

Remembering Margaret Mary (Malachy) Sullivan, IHM

March 1, 1916 – June 2, 2018



In March 2016, Margaret Sullivan, IHM, celebrated her 100th birthday and there was a grand gathering of IHM Sisters, her large Sullivan and Quilty clan, and her many friends and former students. There was a joyous liturgy, a wonderful meal together, music, singing, poems read, stories told and tributes proclaimed from so many members of her family and friends and IHM Sisters. A nephew, John Gallagher, recalled all the world events that Margaret had experienced in her 100 years of life and then emphasized the remarkable consistency of the current of love that has always flowed so freely throughout her life. A friend, Rosemary Reilly, declared compellingly: “We congratulate you on reaching 100 years, an amazing milestone in itself, but more we praise you for the love, caring, and wisdom

you’ve given to all of us so generously every day of your 100 years. ... You are someone with complete peace – peace in your heart, in your spirit, in your entire being.” Family members sang the old Irish song, “Mother Machree”, ringing out that it was *Mother Malachy* who “brightened lives by the love that shined from her eyes, and like a candle that’s set in a window at night, she guides us toward the right.”

Where and how did these gifts of love, kindness, peace and wisdom arise in Margaret? She herself told many of us throughout her life that they came from God in her early life through her large and loving family, then later through her IHM teachers and mentors, and even later through the wonderful opportunities she had as an IHM Sister for deep and life-changing spiritual renewal as a result of the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, her life history bears exquisite witness to the truth of her words.

Margaret Mary Sullivan was born on March 1, 1916, in Barry’s Bay, Ontario, Canada, a small town about 200 miles north of Toronto, where many Irish immigrants had settled after the 1860s potato famine in Ireland. Margaret was the fifth oldest of the 12 children of Catherine (Quilty) and Michael J. Sullivan. She had three older sisters and one older brother. After her, came three more brothers and four more sisters. The four sisters became Monroe IHM Sisters: Angela, who died in 2004; Marie Sylvia, who died in 1994; and Genevieve and Janet, who are with us here today. Margaret’s early days in Barry’s Bay were difficult ones in some ways – no electricity, no indoor plumbing, no central heating, no automobiles. Nevertheless, her family home was a gathering place for friends and neighbors where they often rolled up the rug, pulled out their fiddles and danced into the night.

But when Margaret was 10 years old, the family was marked by a shocking tragedy: the death of her older brother Cecil, who was pulled out into the lake by a strong and surprising current while swimming with some of his brothers and sisters, and they were

unable to reach him. We can only imagine the grief that overtook the loving Sullivan family for such a long time. This terrible loss was a factor in the family's decision to move to Detroit in 1927, where they had some family connections. The youngest two children, Mickey and Terry, were born in Detroit. Yet the family still struggled, too, in their early years in Detroit at the time of the Great Depression. Mr. Sullivan, like so many other newcomers to the city in those years, walked the streets looking for work.

In time, simple means of sustenance appeared for this large family as Mr. Sullivan eventually found employment in a factory. The family also experienced loving and supportive friends and parish communities, and very soon Margaret met the IHM Sisters in Detroit by attending St. Boniface School, St. Gregory School and then St. Cecilia High School. She spoke lovingly about how her call to IHM life developed in her teenage years. She said, "The warm welcome, kindness, and support of my IHM teachers impressed and inspired me. Ultimately it led me to join the IHM community in their service to God's people." Margaret did indeed become an IHM Sister, making her vows on Jan. 2, 1935, and then set out on a path of long and loving years of ministry, "impelled," as Chapter 1 of our IHM Constitutions state, "to proclaim the good news of salvation, sharing in Christ's own liberating mission in the reality of our times through a variety of ministries."

From 1934 to 1958, Margaret taught at nearly every grade level in several IHM-staffed grade schools in Port Huron, Detroit, and Birmingham, Mich. At the same time, she studied for a Bachelor of Arts degree, which she received from Marygrove College in 1949. In 1958, she became principal at Holy Name School in Birmingham, where she served until 1964. Again, during these years she continued to study, receiving a Master of Arts degree from the University of Detroit in 1961. In a conversation I had with her recently, I asked what it was like to become the principal of a fairly large school. She wrinkled her nose a bit and said, "I didn't like it. I missed my connection with the children as their teacher. They gave so much back to me as I saw them grow and develop before my eyes."

Her sisters Genevieve and Janet were with me that day and they reminded Margaret about how this change led her into an entirely new ministry, relating her IHM spirituality and values more directly to adults, the teachers and parents of her beloved children. She sprouted a big smile on her face and said in that quiet but deliberate voice, "Well, yes! You are certainly right about that and it is very true that I came to enjoy those wonderful relationships fully, too." Little did she know at that time how this move to more direct relationships with adults would prepare her for a future significant change in her practice of ecclesial ministry.

From 1964 to 1970, Margaret continued to serve as a teacher and as a principal at several schools in Pontiac, Detroit and Dearborn. Then, in 1970, a big shift occurred when she became a parish-based pastoral minister at St. Mary of Redford Parish, which again she thoroughly enjoyed, serving there for 10 years. In 1980, she moved to Florida with several IHM Sisters and continued to serve parishes in the Naples area. Then, in 1987 at the age of 71, she became a volunteer, serving the spiritual needs of the senior

residents at Rocky Creek Village in Tampa until 2004 where she continued to engender faith and hope and love and joy. In 2004, she returned here to the IHM Motherhouse to retire herself at the age of 88 and, of course, continued to share her remarkable gifts with her IHM companions and lay residents and staff.

What sustained Margaret during all these years? How did love continue to grow and expand in her heart so as to be so available to all with whom she lived and labored in ministry? She told me in a recent conversation that it was of course originally her experience of God in her loving family and then through the warmth and kindness that she experienced from her IHM teachers. But then she described the absolutely transformative effects that took root in her soul as a result of the post Vatican Two opportunities we had as IHM Sisters, generated by our inspired leaders of the time, to deepen our personal and communal experience of God and to integrate it with our practice of ministry in a renewing church.

Margaret mentioned three such gifts, in particular, she received during those years: (1) having courses and workshops on Scripture and theology; (2) learning to read and to pray from the Scriptures; and (3) the profound and transforming experience of her first directed eight-day retreat. During that week, she came upon the Scriptural theme in Jeremiah and Isaiah where God speaks lovingly to the people who were going through tough times. "I am the potter: you are the clay, and my desire is to shape you continually into love and beauty." She said to me with such a degree of ebullient joy: "I just LOVED discovering how to read the Scriptures so lovingly and how to let the words enter into to my very heart. I learned how to love God even more and how to love each other in our IHM community and how to love all whom I served in ministry. The first directed retreat that I experienced opened my eyes to all the beautiful things of God."

Indeed, we have all received the fruits of Margaret's fidelity to our ever-loving God "all down the years," as one of our IHM hymns puts it. Two of her students from long ago became IHM Sisters, Amata Miller and Betty Leon. They described the evolution of their call in a way similar to Margaret's own path. Both have identified Margaret as inspirational and keenly helpful to them. In Betty's words, "Margaret was a significant inspiration for my acceptance of a call to religious life as an IHM Sister. She was and is one of the people I have most admired throughout my life. As our teacher she was patient, calm, organized, and *very real and kind* and she has remained ever interested in and supportive of my life path. ... She radiates a deep spirituality, a heart of love, ... and she has a way of taking in hardships, illness, and loss – feeling them deeply and choosing to live into them and beyond with acceptance and inner peace." In the same vein, just this week, one of the nurses who cared for Margaret in our IHM Health Care Center told her sisters Janet and Genevieve, "When we put our arms around Margaret, we knew we were loved! Another nurse said, "By far, Margaret's spirit outlived her body. She had such love and care for all of us even as we cared for her."

Indeed, our dear Margaret, your spirit as a heart of love has moved now into the fullest expression of love, for you live now in the very heart of our loving God and with all you have known and loved who have gone before you. We can only imagine the heavenly

celebration you experience now with your parents, your nine brothers and sisters, your many nieces and nephews and all in your extended family, your students, your friends and your beloved IHM Sisters. There is for sure lots of music and dancing and poetry-reading and time immemorial for the storytelling you have always enjoyed!

Today, our dear Margaret, we hold both our loss and our love for you together, for grief is a product of love. We know that you will continue to be present to all of us, and especially to your dear and loving sisters, Genevieve and Janet. We know too that you will continue to inspire and animate all of us, as you put it in our *IHM Book of Life* in 1998: "to reach for the stars of justice, peace, and compassion, to be present wherever there is need, to continue the saving and living mission of Jesus."

Our dear Margaret,

We invoke now the consoling name of our Holy Trinity,

*The Three in One and One in Three,
Through whom all has come to be
And in whom all of us continue to be!*

May the blessing of God's Light be fully yours!

May the blessing of God's Life be fully yours!!

May the blessing of God's Love be fully yours!

*And may you continue to hold us all warmly and with care
in the hollow of your loving hands!*

Written and delivered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM, June 6, 2018