Remembering Jean Burbo, IHM
June 29, 1931 – June 19, 2015

Jean Burbo was born on June 29, 1931, and named Barbara Jean. Her parents were William Burbo and Mary Magdalene Navarre, both of French descent. There were nine children: Alma, Thomas, Walter, Donald, Vera, Emma, Edna, Virginia and Jean, the youngest. Their father worked as a supervisor at a quarry in Trenton, Mich. Their aunt, Emma Burbo, was a Sister of the Sacred Heart in Grosse Pointe.

Jean was baptized at St. Joseph Church, Trenton, and attended public school. She was proud of Slocum Truax High School and often boasted that they had the best literature teachers there. Even in the Postulate, when sisters mentioned their high schools (such as St. Mary of Redford, Holy Redeemer or Immaculata), she would give a cheer for Slocum Truax.

Jean attended Marygrove College for a while after high school and Sister Virgilene was her favorite teacher and mentor there. The young women at Marygrove were expected to act like young ladies and were not to be found at “The Cup,” a hangout just across McNichols Road. The legend goes (and we’re not sure where it arose), that one day Sister Anna Marie Grix (known as Sam to the students), dean of students at the college, found her way over there to make her presence known. She entered into conversation with the proprietor, who quite unknowingly asked her: “Who is this person called ‘Sam,’ the girls are always talking about?”

Jean entered the IHM community on Aug. 19, 1950, before she finished her work for her bachelor’s degree at Marygrove. She was received into the Novitiate on Aug. 15, 1951 and was given the name, Sister Incarnita. Sister made her first profession on Aug. 15, 1953, and her final profession three years later.

While she was in formation, on her birthday, her five sisters and her mother each baked a cake and brought ice cream and Vernor’s Ginger Ale for all of us in the Postulate and Novitiate. No one ever forgot June 29th!

In October 1953, while Jean was a second-year novice, she was sent to St. Mary in Monroe to teach fifth grade in the place of a sister who had fallen ill. So she had to miss some of her college classes. Sister Amata Miller, a classmate, was given the responsibility to share the content of a theology class with her. So they met for weekly discussions, and it was then that this unlikely twosome became good friends.

As a young sister, Jean taught elementary school at Holy Name in Birmingham, Christ the King in Detroit and St. Mark in Cleveland, where her friend, Sister Angela Reese (Carleen), was her principal.
In 1960 Jean was sent to Holy Redeemer School in Liberty City, Fla., where she taught eighth and ninth grade world history. She often spoke lovingly about her students there. The IHM time at the school was short, since the student body was mainly African-American and so the sisters were replaced by an African-American community after only two years.

Jean then returned to Michigan where she began to teach high school at Sacred Heart, Dearborn and at St. Patrick in Wyandotte. Besides the regular subjects (English, government, world history, foreign relations and science), she, as a popular young teacher, also managed the Pep Squad, Future Teachers’ Club, Sodality, C.C.D. and Student Council. In the summer of 1961, she began her master’s program in political science at Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

Besides this busy life, Jean carried the burden of family illness. Her dear mother, to whom she was particularly close, suffered several strokes and was confined to a wheelchair for many years, and her father had several heart attacks. When her father died, he was waked and buried from the same house in Trenton where he had been born and had lived for 91 years. Jean always had a particular love for her home neighborhood where she and the family of her eldest sister, Alma, grew up. Jean always called Alma’s sons, Denny, Chuck and Mike, her “brothers.”

In 1968 Jean returned to Marygrove – this time to teach history and political science and to serve as residence hall director. Two years later, she was missioned to Sienna Heights College in Adrian, Mich., to teach political science. In 1976 she went to St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas, as associate dean of students and later vice president of Student Affairs.

In 1986, the Bishop of Austin, John McCarthy, asked her if she would be director of Cedarbrake, a renewal center 60 miles north of Austin. She said, “I really had no experience to prepare me for that, but there was a real need, so I decided to try to meet it.” She actually spoke a bit too modestly, since she had just completed several years of CPE training for hospital chaplaincy.

In a 2001 publication called The IHM Journal, Sister Anne Crane, a revered English professor at St. Edward’s for 30 years, wrote the following:

Sister Incarnita’s royal blue habit told her students and anyone else who saw her in Michigan, Ohio or Florida during the 1950s and 1960’s that she was a Monroe IHM. Today in central Texas, it is in the messages of personal prayer and spirituality and commitment to social justice that she brings the IHM presence to people who are seeking to deepen their spiritual life. From the beginning, one could witness tremendous growth and development for both Sister Jean and the Center. Four years later, the Renewal Center had grown to include a Chapel and small library administrative offices, a Conference Center serving groups of 200 and six guest houses for over-night stays. Each week-end is booked several years in advance, primarily by Catholic adults interested in retreat.

As director of Cedarbrake for 18 years, Sister Jean supervised the planning, construction and operation of most of the facilities. Her greatest delight, however, was in maintaining the beautiful natural setting for those seeking quiet time for prayer and reflection.

One of her objectives was to provide the people of the Austin diocese the opportunity to interact with nationally known theologians and leaders in social justice ministry. Jean’s earlier IHM
education and experience as a teacher of political science contributed to her passion for social justice. Whether it was in creating the focus of a retreat or fostering the contemplative, natural environment she responded to people’s desire to come to a place away, to meditate, pray, and deepen their spiritual lives.

While Jean was at the renewal center her mission unit would meet there three or four times a year. Jean provided much of the fun enjoyed by the sisters who came for the regular weekend meeting. Mission unit members came from Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, California, Georgia, Illinois and elsewhere. She was a delightful hostess and a great cook! Her delicious hot soups were special! Members of the mission unit still recall sitting by the fireplace, discussing community needs and enjoying the outdoors.

Jean had a contagious sense of humor. You never knew when to expect a witty response or a funny story. Did you ever use her email address? It started with “iaminky” and the “inky” reminded you of her nickname as Sister Incarnita.

In the early 1980s, Jean had a long period of convalescence from cancer. Pat O’Connor, a professor at St. Edward’s, offered to let her stay at her apartment in Austin to be closer to her doctors. Pat’s family had given a large piece of property to the Diocese of Austin for the Cedarbrake Renewal Center. Pat’s family home, an old historic Texas house resided on that property, and in time Pat and Jean moved there. Jean retired from the renewal center in 2002 and continued living with Pat there until 2010. Pat was a loyal and devoted friend.

Jean had a real dislike of animals; however, she had no choice but to tolerate them. Pat grew up loving animals and there was plenty of space on the family property for the animals to thrive. Pat had two cats, Henry and Eileen; two dogs; a pampered pot-bellied pig named Deedee (who had her own little house with a picket fence and mailbox); two Jerusalem donkeys (Ruth and Naomi); Henrietta; roosters and egg-laying hens, and several noisy pheasants. When Jean met either Henry or Eileen in the house, she would say “ugh!” But later she came to love Poppy and Peppy, who had special affection for her, and she for them.

In 2010 Jean moved to the Motherhouse, where she continued to do a ministry of presence among the sisters. It is quite obvious that Jean was an intelligent, creative and courageous person during her various ministries, yet nothing of what has been said conveys the beautiful kindness she manifested during her time in Monroe. Her presence in Memory Care lifted the hearts and spirits of her companions. Jean always went out to others, expressing gratitude for every service and personal concern for each person. She was loved by the nursing staff who cared for her.

In her own words on her page in the Book of Life, Jean wrote of her own spirituality. So it is fitting to let her words close this Remembering:

As I reflected on the various transformational events, the ups and downs, and the wonderful surprises of God’s ways, I was filled with gratitude and wonder. One of the insights that kept coming back to me was that many events that were not exactly the way I would have planned or desired them, turned out to be major sources of blessings, enrichment, and stepping stones to a deeper relationship with God. The Formation I had in a warm, loving family, that which I received in the Congregation--formally and
informally--led me to the recognition of a God Who loves me very much, and knew better than I did what was really important and good for me. Unfortunately, I am neither creative nor artistic enough to find a unique way to express this, but I did find that these words of Julian of Norwich seemed to capture what I realized.

When judgment is given, and we are all brought up above,
then we shall see clearly in God the secrets now hidden from us.
In that day, not one of us will want to say, 'Lord if it had been done this way, it would have been well.' We shall all say, with one voice, 'Lord, blessed may you be! For it is so, and it is well. And now we see truly that all things are done as it was ordained before anything was made.'

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