Remembering Mary Joseph Maher, IHM
Jan. 23, 1929-Oct. 9, 2015

*Educator, Administrator, Missionary, Historian, Writer, Poet, Mentor and Friend of the Poor*

Mary Joseph Maher, born on Jan. 23, 1929, was the oldest of six children of Henry C. Maher and Veronica Kelly, both of whom were educated as teachers although only Veronica took up the profession. Their roots were in the farming communities of Allegan and Sanilac Counties, but both had moved to Detroit to work, Henry for Ford Motor Company and Veronica as a teacher in the Detroit Public Schools. As noted in the biography of her family, the Mahers and relatives were Catholic and Democrats.

The death of her mother at age 36 and that of her father 13 years later had a profound effect on Mary Jo and her brothers and sisters. The twins, Veronica and Henry, were only infants when their mother died. Aunt Jule, the older sister of Mary Jo’s father and a respected principal in Detroit, moved in to help care for the young children. Aunt Jule was an educator and a feminist. She was interested in social issues, politics and in the rights of women. The title of her thesis was “A Political History of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the US.” She played a significant role in the upbringing of this young family, who by now were living in Gesu Parish.

Mary Jo loved her family and was close to her brothers and sisters whom she helped to raise after the death of her mother. Her father’s last message to Mary Jo was “take care of your brothers and sisters.” Mary Jo cared lovingly for her sister Catherine, Sister Veronica Mary, in her illness, which has left this brilliant scientist without her memory and unable to care for herself in her later years. Another sister, Veronica, was also a member of
the congregation for a few years. Details of this remarkable family are included in the family history written by Mary Jo, titled *Tis, Who We Are.*

Mary Jo was educated by IHM Sisters at Gesu School in Detroit and had a great desire, since grade five, to be a missionary. This desire persisted and she wanted to join Maryknoll, but she knew that this would cause her father a great deal of pain as he was still grieving the death of his wife. He was doing his best with the help of Aunt Jule to raise Mary Jo and her brothers and sisters. Mary Jo felt she needed to support him by being closer. In the spring of 1947, she accepted the invitation of Sister Marie Ellen Clannon to join the IHMs. (Mollie Rodgers, the foundress of the Maryknoll Sisters, was known as Mother Mary Joseph. Mary Jo died on the anniversary of Mollie’s death, Oct. 9, 1955.)

Mary Jo loved her novitiate experience. As Mary Jo states in her autobiography, “Sister Mary Hubert’s instructions and example inspired me to want to be a saint and to be a person of prayer … As I listened to her, I realized that the spirit of St. Alphonsus Liguori was already inside me.”

**Teacher and Administrator**

Mary Jo taught grade school for three years in Mt. Clemens and at St. Michael, Monroe, and four years at Holy Redeemer High School. In 1957, she was sent for graduate studies to St. Louis University and received a doctorate in political science and history in 1962. She enjoyed doing in-depth research, a gift and skill that assisted her in teaching and writing community history.

Mary Jo told me that her role in the development of the Marygrove College Monroe campus was a ministry she enjoyed immensely. In August 1961, she became a member of the faculty of the college and taught history, geography and political science. In 1966, she was appointed dean of the college. It gave her the opportunity to be creative, to affirm the gifts of the faculty and to work collaboratively with them. Those of us in formation at the time remember classes that were team-taught with differing
perspectives brought to the issues. During this time, the number of majors was increased, men, non-IHMs and people of other faiths were invited to join the faculty and the college collaborated with Monroe County Community College and the Verona Fathers’ Seminary. Closing the college in 1969 was one of the hardest things she ever had to do. Those of us privileged to receive our education at Marygrove, Monroe campus, know the quality of education that we received. This initiative was just one of many organized and facilitated by Mary Jo, who was a competent administrator as well as a gifted teacher.

**Historian, Archivist, Writer and Poet**

In 1961, when Mary Jo began teaching at the college in Monroe, she designed a college course on the history of the congregation, which she taught to postulants and the senior sisters. She began an oral history collection and invited Mother Teresa McGivney, Mother Ruth Hankerd, Sister Miriam Raymo and others to talk to the younger sisters. Her gift as a storyteller and her ability to engage with our elders and motivate them to share their stories made the sessions most interesting and not to be forgotten by the younger members of the community. She worked closely with Margaret Brennan to promote a greater knowledge and appreciation of our IHM history and our Alphonsian heritage. Mary Jo worked closely with Margaret Brennan on a major revision of the Constitutions during Vatican II, and together they wrote the text of the revised Constitutions, which was passed by the General Chapter of 1966.

She also worked full-time on the revision of the Constitutions, 1980-82, in dialogue with the members of the community, asking them for input. She was the author of Part 1 of the Constitutions, the inspirational text expressing our lived experience, our charism, our traditions and our Alphonsian heritage. In this text, we experience Mary Jo as a poet. Mary Jo wrote, “Being allowed to write Part I of the Constitutions was the greatest privilege I had as a member of the Congregation. It is a long poem expressing who we are and who we hope to be.” Our present Constitutions were approved by the General Chapter of 1988.
Her own book of poems was published as *A Branch of the Watching Tree* in 2002.

Mary Jo became the archivist of the congregation following upon the death of Sister Rosalita in 1964 until she left for Brazil in 1969. Mary Jo was especially inspired by the story of Father Louis Florent Gillet, co-founder of the congregation. She embodied his spirit. She so desired that a comprehensive biography of Father Gillet be written that at one time she considered writing this biography, herself. She came to realize that it would best be written by a Redemptorist, and her dream came true in 2011 when Father Gil Enderle, CSsR, completed his six years of research into the life of our founder and the biography, *I Desire to Be Everywhere* . . . , was published.

**Missionary**

Mary Jo embodied these words of Father Gillet, “I desire to be everywhere when I see so many needs.” Nowhere was this more evident than in her love for the poor of the world. She ministered to the people of northeast Brazil as a member of the Detroit-Recife Mission from 1969-72, working in the parish at Nova Descoberta. She loved visiting the people in their homes and her poetry reflects this experience. While there, she shared the IHM experience of the House of Prayer movement with Brazilian congregations, traveling thousands of miles in Brazil during her first year there.

From 1972-76, Mary Jo served the congregation as director of the IHM Apostolate. While she admired and encouraged IHMs in every type of ministry, she gave preference to those working among the poor. She invited and sent sisters to four missions among Native Americans and initiated the establishment of the Vice-Province of Latin America (Puerto Rico, Brazil and Grenada) in 1973.

Mary Jo asked Joyce Durosko to consider going to Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming to be the principal. Joyce had just begun
programs at Immaculate Heart of Mary High School in Westchester, Ill., and was not eager to leave. Mary Jo sent her a plane ticket to go and visit. What Joyce saw was so bad that she changed her mind and went the next year. In 10 years’ time, they had a new school with Native Americans trained to lead the educational programs.

She encouraged and supported IHM missionaries in the opening of missions in Honduras, Vieques and Culebra. She also made two trips to Africa to visit sisters in Uganda and to plan for missions in Ghana and short-term missions in Malawi, Ghana and South Africa. Before leaving this ministry, she united all the overseas missions into one governmental unit, the Vice-Province of Overseas Missions.

In 1982, Mary Jo was elected provincial of IHM Overseas Missions. During this time, IHM overseas missionaries came together on a regular basis to share experiences, reflect on them and learn from them. They were able to express a common vision, to make collaborative decisions and to be accountable for their life together in community and ministry among the poor in Latin America and Africa. She facilitated the expansion of missions to Zimbabwe and South Africa, incorporated the mission in Mexico into the province and encouraged IHM ministry with refugees from Central America. She initiated an office of Global/Mission Awareness with Anne Wisda and facilitated development of a corporate stance process for the congregation. Mary Jo was also a member of the U.S. Catholic Mission Association Board in its earliest days.

Mary Jo loved this ministry more than anything else she ever did. She was asked by the mission province to write the history of the overseas missions to commemorate 50 years of IHMs in these ministries. It is titled, *A Compelling Vision: History of IHM Overseas Missions*, and draws upon the experience of the missionaries themselves as expressed in letters and chronicles as well as her own experience.

From 1989-94, Mary Jo went to work among the diverse communities in Chicago, Gary, Ind., and Yale, Mich. In Chicago, she worked in a shelter for
homeless women and children in an African-American neighborhood and undertook a feasibility study for opening a senior citizen drop-in center. Vincennes Senior Center opened in the summer of 1990 and continues to meet the needs of hundreds of senior citizens.

In 1990, she sought out ministry in the only African-American parish in Gary, Ind. When the pastor could no longer afford to pay her “salary” ($500 per month), Mary Jo returned to Chicago, to the Mexican community of Pilsen and St. Pius V Parish. Here she put her research skills to work and developed a reference book detailing every social service being offered in the neighborhood. This was distributed to schools, churches and agencies that could use it. She worked with the pastor to coordinate 17 base Christian communities and learned Spanish by studying and interacting with the people.

Needing to be closer to her family, Mary Jo moved back to Michigan in 1994 and worked in adult faith formation at Sacred Heart Parish in Yale until 1998.

**Historian and Writer**

She returned to Monroe in 1998 to write the history of the overseas mission, finishing this book in May of 2000. Her health began to deteriorate and she was no longer able to work long hours, but she continued doing research and writing in the Archives. During this time, she produced a history of the Chapel and was a member of the Chapel committee responsible for the current renovations of the lighting and sound systems as well as the restoration of the Chapel windows. She also wrote historical essays on the IHM Constitutions and a brief history of the congregation for an encyclopedia that was never published. She continued to provide interactive sessions on community history for new members and associates.
Prophetic Leader
Mary Jo spent the better part of her life in service to the congregation. She was a visionary who had great dreams for the congregation, especially after Vatican II. Her clarity was sometimes too much for others who feared what it might cost them to embody her vision. Our lack of corporate identity was a sorrow for her. And yet, she never imposed her vision and was always supportive of leadership and individuals in their discernment of ministry.

Judy Coyle, an IHM friend and professor of spirituality at St. Augustine College in South Africa, wrote, “Mary Jo made possible a way of living the IHM vocation with meaning and intensity, providing for its members a rich Gospel life no one singly could have imagined. Her own example, in its living, was a challenge.

“There is an interpretation of ‘mystical life’ that describes mysticism in terms of its enactment, the performance if you will, of the deepest realities of our incarnate faith – of prayer, virtue, asceticism, love, generosity, kindness, wisdom, courage and service to one another, especially the poor. Mary Jo enacted, in her person and in her leadership, one such ‘mystical life.’ Her love for the poor will bring her right into the heart of God.”

Mary Jo was a woman of high energy who gave her all in pursuit of God’s reign. In her later years, she suffered from an impairment that greatly reduced her level of energy and ability to implement her desires for herself and the community. She moved to our memory care unit a few months ago and there supported her sister, Catherine (Veronica Mary).

All of us who have been touched by her giftedness and mentored into ministry are blessed to have known and loved her. On her behalf we thank all those who cared for her in the Health Care Center, especially Anne Marie Murphy, and we know how grateful Mary Jo is to all of you for your care of Veronica Mary.
Mary Jo, you have new vision now and we ask you to intercede on our behalf to enable us to grow into the community that God intends us to be. Thank you for all you have shared with us and contributed to this community. Thank you for giving flesh to the IHM vision and mission and to the virtues of humility, simplicity and zeal.

Written by Joan Mumaw, IHM
Oct. 14, 2015

A branch of the watching-tree
as to jeremiah,
so to me
the query:
“what do you see?”

on muddy paths
on littered streets
I meet mystics
in faded dresses,
prophets
bone weary.

when the hungry
break bread
with me,
share their cup
of life
with me,
this I see,

a fresh green branch
of the watching-tree.

By Mary Joseph Maher, IHM
from Brazil, in the 1970s