Remembering Mary Kinney, IHM
Feb. 24, 1924 – Aug. 4, 2015

To appreciate Mary Kinney’s deep faith, her love of community, her dedication to education, her commitment to the poor, her simplicity in word and in lifestyle, and her remarkable leadership ability, we must understand something of her birthplace – Emmett, Mich.

The township of Emmett was founded in 1850 by Irish immigrants who had fled the great famine of the 1840s and settled on land in Michigan that reminded them of the Emerald Isle. “They brought little with them except their strong Catholic faith, a willingness to work hard, and a sense of humor along with a hope for a better life for themselves and their families.” (Newspaper article about new sign at Kenockee cemetery, undated.) Among those pioneer families were the great-grandparents of Sister Mary Kinney.

In 1851, shortly after their arrival, the Irish settlers established a Catholic mission and cemetery in the township at a place called Kenockee, located two miles east of the present town of Emmett. The parish cemetery is still at Kenockee.

The first church was a log cabin; the second was a wood-frame church built after the Civil War. The parish was named Our Lady of Mount Carmel. In 1896, as the parish grew, Bishop Foley and the parishioners decided that a new church should be built and that it should be located in the village of Emmett. It was a beautiful, large, Gothic church, and it was to that church that a young priest, Father John Farrell, came as pastor in 1923. He immediately asked the IHM Sisters to open a parochial school.

In September 1924, four IHM Sisters arrived, headed by Sister Liguori Stanley – who is still referred to lovingly by the Emmett people as “Mother Liguori.” The school opened in October with 125 eager students. The Sisters instilled in the children a love for reading, taught them composition, closely supervised their handwriting, and made sure that they learned mathematics, history and all the other subjects. By Christmas, the children’s choir enlivened the celebration of Mass; and, at the end of the school year in June 1925, some of the children gave a piano, violin and horn recital for the parents. By the beginning of the second year, in September 1925, Our Lady of Mount Carmel School offered education from first grade through 10th grade.

Today, former students of our school in Emmett still thank the sisters for their education and for instructing them in the Catholic faith and inspiring them to be prayerful, devout Catholics. They also appreciate how the sisters respected the rhythm of farm life at harvest time, encouraged 4-H programs and excused boys who were absent during hunting season.

But above all, the kindness of Mother Liguori and the joyfulness of the IHMs who served at Emmett established a relationship of love and respect between the students, their families and the sisters that began in the first days and has lasted long after the IHMs left the school in the early
1970s. It was this relationship that inspired some young women to become IHM Sisters – one of whom was Mary Elizabeth Kinney.

She was the fourth of 10 children born to Ambrose Kinney and Marian Mahar (not related to me, by the way). The oldest was Rita, then Mary Ann (who died as an infant), followed by Patrick, Mary Elizabeth, Georgiann (who died when only 18 months old), Lucy, Jeremiah (known as Jerry), Michael, John (know as Jack) and finally Margaret, called Peggy, who was born when Mary was a novice.

After finishing the 10th grade at Our Lady of Mount Carmel in June 1940, Mary entered the IHM congregation. She was 16 years of age. Mary completed her high school courses during her year as a postulant (IHM candidate) and graduated from St. Mary Academy in June 1941.

In August, she entered the novitiate and was given the name Sister Mary Bede. Two years later, having professed her first vows in August 1943, Sister Mary Bede began her 25 years as an outstanding elementary school teacher and principal. She taught every grade from first to eighth and every subject in those grades, except seventh and eighth grade math.

In 1957, when Mary was appointed principal of the new St. Timothy School in Trenton, Mich., she had only one lay teacher and one IHM, Rita Mary Rennell, to help her. But, over the next decade, enrollment reached 800 students in the school and approximately 1,000 students in the religious education on Saturdays. Nothing seemed to faze Mary. In fact, the greater the challenge, the more she enjoyed it.

Mary’s leadership abilities were recognized from her earliest days in the congregation. She had been teaching only three years when she was made a directing teacher for young IHM student-teachers here in Monroe. During the years she was principal and superior at St. Timothy’s in Trenton, the IHM formation college always sent young sisters to do their practice teaching at her model school and to live in Mary’s very happy local community.

It was during those years (1965), when asked to state her particular interest, she wrote: “To become a true religious in every sense of the word [and] to become an excellent elementary religious teacher.”

In 1968, when the IHM congregation was divided into provinces, Mary was appointed the first provincial superior of the Southeast Province. Six years on the Council of the Regional Superiors prepared her for this position. During her eight years as provincial superior, Mary visited every local community each year, took special interest in every school, initiated enrichment programs for the sisters and encouraged them to complete master’s degrees and professional updating programs.

Mary’s exceptional leadership ability was especially recognized when, in 1976, she was elected general superior of the IHM congregation. In that role, she fostered community life at both the local and congregational levels, increased the financial resources of the congregation in the face of rising costs for health care and retirement, took action to secure a just compensation for diocesan women religious in Michigan, encouraged programs to raise social consciousness and
action on behalf of justice, challenged the IHMs to focus on our mission and continually called the members to deeper faith and fidelity to prayer.

To foster community life, Mary continued her practice of visiting local communities, she often remarked that the happiest communities were those that prayed together and had fun together.

At the congregational level, it was Mary Kinney who brought the whole community together by establishing the custom of celebrating IHM Jubilees on the last Saturday of July – a custom which, over the past 30, has become the “annual IHM family reunion” – a day of joyful visiting with friends, the joyful celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy and the enjoyment of a delicious meal together.

For Mary, community also included former IHM Sisters. Mary initiated the first return to the Motherhouse of women who had left the congregation, organizing not one, but two such reunions during her term of office – the first in July 1978 and the second in July 1981. She felt strongly that the bonds between IHM Sisters and former sisters were deep and ought to be fostered.

To supplement income from salaries and investments, Mary initiated the IHM Development Fund – a program through which, under the direction of Sister Annunciata Grix and Sister Marietta Murphy, benefactors gave generously to the retirement fund.

As leader of the major superiors of 25 congregations of women religious serving in Michigan, Mary attempted to make the bishops aware of the financial situation facing their congregations. The Michigan bishops, although presented with statistics, a philosophy for compensation of diocesan women religious, and a new model for compensation, refused to accept the proposal. Mary stood up at the meeting and addressed the bishops with these words: “You do not pay our salaries, nor do you live on them. We will take our case to people.” She then picked up her materials and walked out of the meeting, followed by all the other women superiors.

For Mary, our IHM mission always included advocacy for justice. She supported the formation of Groundwork (the Michigan social justice advocacy agency of women religious), encouraged participation in solidarity workshops which taught IHM’s a process of theological reflection and social analysis, and she fostered the beginning design of a corporate stance process which would empower IHM leaders to make public statements on justice issues in the name of the congregation.

Mary continually reminded the IHM Sisters that our focus should be on our mission. At the opening of the 1980 IHM Assembly, she noted that “we came here as individuals, but we also come here as a corporate group, called to discipleship, and invited to work for the transformation of the world.” This was her challenge: “… we find ourselves on this mountain top, looking together at our world in 1980, a world of missile-rattling super powers, economic recession, unemployment, monetary inflation, fuel shortages, Third World poverty, famine, terrorism, street crimes and marital disasters. We find ourselves this week looking together and grappling with questions about our life, our society, our Church, our mission as a Congregation and asking the
very real questions of HOW and WHERE we should be in ministry in the 80’s in order to enable the Kingdom to come.”

Her letters to the congregation and her words at congregational assemblies revealed her own faith and prayerfulness and called all of us to keep our eyes on Jesus and to be faithful to prayer. In her 1979 Easter letter, she wrote: “… [the passion and death of Jesus] reveals to us how absolute God’s love is – how unconditional…. The fundamental message of the cross is not suffering, but absolute love and a sign which makes love believable….

The forgiveness of Jesus is not a forgetting, but it is the power of transforming, of entering into, of going through sorrow, pain, and death in order to bring forth life in others. His love, compassion, and forgiveness transformed His disciples into a firmly united group who felt impelled to go forth and share with others their own experiences of faith.”

In her opening talk at Assembly ’80, Mary said: “…let us remind ourselves that we are called not to think, speak or act in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus…. Living in His Name does not refer to a functional association in which one acts instead of another who cannot be present. Rather, it points to an affectionate, intimate, personal relationship. To think, speak, act in the Name of the Lord means that the Divine Name is the sacred space in which on-going encounter takes place that forms the basis of all ministry.”

Mary strongly encouraged the participation of all the members of the congregation in major issues and decision. Processes during her term included the revision of the Constitutions, a new government plan, decision regarding the divestiture of ownership of IHM schools, setting congregational goals and priorities for ministry and developing a master plan for our Monroe property.

Two of the things I most admired in Mary as a leader were her delight in encouraging and inviting gifted people to use those gifts in ministry and in service to the congregation. She was secure in her own identity and therefore unthreatened by people more gifted than she. This trait also made her unafraid of dissent in the community. She would bring together people with opposing ideas and say: “Let’s put everything out on the table and look at the issues and the reasons for your positions.” People left those meetings not always getting their way, but feeling that they had been heard and that their position was appreciated.

After finishing her term as general superior and enjoying six months in a renewal program at the University of Notre Dame, Mary became the Director of Urban Ministry in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. In that position, she pulled together the pastors and staff of 21 inner-city parishes that would either “grow or die.” Each parish had a small congregation, dwindling financial resources, buildings that were under-utilized and in need of repair and few, if any, outreach programs for their poor and mostly African-American neighbors.

Directing the Urban Parish Cooperative, Mary actually got inner-city parishes to collaborate – to set goals, coordinate staff services and parish programs, raise funds, make decisions about the use, repair and adaptation of buildings. One of her last goals was the establishment of the Volunteers in Ministry project (dubbed “a Catholic Peace Corps”) to work with the unemployed,
the elderly, imprisoned, handicapped, homeless and sick in the neighborhoods surrounding the inner-city parishes.

In 1986, while continuing as director of Urban Ministry, Mary was appointed coordinator of the Indiana Catholic Conference for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. In this position, Mary directed the Indiana Catholic Conference parish networks, which worked with the Indiana Catholic Conference Board of Directors, the advisory council and staff to impact public policy.

Mary gave six years of service in Indianapolis and then returned to Monroe to become the director of St. Mary Center for six years. In 1994, at age 70, Mary fulfilled her long desire to serve in the IHM Overseas Missions. As provincial and as general superior, Mary always supported the expansion of the missions and encouraged IHMs to volunteer for the missions. Now she herself would go to South Africa.

As a member of the Catholic Institute of Education, Mary worked with a team in the Eastern Cape – one of the poorest areas in South Africa, which has the greatest number of rural schools and students. The Kokstad office was responsible for nine school districts with an enrollment of a half-million students, many in extremely remote mountain areas. Roads were very poor (sometimes hazardous), many schools still had mud-brick buildings, teachers were untrained or poorly prepared and teacher morale was extremely low. This was truly ministry among the poor and abandoned. In 1998, shortly before returning to the States, Mary and her team won the prestigious Education Africa Premier’s Award in recognition of their significant and innovative contributions to education in the Eastern Cape.

When Mary returned to Monroe, her gifts were put to use in the Archives. She spent one and a half years doing oral histories. She would visit Sisters and interview them inviting them to share their personal history which she would then write.

Mary also organized teams for funerals in the Motherhouse to welcome family members, friends and colleagues of the deceased sister and to minister to their needs as needed.

Once Mary’s health began to diminish and she was admitted to health care, Mary continued to graciously welcome people to her room. She loved visitors and enjoyed reminiscing with them. Ministry was so much a part of Mary’s life and during these years her ministry was prayer.

Mary Kinney lived the words she spoke. I want to conclude with her words in a letter to the IHM Sisters six months before concluding her term as general superior. Perhaps this is what she would want to say to us today.

“
My deepest desire for the Congregation is that we will continue to grow as a people, a people who love and believe in one another and in God, a people deeply committed to radical discipleship and all [that] the Gospel call demands in our daily lives. We began as a Congregation without numbers, buildings, property, but we did not begin without a faith commitment and love and belief in one another and [in] our mission….”
“As we look at our world with nations vying with one another, threatening annihilation, as we see people experiencing unemployment, poverty, hunger, let us do what ever we can …

To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release prisoners
To rebuild nations
To bring peace among all people
To make music in the heart.”

(Christmas 1981)

Written by Mary Jo Maher, IHM
Delivered by Barbara Weigand, IHM, Aug. 6, 2015