On January 24, 2004, I made my move to Monroe and began my final trek." During these years since 2004, John Mary has been an active participant in the Motherhouse ministries as a lector, writer, greeter, mail distributor and more. John Mary was a great conversationalist, often taking us beyond the "nitty-gritty." John Mary had given 100 percent to all of the challenges of life among us and to all of her ministries. Now came the call to accept the realities of dementia and the move to the Memory Care unit where, at least at times, another would lead her. She still sometimes whispered that "there might be another way to run the railroad." After pacing the corridor for some time, John Mary shared with one of her friends that "there's gotta be a better way to salvation." Her eyes lit up when someone could share poetry with her. How appreciative she was of nieces and nephews who visited and at times whisked her away for vacation among them.

Quoting from the "Nun's Tale" John Mary tells us:

Truly, I've had a wonderful life. I've sipped the sweet wine of success and tasted the bitter dregs of failure. Along the way I've known joy and sorrow, which have shaped and supported me. I've found great consolation in these words of de Chardin.

The main stream of the tree of life has always climbed in the direction of spontaneity and greater consciousness. Thus the slow progress of energies must reach a peak from which life will never slip back. To overcome every obstacle, to unite our beings without loss of individual personality, there is a single force which nothing can replace and nothing destroy! A force which urges us forward and draws us upward: This is the force of love. I rest upon it!

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