

## Remembering Sister Teresa Rennell, IHM

June 21, 1926 – Sept. 5, 2017



Teresa loved to make music and gather groups together and especially to sing. Do you remember hearing her sing: “Somewhere Over the Rainbow?” We believe she is right here with us now, inviting us to sing in our hearts for her.

Teresa Rennell was born on June 21, 1926 near Belle Isle in Detroit. She was the third daughter of Ambrose and May (Sullivan) Rennell. Betty, the oldest daughter, wrote a lovely remembering for Teresa and Rita on the occasion of the family celebration of their Jubilees in 1995. I am quoting much of Betty’s narrative.

“To this day I have very vivid memories of my sisters, Rita and Teresa, at the tender ages of one and two and a half years. They were beautiful, happy, dark-eyed, curly-headed cutups! In particular, I recall brown-bag paper sacks over their heads.

With the holes for eyes sliding out of place as they gleefully ran about. Whatever Rita did, Teresa mimicked. I was only a few years older, but I felt responsible for their safety and learning.” James came next, then the fourth sister, Dorothy. Brothers Robert and John were the last of the children, now totaling seven.

“Of the sisters, Rita seemed the strongest, most innovative and could fix anything. Just give her a screw driver! Teresa’s terrific sense of humor kept everyone laughing. She was musical and athletic. I was creative (maybe bossy), drawing, writing little plays to be acted out by my sisters and brothers in our make-shift garage theatre. Little Dot was sweet and smart. Dad was great in coaching our swimming, basketball, ping-pong, ice skating. Mother enriched us in all the feminine skills, and heaven help us if we ever split an infinitive or ended a sentence with a preposition. Rita and Teresa excelled in sewing. Rita’s workmanship – exquisite – and Teresa loved to wear the latest fashions and did just that.”

The girls attended T. Dale Cook Elementary School and then St. Mary of Redford High School where they met the IHM Sisters. The family prayed the rosary nightly, and their parents attended Tuesday night devotions regularly. Coming from a faith-filled family Teresa was eager to grow closer to God by joining a religious community. She felt the call strongly in the 10<sup>th</sup> – grade during a retreat. After a year at Marygrove College, Teresa entered the IHM Sisters. Their mother said to Rita at the time, “Now here is your sister, you are to watch over her” – which she did all of their lives. Teresa took Rita’s name for herself, becoming Sister Rita Mary. Her sense of humor came with her. One time when family visited with her in Monroe, Betty asked why she was wiping the leaves with her handkerchief. “The willows are weeping,” she replied.

When it was time to set out on mission, Teresa taught first grade at St. John in Monroe for two years. She taught in several schools in Michigan from 1947 until 1970. Teresa spent four years teaching at Immaculate Heart of Mary High School in Westchester, Ill. During her teaching career, she taught all the grades from first through 12<sup>th</sup>, and completed her master’s degree in

education/English from the University of Detroit. She also completed 30 graduate course hours in theology at St. John's Seminary in Detroit.

Teresa served as the coordinator of the Archdiocesan Media Center and for the Detroit Board of Education as a reading instructor before ministering as a religious education coordinator at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs in Birmingham, Mich. In her autobiography, Teresa wrote: "Throughout my career I combined teaching and religious education with pastoral ministry. I can work effectively with children and adults."

Teresa retired from formal ministries in 1992, and in 2009 she entered the IHM Health Care Center. She said her greatest joy was her 30 day retreat with the Jesuits, – the experience allowed her to become "much more full of the divine life". Afterward she was better able to "see the divine in everyone."

Rita said that for much of her adult life Teresa struggled with bi-polar disorder. She spent time in qualified residential homes or institutions as she regained her balance. In her interaction with others struggling for wholeness, Teresa found her own self. In the residential home in Chelsea, Teresa was especially happy. She was respected by her peers and took leadership roles among them. The residents wrote poetry together and it was published for them in lovely books. While there, Teresa was able to have her little Shih Tzu dog, Suzi, which she then brought with her when she returned to Monroe. We remember seeing Suzi with Rita Fisher, IHM, at LARC Bookstore.

Here is something Teresa wrote: "Reflecting on Jonathan Livingston Seagull, I experienced the wonder of all creation; and I felt my littleness in comparison to the seas, the sand, the trees and the sky. I realized that even my littleness was a blessed gift. I am one of many who have tremendous potential for good. Each one of us is called to become for others – to be and yet to lead. ... If we have each other there is no reason to be afraid."

But her journey was not without struggle. On her IHM Book of Life page, Teresa wrote a poem about some of her experience. Since she references the Savior-King, she may have written it near Christmas.

### *FEELINGS*

The ordinariness of all the earth  
Bespeaks death; not life.  
The dull sky covers the earth;  
No hint of glory can be seen.  
The pall over my life matches the sky;  
Together we feel impending doom.  
Where has the brilliant light gone?  
Why is my future a state institution?  
God must be here, although unseen,  
Behind that cloud there must be hope.  
In humble tones, I lift my voice  
And the glorious sounds of Angel hosts  
Proclaim the Savior-King is born.  
Peace on earth; good will to all.

The Christ has come for everyone.  
Joy in pain will end in blessing.  
By Teresa Rennell, IHM

In 2005, on the occasion of another sister's death, our sisters, Marie Gatza and Mary McCann, wrote a reflection that is appropriate for Teresa's struggle, as well as that of each one of us. I close with it:

The experience of debilitating, disabling, or life-threatening illness or injury – whether physical, mental or emotional – comes to individuals (our sisters, associates, friends, family members, and sometimes ourselves) like a frightening stranger knocking at the door of our lives. Instinctively, we want the stranger to go away quickly, to respond to medical intervention or therapy, and then to leave us alone so that we can go on with life unchanged as we know it.

But the journey of welcoming this unbidden stranger into our lives and into the life of the community can also be a journey of transformative grace. It is a call to embrace life as it is – moving us beyond our wants, our fears, our comfort zones, our images, our judgments of what life should be like for us, for others. It is a call to seek God right here, right now in this unwanted place.

This journey invites the individual and the community to faith beyond understanding; it invites us to hope when there seems no reason for hope; it presses us to a love that is unconditional. It is a call to a profound surrender to the mystery of life simply as it is. And it is at the heart of what this Motherhouse community lives into every day, and a profound invitation to the deepest meaning of sisterhood.

Thank you, Teresa, for the life-lesson we have learned from you. May you rest in peace and enjoy fullness of life, "somewhere over the rainbow."

Written by Roberta Richmond, IHM, and others

Delivered by Roberta Richmond, IHM, Sept. 8, 2017