Remembering Sister Noleta O’Dea, IHM

Sister Noleta generously recorded events in her life. In 1994, in 2011 and at other times, Noleta summarized her experiences. We are happy to bring her voice into this remembering using much of her own writing.

She wrote: “I was born December 27, 1923, the second child of James and Mary Roach O’Dea. Although lacking many material comforts they gave me a bedrock faith in God that has sustained me… Two devoted brothers, Frank and Jim, and six lively sisters: [Rose], Doris, Susan, Mary, Lauretta and Patricia provided me with invaluable experience of family living which I brought to the community…. Patty Jo was the youngest of our nine kids and was called ‘my reception’ present as she was born two weeks before I was received into the community as Sr. James Mary. …

“We lived … on Bagley Street in Flint, Michigan. During our growing up years, the first four of us attended Longfellow Public School for six years as it was about four blocks from our home. … We transferred to St. Michael Catholic School in grade six as we were then old enough to walk the three miles between our house and St. Michael’s. My mother was the organizer of our lives at this time and Dad said, ‘That’s fine with me … whatever Mom says goes.’ Dad worked at General Motors factory in Flint for forty-five years. This shop was about a mile from our house and he walked there and back daily.

“Transferring from Longfellow Public School in grade six to St. Michael Catholic School made a profound impression on me. Beginning the school day with 8:00 Mass … and being taught by IHM sisters in their blue habits and with their strict discipline in the classroom set a religious tone that reached me and called for a whole-hearted response. I loved the school and the kids that were my classmates and the varied activities we participated in: Picnics, parties, roller-skating, hay rides, dances and the like!

“At the end of high school I responded to a desire that began when I was a sixth grader and entered the IHM community. Sister Mary David was my Postulant mistress and I was her first postulant in a class of about 30. … Sister Mary David and I got along fine and I eventually tamed my effervescent ways and adopted the manner of a sincere postulant. When I retired in 1998 I resumed my talks with Mary David at the Motherhouse and we grew even closer. She was a holy lady.
“Sister Mary Hubert, our novice mistress who was a serious, goal-oriented person gradually won my cooperation and I thank her for teaching me how to pray in the two years we had her.

“At the end of the novitiate I was assigned to Holy Cross School in Marine City on the St. Clair River where Sister Robertine was my superior and principal. I was there with her for five years and she taught me to teach, how to laugh and love life. Sr. Emily Joseph followed Robertine and set me on a program of reading religious books which made a wonderful difference in my spiritual life. Both of these sisters were a Godsend to me at a time of my life when I needed them. I loved them.”

Noeleta chronicled her mission experiences. She moved from Detroit to Port Huron more than once, then, to our Lady of the Lake High School, Harbor Beach, where she became principal and house superior. There she met Father Cornelius McEachin who became a good friend for many years. Father “Mac” died in 2003. In her silver jubilee year, [1970] the failure of Proposition C forced the closing of the Harbor Beach high school, “a most painful experience.”

She moved on to Immaculate Heart of Mary High School, Westchester, Ill., and to Marian High School in Bloomfield Hills. Along the way Noeleta developed her academic and professional skills. Majoring in English at Marygrove, she went on for a master’s degree at the University of Detroit in education and English and another master’s from Providence College in Rhode Island in religious studies. In later years, she found opportunities for post-graduate studies, received professional awards and recognition while using her teaching and administrative skills.

“In 1974 my mother suffered a heart attack; my dad asked me if I could come to Flint and help out. Marion Farrell, my provincial, put her blessing on the move. … I was interviewed by Fr. Douglas Osborn, acting Principal at Luke Powers Catholic. … After an hour’s session with me he said, ‘I want you to teach in my school.’ It was a good experience from the beginning. These students were ‘my kind of people’ in the sense that many of their parents were GM workers as my dad had been for 45 years and my brother Frank was for 40 years and my brother Jim was for 35 years. I had a sense of belonging in many ways. …

“My dad suffered a heart attack and stroke in August of 1976 and died April 7, 1977. I was grateful for the opportunity of being able to assist the family at this time. My mother lived another seven years … and died on January 14, 1985. Once again, I was a part of the caregiving for her during her final illness. It was a privileged experience.”

Noeleta then cared for her sister Rose, who needed supportive care until she died in 1997. Noeleta wrote, “The following year … marked my fifty-third year in IHM educational ministry. I sensed that it was time to retire!” Noeleta served at Luke Powers from August in 1974 until her retirement in 1998, 24 years of generous ministry touching many lives and hearts.
It was during these years that I [Marion Duggan], got to know Noeleta, as I also taught at Powers at the same time. What I remember most about her is her complete dedication to the students. She had a special gift for reaching students in need. One time a young man was homebound for several months due to illness. Every week, Noeleta visited him and helped him keep up with his classwork. With her encouragement, he never fell behind. There were many things like this Noeleta did in her quiet, unassuming way, gaining great respect from students, faculty and parents.

I also recall her great sense of humor. Perhaps she inherited her wit from her Irish family. Noeleta was known for her kindness and genuine concern for others, as reflected in the steady stream of employees to come to her bedside the night she was dying to say their goodbyes and share their love for her. “Very special,” are the words they most often repeated to me and “a holy woman” was how she was described at Powers.

After a sabbatical year, Noeleta took up her pen to write family and friends about retirement or as she had remarked, “IHM’s don’t retire; they rehire.” She announced, “I applied for a position on the Pastoral Care team in the Motherhouse in February. After working out an equivalency background evaluation, I began a month long orientation period for work in Pastoral Care. On March 17 (great day for the Irish), I signed a contract with the Pastoral Care director, for working 20 hours a week on the team. I love our senior sisters and am happy to be of service to them. Each day they prove to be a blessing to me.”

Already her heart was growing weaker, her health diminishing, but Noeleta was never one to sit in idleness. She celebrated family successes and shared concerns of family and friends. She lived actively at the Motherhouse, reaching out to serve others’ needs. As much as she was able she engaged in armchair activism for social justice causes. She read and prayed, kept an open door and a welcoming greeting for visitors. So it was for some, a surprise this week to hear that the toll bell was sounding for Noeleta O’Dea.

We have now another heavenly advocate. In eternal life we are confident she will support us as she did in her life among us. She will hear the needs of family and friends. She will lift up our pleas before God. In many ways she journeys with us even now. As she wrote in her Book of Life insertion, “My heart and my body cry out with joy to the living God for all that has been, is now and will be. Alleluia!” Peace be with you, Noeleta.

Taken from the writings of Noeleta O’Dea, IHM ; assembled by Joan Gisky, IHM, and Marion Duggan, IHM

Delivered by Marion Duggan, IHM
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