In one of her writings, Joan Chittister has said: “Mystery is what happens to us when we allow life to evolve rather than having to make it happen all the time.”

When we think about it, despite our making plans for our lives, our life work, our relationships, there are occasions when it feels there is a call that we cannot resist … to make a change, to let something happen and evolve into something new. This kind of mystery seems a part of the life story of Sister Monica Stein.

But to begin with, let us learn a little of her earliest years. Sister Monica Stein was born on the third of November in 1937 in Vacherie, La. Three days later, she was baptized Emeline Marie at the church of Our Lady of Peace in Vacherie. Her parents, both good Catholics, were Euclide Joseph and Celestine Marie (Gros) Stein.

There is no autobiographical description of her early family life anywhere in our files in Monroe. But we know that Emeline had three brothers, Joseph, Raymond and Murphy; and a sister, Madeline, all of whom live in Louisiana.

From documents and letters within the IHM Archives, we learn that Emeline graduated from St. James High School in St. James, La. At age 17, she believed strongly that she had a call to religious life. She therefore entered the diocesan community of the Immaculate Conception of Matairie, La., in 1955. This was a small community of women religious in which Emeline completed her formation and professed final vows.

In the summer of 1958 Sister Monica began coursework toward a degree at St. Mary’s Dominican College in Louisiana, attending summer school courses for the next few years. Meanwhile, like the members of many other communities of women religious in those days, she taught in the elementary schools of New Orleans and Larose, La. Monica loved teaching right from the start. She fully believed that it was the right ministry for her. For a time, too, she served as vocation directress for her religious community.

While taking courses during summer school at Mundelein College in Chicago in the late ‘60s, Monica met our Sister Praxades (Eileen Mills). Monica learned from her that young sisters of various communities were gaining their college degrees along with our IHM Junior Sisters on the Monroe Campus of Marygrove College. Monica was immediately interested and Sister Praxades encouraged her to contact Sister Mary Jo Maher, the dean at the Monroe Campus.

Our Archives have in the IHM Scholasticate Chronicles of 1967-1968, the correspondence that occurred between Mother Dolores, Monica’s superior in Louisiana and Sister Mary Jo Maher here in Monroe, as plans were being made for Monica to complete her studies toward a bachelor degree on the Monroe campus.
Monroe offered a full scholarship to Sister Monica, who gratefully accepted it. Mother Dolores, the superior general of the Immaculate Conception community, sincerely expressed her gratitude as she was facing many problems regarding the professional training of her sisters.

And so it was; Sister Monica arrived at the train station in Toledo where IHM Sisters awaited her on the afternoon of Jan. 11, 1968. She would spend the next two years living and studying with IHM sister-students on the Motherhouse Campus and also would get her teaching certificate through Marygrove.

In 1970, Sister Monica began living with IHM Sisters at Holy Name Convent in Birmingham, Mich., where, interestingly, Sister Ruth McGuire was one of our sisters on mission there. Monica did her student-teaching at Holy Name School, instructing second-and third-graders.

Following this experience, Sister Monica returned to her community in Louisiana. From there she wrote: “The thank you I say today is my greatest thank you ever. My heart is filled to overflowing with gratitude for being able to study in Monroe. It is an experience I will always treasure and remember. But I know that most of all I am so happy to have lived with the IHM community. I have learned so much about what is most important in life. I think I can best show my gratitude to you by sharing all I’ve learned with my own community here and with others.”

Even while she had been living with IHMs at Holy Name, thoughts about the future of the Immaculate Conception community and about her remaining a member within it were frequently in her heart and prayer. The number of her community sisters had dropped to 34. Monica had worked in the community’s renewal program, which she felt put her in a position to make first-hand observations about how the community was progressing. She was aware that there had been no new vocations for several years. She wondered whether there was sufficient leadership that could make the community a meaningful one in the church of Vatican II times. Most members were elderly and did not possess sufficient theological background to cope with the renewal which the times called for. She agonized over all this and finally realized that she could no longer remain in a situation which produced a conflict within her own mind and heart.

All of this, she communicated to her superior in Louisiana. A letter to Sister Margaret Brennan followed soon after, stating: “I would like at this time to make a formal request to be allowed to transfer to the IHM Community.” She explained in some detail her reasons for believing that a transfer to a different community was essential to her continuing in religious life. When all necessary negotiations had been finally and agreeably completed between the two communities, Sister Monica Stein formally made profession of vows in the congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, according to the prescribed regulations of the Sacred Congregation of Religious, Rome, on Friday, June 23, 1972.

After her profession, Monica’s places of ministry in the field of education included: Our Lady of Mt. Carmel School in Tempe, Ariz.; St. Jerome School in Phoenix; Our Lady of Miracles Education Center in Gustine, Calif.; St. Raphael School in Iowa, La., where she was religious education coordinator; St. Clare School in Santa Clara, Calif., where she was again religious education coordinator and, finally, back again to St. Jerome School as a teacher aide between 2000-2015.
There is an interesting note in the Chronicles of Our Lady of Miracles in Gustine, Calif. The Monroe IHMs had been missioned to Gustine, Calif., in the 1950s. In the late ‘50s, they had left under rather difficult circumstances. Shortly after their departure, the Los Angeles IHMs had staffed the school for a couple of years. But then the school closed and remained closed.

In 1979, under a new pastor, the parish worked to reopen the school, which was to provide the focus of the parish’s renewal. As a result of the new pastor’s constant calling to Monroe to secure sisters for the staff, the word was published to the IHM Sisters and three sisters responded. One of them was Sister Monica Stein. As she did not drive a car, Sister Monica had purchased a red motor scooter while in Phoenix in order to get around. So, upon her arrival in Gustine, the RED motor scooter was the talk of the town! The last time that anyone in Gustine had seen an IHM Sister, she had been in the long, blue IHM habit and now an IHM had returned on a RED motor scooter!

Sister Monica’s years in ministry were all completed in the western part of the country and few of us had the opportunity to know her very personally. However, those IHMs who lived and ministered with her remember Sister Monica as easy and fun to be with, warm-hearted, friendly and having an engaging laugh. Being from the South, she could tell the best Cajun jokes, entertaining the whole group. Monica was a private person though, who did not speak often of herself. However, when she and Pat Nagle, also a transfer to the IHMs, might be together at a Mission Unit meeting, the two shared what that journey of transfer to another community had meant to each of them. Monica related effectively to people of the parish and to the parents of the children she taught. She was wonderful with children. She loved them and they responded to her very well. She was a creative and artistic teacher of her students, who were mostly first-and second-graders.

In one of her Commitment Forms Monica wrote: “My ministry in elementary education is a joy in that it allows me to be a part of helping children put their faith into action through school service projects … to affirm the rights of others … and to become life-long learners.”

In another, she speaks of her ministry as having a vision for all to come together to “build bridges, walk across them, and reach out to others with open hearts.” She continues: “I think of the community in which I am living and teaching as one that is committed to reaching out to all the diverse cultures of the area, the marginalized, and especially the Hispanics. It is not only the children in formal education that call upon my ministry, but many of their parents when the need arises. I find joy in being part of this community.”

Following Sister’s death, Sister Mary Ann Mahoney, IHM, offered some thoughts for our reflection on Monica’s life. “Monica and I had been good friends for many years,” Mary Ann stated, “and when I was planning to move to the Motherhouse in Monroe at the end of 2014, it seemed quite normal to ask Monica if she might be thinking of the same thing. Monica said, yes, she was thinking of it, ‘but not just yet.’”

However, in January 2015, when serious illness caused her to be hospitalized at the John C. Lincoln Hospital in Phoenix, Monica was again made aware that none of us is sole master of our
life plans. Her health condition declined to a point where she could not physically make the trip to our Health Care Center in Monroe.

From Jan. 23 until the time of her death on Jan. 26, Sisters Mary Ann Mahoney and Shirley Houff were present with Monica. “Though on a respirator and not able to speak,” Mary Ann reflected, “Monica made a sign to us, indicating that she was aware of our presence, prayer, and support. At the time of her gentle death, Shirley and I were at her bedside along with a number of her faithful lay friends. Monica’s brother, Raymond could not be present, but he phoned from Louisiana to say his ‘good-bye’ to Monica.”

Mary Ann described in some detail the beautiful funeral that Monica had at St. Jerome Catholic Church in Phoenix on Jan. 29. The pastor, people of the parish and school all had a part in making it a joyous, grateful acknowledgement of the life of this sister whom they loved. On Jan. 30, a Memorial Mass took place at Our Lady of Peace Catholic Church in Vacherie, where Monica’s big family gathered together to remember and pray for her.

This morning, here in our Motherhouse Chapel, we celebrate with thanksgiving the life and ministry of our Sister Monica Stein. We recognize the mystery present in Monica’s, every day and in ours, as well. May she rejoice and be glad as she enters fully into the presence of the Holy One – Holy Mystery – in whose light and shadows she has journeyed all these 77 years. Peace and love from us all.

Written and delivered by Marie Gatza, IHM
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