Sister Josephine Karas, better known to us as “Jo” was born on Aug. 17, 1921 in Long Rapids, Mich. She was the second oldest in a family of five. Her brother, Francis, was a year-and-a-half older, Ivan, a second brother, was a year-and-a-half younger. Her two sisters, Bernice and Vivian arrived within the next five years.

Josephine’s father, Edward was raised in Minnesota. Her mother, Clara Catherine Krenz, grew up in Alpena, Mich. Strangely, it was World War I that brought them together. Her father was stationed at Fort Custer in Battle Creek and her mother had moved from Alpena to Battle Creek because there were plenty of jobs available since the war was on. Edward and Clara were married in St. Philip Church after the war.

Some years after they were married, it was determined that Mr. Karas had contracted tuberculosis (TB) during the war. Under the advice of the doctors that a drier climate would be beneficial, the family moved to North Dakota. However, within two years, the TB had become overpowering and Josephine’s dad needed to be separated from the family. He entered the Veterans’ Hospital in St. Paul, Minn.

Mrs. Karas then brought her five children back to Battle Creek where she had been previously employed. Here she felt that she could make a better life for her children in a more familiar environment, nearer to her family.

Josephine wrote: “I remember two occasions when Dad came to visit us in Battle Creek, but did not stay with us. I was ten years old when he died. I was very angry with God for doing such a thing.” She continued: “A government compensations check (albeit small) and Uncle Frank Krenz, my mother’s youngest brother, pulled us through the Depression Years. Our uncle continued to live with my family until he died. He was a wonderful, loving, caring man, who gave us everything that one would wish for in a father. We were five lucky children to have him in our midst.”

Josephine, and her brothers and sisters, received their education at St. Philip School in Battle Creek. At one point, the family moved into a more country area and then Josephine’s mom paid tuition with butter and eggs.

After her graduation from high school, Josephine worked as a nanny for two young children. During this time, the realization that she wanted to do something more with her life grew stronger and stronger.

Two IHM Sisters, Frances Dumas, and Catherine Therese Ambs, had been good and helpful friends to Josephine while she was in high school. She decided to speak with Sister Catherine Therese about entering the IHM community and found warm encouragement. Sister Eudora, the
local superior, expressed some reservations about the idea, however, believing that Josephine may have been needed at home, since she was the oldest girl in the family. “Fortunately for me,” Josephine recalled, “my Mom felt differently, and was happy that I had made that decision for my life.”

She entered the community on June 30, 1940, and received the habit on Jan. 2, 1941. She was given the name of Valencia, (“not my choice by any means!” she insisted), and in two years professed her vows and moved on to what she considered to be “the most wonderful years that anyone could wish for.”

Sister Josephine’s autobiography now picks up her story: “At seven-thirty a.m. on January 3rd, the day after Reception, Sr. Mary Emil and I boarded the bus on Telegraph Road in Monroe. It was a cold and snowy day as we left for St. Mary Convent, Akron, Ohio. The trip took us all day. At about eight o’clock p.m. we arrived at our destination, and received warm greetings from the Sisters. Sr. Mary Emil introduced me to all the Sisters, and what they taught, as well as where they sat at the table for meals, so that I felt very comfortable on my first mission.”

And so with that, Josephine began her teaching career as a fifth grade teacher under the guidance of Sister Laurella Jarboe. Her page in the Book of Life tells of her wonderful experience while living at St. Mary, Akron. The sad part was that she did not return in the fall because she did not have the number of credits required for Ohio certification.

Josephine was assigned to St. Gregory School in Detroit the next year and taught fourth grade. She had an attack of acute appendicitis just before the closing of school for the year and never returned.

On Aug. 2nd, 1944, her Mission slip read “Home.” Of this assignment, Sister Josephine wrote: “Blessings come when they are least expected. That is what happened when I was assigned to the Motherhouse kitchen to work with Sister Myra. It was during the Second World War and help was hard to find, so several sisters were engaged. During this time at home I got acquainted with many of the retired senior sisters. I learned about the early days in the community first hand. I heard about their early living conditions, and was introduced to their spiritual life as it was demonstrated daily. I felt very close to the heart of the community, and enjoyed those enduring friendships. Home became a loving place for me, and it still is today.”

Other assignments included teaching at St. Raymond School in Detroit; St. John, Jackson, Mich.; Minnetonka, Minn.; St. Patrick and Our Lady of Good Counsel in Detroit; Our Lady of Lake Huron in Harbor Beach, Mich.; St. Alphonsus, San Leandro, Calif.; and St. Mary, Lorain, Ohio. In the last three places, Sr. Josephine was school principal.

When her mother’s health declined, Sister Josephine requested to be missioned closer to her in Battle Creek. She taught at St. Philip School for a year. Then Sister Melanie, her provincial, told her of an opportunity to do parish work at St. Mary, Marshall, Mich., where she would still be near her mother. For the next 26 years, Jo served the people of that parish. Nine of those years were devoted to her being the religious education coordinator. Finally, the RCIA process was introduced in the Diocese, and RCIA became one of her full-time endeavors. Instructing
parents for the baptism of their children was its partner challenge. For Josephine, this was working in the heart of the church. She also visited the homebound and did all the many things that go on in a parish ministry.

Sister Josephine had the advantage of fine friendships throughout her life. She wrote: “It was no secret that Sister Maureen Nolan (Mary Caelan) and I were good friends (Mo and Jo). We were not exclusive by any means, because each of us enjoyed the friendship of many others.” Whether they visited one another at their various mission houses, had lunch and played cards, or took a trip together enjoying all the sites, the relaxation and fun they experienced made for happy memories.

For three summers, Sister Jo and five other sisters taught religious education to children in Invermere, B.C. They lived in the priest’s house, set up the program and taught five mornings a week. The weekends were for exploring. Josephine recalled: “Many times the six of us ventured out in our station wagon to see the beauty of the Northern Rocky Mountains, Lake Louise, the glaciers, waterfalls, hot springs, and anything else that came up.

“Once, in our long station wagon, as we drove up a mountain with hairpin curves, our driver (Sr. James Marian) realized that she could not make the turn. Very quietly she said: ‘I need to back up.’ Now there were no railings or barricades at the side of the road. All of us became silent as prayers filled the car, all of us hardly breathing. Ever so carefully, Sister backed up six inches and after several tries wriggled her way around the curve. God is Good! We went back to the house by another way.”

Other experiences that Josephine rated “fantastic” were her participation in the G.A.T.E. Program in Mexico; a trip to California with friends by train and her attendance at a Tri-Community meeting in Scranton by way of New York City and Cape Cod.

In 2001, a gentleman by the name of John Curtis contacted Sister Josephine on the Internet. He had found her name on the IHM website. Their ensuing conversation established that he had been a young seventh grade student of hers in Minnetonka, Minn., in 1958, one of the students who had “hung around” after school to talk with Sister. Shortly before John got in touch with Josephine, his wife had died of cancer. His daughters were grown; he had become an attorney, but was thinking of religious life. Sister and he kept in contact through email for the next few years. She was present when he became Brother Bonaventure at the Benedictine Monastery in Latrobe, Pa. Then, in 2010, Josephine and several of her IHM friends were invited to his ordination to the priesthood. This whole story of friendship is beautifully recorded at some length in Sister Josephine’s autobiography.

In 2003, at age 82, Josephine came “home” to the Motherhouse. She described her ministry as Prayer/Retired/Volunteer. Her call was to serve the needs of God’s people, especially sisters in the IHM Health Care Center. She purchased, or supplied, the desired articles for those sisters who were unable to do so for themselves. “A simple service for me,” she said, “but much appreciated by the receiver. I have been doing this for five years and have reaped a tremendous reward of friendships.”
In her page of the Book of Life, Sister Josephine wrote: “Now that I am in my golden years and have taken part in the Theological Reflections offered through the community, a new energy fills my life. I see God in new, and different loving ways. Readings and lectures on Ecology have given me a deeper insight on nature and its relationship to God. Life is truly beautiful.”

In another place she stated: “Our Blessed Mother has always been there for me. She took care of the big hurdles in my life, and many of the smaller ones, so easily. And I think of my own mother, a remarkable woman. She never remarried after my father died although she had five children between the ages of twelve and three to raise. Though she had no professional education as a teacher, nurse, psychologist, counselor, cook, pray-er and wonderful mother, she ranked high in each category!

God has been very good to me. My favorite three words are, ‘Thank you, God.’ I hope and pray that God will take care of this IHM community that I love with all my heart.”

Then, as a kind of after-thought, she added: “I rented a plot of real estate in the organic garden area and raised tomato plants. Three other Sisters chipped in, but I did the weeding and watering. The tomatoes were delicious!”

Dear Josephine, you have given your life here on planet Earth with love, joy, and compassion for those among whom you lived and ministered for more than 90 years.

Thomas Merton reminds us that “our destiny is to go forward beyond everything, to leave everything, to press forward to the End and find in the End our Beginning, the ever-new Beginning that has no end.”

Go forward then, with our love and gratitude.

Relying on Josephine’s documents, written and delivered by Marie Gatza, IHM
Feb. 3, 2015