Remembering Cecilia Schmidt, IHM  
Jan. 18, 1925 – May 1, 2015

“Gratitude fills my heart when I realize all the wonderful opportunities I have been given.” Cecilia wrote in her autobiography.

Cecilia was born in 1925 in Geneva Township, Wis. Her parents, Philip Schmidt and Angela (Bauer), of German descent, were also from Wisconsin. Cecilia wrote, “I came from a poor, happy and faith-filled family – mom and dad, three boys, and five girls. Mary became a Missionary of Mary; my other brothers and sisters gave me 43 nieces and nephews. Our father went blind when I was ten and the baby was only nine-days old, so there were many adjustments and struggles. We lived on the property of Duns Scotus College in Southfield, Mich.” After his blindness occurred, Philip Schmidt built his life around his carpentry trade. Eventually, with the aid of his oldest son and his wife, he drew up blueprints and built houses. Angela was Philip’s eyes and his partner in business. And when their carpentry business closed, she went to work as a sales clerk at a bakery and cooked at convents and rectories. During this time, her needle was always busy, sewing clothing and alterations for friends and neighbors.

“I chose to enter the congregation in 1943, after graduation. The thought of dedicating myself to God came in and out of my consciousness from second grade on. When I was in the ninth grade I was reading the autobiography of the Little Flower, and I had an intense experience of being loved. I wanted to give my whole self to God as a sister. Having had Dominican Sisters for eight years, St. Joseph Sisters for one year, and IHMs for three years posed a dilemma for me. I settled on IHMs, because of my love for Mary and the fact that IHMs were stricter, and I wanted to give my ALL to God.”

Cecilia was received in January 1944 and given the name Sister Mary Dalene. She made her first vows on Jan. 2, 1946, and her final vows three years later. She received her BA from Marygrove and her MA from Wayne State University. Cecilia began teaching in Detroit schools in 1945; she taught both primary and middle grades. In 1958 through 1963 she taught at St. Peter Claver in Mobile, Ala. She wrote, “The experience in Mobile, Alabama was one I will never forget. Those were segregation days and teaching with the African American community, opened my eyes to the struggles of the poor and the pain of racism and prejudice we all have.”

In 1963 Cecilia was missioned to Holy Name, Birmingham. It was there she and Nancy Ayotte met and became life-long friends. Nancy says that Cecilia was an extraordinary teacher, kind and gentle, very organized, very helpful. Her artistic talents were drawing, painting and working with clay. Together, Nancy, Judy O’Brien and Cecilia did many projects for their schoolwork. One of Cecilia’s last projects was for Nancy’s atrium – she made a triptych of the Holy Family and their Flight into Egypt.
In 1974 Cecilia began ministry among the Native Americans on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and later in Anadarko, Oklahoma with Sister Francine Malzone. It was here she realized that “My world was bigger than the Catholic Church since Oklahoma was only 2 percent Catholic.” Cecilia was loved and accepted by the Native Americans; they accepted her into their customs and prayers and pow-wows, and even gave her an Indian name. In May of 1979 Father Michael Chapman, the pastor in Anadarko, wrote the following about the sisters working with him:

It was four years ago that two great people came into Caddo County to offer their services, their comforting ministry, their many personal talents and especially their lives of loving witness. For many years they served the Catholic Church as excellent school teachers and school administrators. In this decade the Lord has called them to pastoral ministry beyond the school system. I am speaking of Sister Francine Malzone and Sister Cecilia Schmidt. We here in Caddo County have seen their personable talents take root and blossom in ourselves, our children, our elderly and infirm. Both sisters are quite well known and respected for their service, but I think more especially for their nonjudgmental kindness. I invite you, my friends, to join me in honoring these two great spirits, “Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.”

In 1977 Cecilia’s father died suddenly. Cecilia wrote of this, “I learned death is real, it hurts very much and one needs others to help cope.”

Her next mission was in Carrizozo, N.M., with Gail Stackpole. “Living with Gail was a great blessing,” she said. “I experienced a deep sense of IHM community, and of shared prayer. I had never shared so deeply my love for God and my journey with my God. Yet Carrizozo was a year to remember for other reasons. The pastor, a man with serious personal problems, fired me in a fit of rage; and Gail resigned in protest. Finishing out that year, I worked five part-time jobs.”

In 1982, Cecilia was missioned to Minnesota, to the parishes of St. Joseph in Chisholm and Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in Buhl. Cecilia was alone there, but she found support with a group of Benedictine Sisters who lived nearby. In her ministry there, Cecilia and Carole Gornick began a program called Befriender Ministry, which trained people in listening with their hearts to those in need. During that time, Cecilia also completed a course in spiritual direction. The following observation was written about her by her director in that program:

One of the gifts Cecilia really brings to spiritual direction is the ability to listen with her heart. She has sensitivity, a compassion for people, a caring and a kindness about her that facilitates people’s sharing. Her own love for God and desire to grow in that relationship is also a gift she brings to spiritual direction. She has a gift for deep understanding and the ability to communicate that as she listens.”

From 1998 until 2004, Cecilia continued to minister at the two parishes in Minnesota. She found this ministry was very life-giving, and although she retired in 2004, she continued to volunteer there until it became apparent that she needed to come home to the Motherhouse. This was a difficult decision – Cecilia said she left a part of her heart in Minnesota. She arrived in Monroe in June of 2006 with hands open to the will of God.
Cecilia continues: “When I met Melissa Hug, an IHM Associate, I felt that I could trust her, and I shared my story with her. She and Judith Bonini have been ‘God-sends’ – persons with whom I could share deeply. I moved to Memory Care in February of 2009, and I’m trying to adjust to my lack of independence. It’s hard, but I have met some very good people there.

“Throughout my time of diminishment, my family has been a rock for me. I frequently spent extended time with my brothers and sisters, whom I love dearly. With them I have been to several family reunions, and my sister Emmy has taken me to Florida for wonderful vacations. Another vacation that was a special joy to me was a trip to Minnesota with Melissa for two weeks. How I loved seeing my old friends!

“For however long God keeps me on this earth, I will be eternally grateful for my religious vocation. I am blessed and proud to have been an IHM for seventy some years. I owe the community so much, and I continue to minister to my sisters at the Motherhouse in whatever way I can – prayer, art, and acts of kindness. God is very much alive in my heart! When I get to heaven, one of my greatest joys will be embracing my dear Mom and Dad again. Never could I have had more wonderful parents. Their goodness, faith, and perseverance in the face of many struggles have always been an inspiration. God has been so good to me, and yes, my hands are still open to His will.”

The following poem by St. Irenaeus was found among Cecilia’s memories:

It is not you who shape God; it is God who shapes you.
If then you are the work of God, await the hand of the Artist
who does all things in due season.
Offer the Potter your heart, soft and tractable,
and keep the form in which the Artist has fashioned you.
Let your clay be moist, lest you grow hard
and lose the imprint of the Potter’s fingers.

Written and delivered by Roberta Richmond, IHM
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