Remembering Rose Carmel Burgess, IHM
Feb. 8, 1928 – March 15, 2015

How vivid are our images of Rose Carmel sharing her many gifts! A grieving friend remarked, “I can’t imagine Rose Carmel’s voice being silent. Who’s going to sing the ‘Ave Maria’ the way she did it?”

Another one said, “I looked forward to her joyful piano renditions after Mass on Friday mornings. Such uplifting music filled the Chapel.”

Still another recalled, “I’ll always remember her Easter vigil solo before the Paschal candle as Lent came to an end.”

All of us knew what a memory she had for party songs.

We pause today to ask ourselves, “Who was this remarkable woman sharing life’s journey these four score and more years?”

Certainly many came to know her through her lovely voice and her instrumental skills. She lifted us Godward through these singular gifts. At the same time, she revealed her own beauty. We came to know a person of lively faith and probing intelligence. We witnessed her ready generosity, her deep compassion, her quick humor and availability.

She was born in Grand Rapids, Mich., on Feb. 8, 1928. I was in awe that her resurrection liturgy should be today, the Feast of St. Joseph, because she was baptized Mary Josephine. It seems that God arranged the timing.

Clearly she has been in God’s hands all these years even though her life direction took a sudden early twist. “I was adopted at the age of four months,” Rose wrote. “My biological father was, I believe, a musician, and my mother a devout Catholic and deeply philosophical. (I happened to find the adoption papers when I was ten or twelve; I had always known I was adopted and considered it a great privilege.)”

Her biological parents were George and Elizabeth Briggs. Apparently she never met them.

Her adoptive parents were James E. Burgess and Violet (Bauman) Burgess. She wrote, “My adoptive mother was Catholic, my father Protestant, but religious in his own way. He was converted the year before his death in 1961. They were very loving but indulgent,” Rose noted, “and since I remained the only child I was very pampered and sheltered. On the other hand, I learned to be comfortable with my own company.

“We never had much money, and since my father had a serious year-long illness when I was eight or nine years old, finances were even more stringent. Fortunately, an aunt and uncle could help and provided piano lessons for me. My parents were not musically inclined, but were very supportive.”
A brief biography written years later by a friend comments, “Sr. Rose Carmel began her musical studies in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, at the age of 7, and by the time she reached high school she was already in demand as an accompanist for her musical friends.”

Rose herself confirms her early work as a musician, “In high school I never dated, but belonged to two social groups – one a mixed group of boys and girls who were musically inclined, and more interested in group socialization than in dating. I belonged to a trio consisting of violin, cello and piano, which performed at various teas, meetings, etc. I also accompanied for the choir and for vocal solos, little realizing that I would spend the greater part of my ministry doing just that.

“My mother had two aunts who were IHM nuns, and from my earliest years I felt the call to religious life.” Those two aunts were Sisters Mary Albert and Beatrice Brehler. “I begged to be allowed to go to parochial school, but the twenty dollar tuition was too much for us to afford, and my parents were too proud to accept the subsidy from the parish. Since I had had polio when I was three (without any lasting effects) they claimed that it would be more convenient for me to attend Lincoln School, which was only two blocks from our house, rather than St. Mary’s eight or ten blocks away.

“At the age of eleven, I had to have braces on my teeth. This necessitated a trip from Mt. Clemens, Michigan, to Detroit, twenty miles away. For the first year my grandmother went with me on the bus; after that I was allowed to go by myself, and had a great time exploring downtown Detroit, which of course was safer at that time. Later [in 1944] when I was sixteen, I spent six weeks in New York at a summer school for high school students at Juilliard, and again did much exploring on my own of the ‘sidewalks of New York.’ It is no wonder that I still love to travel on my own.”

Upon graduation Rose Carmel merited a year’s scholarship to Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Oberlin, Ohio, until she entered the Immaculate Heart of Mary congregation on July 2, 1946.

It was not long after her entry into the IHMs that Rose Carmel completed her bachelor’s degree in music at Marygrove College. And like many of the rest of us, she gained her master’s degree as well from Wayne State University while teaching music and sometimes other subjects at all levels.

As the years unfolded, her music ministry proved diverse. She taught students in classroom and studio. She taught instrumental and voice and music history. She served as liturgy director, choral director, choir director, accompanist and entertainer. She ministered in locations from Harbor Beach, Mich., to Akron, Ohio, and went on chorale tours in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the former Soviet Union, as well as in the Archdiocese of Detroit. In addition to her two years at Marygrove College as a sister-student, Rose Carmel served at the college as accompanist and instructor for 27 years and took a sabbatical year as well at Marygrove.

Rose Carmel knew some memorable activities and moments. With Sister Nativita Van Blarcom, Rose proudly told of composing two musicals. She performed for Archbishop Desmond Tutu at the Annual Cranbrook Peace Foundation Conference. In the Archdiocese of Detroit, she led the schools in their opening liturgies of the school year at the Cathedral for some years. In a ministry
of entertainment to restaurant patrons in eight fine restaurants in the Detroit area, Rose Carmel accompanied several outstanding musicians. She herself vocalized, much to the pleasure of the patrons. One evening she even accompanied Bishop Moses Anderson singing “Old Man River” when he appeared among the patrons.

Rose Carmel’s repertoire was broad, ranging, she said, from “the most high flying arias, Neapolitan songs, to Broadway and operetta music” to light-hearted or reflective songs for various occasions and ethnicities.

Yes, her spirit was drenched in music. It was on her lips, in her hands and fingers. Even in her ears. I remember at Immaculata High School one evening she shared with me a concert tape. I heard a rich melody, but she thrilled to the whole of it – the words, each instrument, every crescendo and diminuendo. It was so much a part of her.

Rose Carmel had other artistic interests. She became widely known as a trained calligrapher. She developed a business, Serendipity Prints. She created, merchandised and enjoyed deeply her thoughtful greeting cards as well as her paintings. A lover of art, she sought it out and opened up the riches of sculpture and painting to us through her teaching and travel.

She was a poet as well. She drew out profound insights from nature; its silence and loveliness spoke to her wherever she found it as this poem says so well:

I don’t really need
The thousand forget-me-nots
By the water’s edge.

Let sleeping rocks lie
Leave the driftwood
On the beach
And do not uproot
A great joy
From its native silence
To bring it within words.

In these final months and days, unable to sing or play an instrument, surely she shared in Jesus’ Passion. A poem she wrote in March of 1969 forecast her understanding of the mystery of suffering when she wrote:

I was lonely
So I went up to Tabor
But He had just left.
I’ll go up to Calvary –
He’s always there.

Yes. We celebrate her abundant gifts benefitting thousands of students, audiences, artists, and friends. We celebrate her generosity in sharing all that beauty and inspiration. We are grateful for her kindness in so many other ordinary ways – driving health care patients to doctors or travelers to the airport or taking vacationers far and wide and always lending a helping hand wherever needed. She was a daily companion offering her broad knowledge, her humor, and her lively wit to conversation. In short, we embrace her as a friend in more ways than we can count or enumerate. We have been blessed by her presence among us.

The embrace of our good God be yours, Sister Rose Carmel Burgess. We are all the richer for having journeyed along with you. For a long time we will draw strength and wisdom from your ever-questing spirit.

We close our reflection with the words you chose from T.S. Eliot to mark your Golden Jubilee:

“With the drawing of this love and the voice of this calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

Written and delivered by Joan Glisky, IHM
March 19, 2015