

Remembering Catherine Mary Zacharias, IHM

Dec. 8, 1934 – June 13, 2019

Sister Catherine Mary Zacharias was touched by the Immaculate Heart of Mary from the moment of her coming into the world. She was born on Dec. 8, 1934, the feast of the Immaculate Conception and the patronal feast of the IHM congregation. She grew up in northwest Detroit in a strong, loving, Polish family, a child of Casmira Powlowski and Joseph Zacharias. Catherine Mary was baptized “Mary Ann” in Epiphany Catholic Church. She was the fourth of six children and dearly loved her siblings, Joseph, Edward, Andrew, Paul and her sister Jean who entered the IHM community in 1949. According to her friend, Sister Laura Hardage who grew up down the street from Sister Catherine Mary, the Zacharias home was always a great place to be.



Catherine Mary first met the IHMs when she attended Epiphany Elementary School in Detroit. She attended Mackenzie High School and chose the business curriculum.

Her sister Jean was already a member of the congregation. One time after visiting the Motherhouse, she knew she was called. “It is something in your heart, you know it’s right.”

Sister Catherine Mary Zacharias came to the IHM community in August 1952, received the habit in May 1953. A month after becoming a novice, her father died; a heartbreaking event for her. She professed her first vows in June 1955 and made Final Profession in June 1958. She spent a year and a half in the Juniorate at the Motherhouse, receiving her bachelor’s degree from Marygrove College in 1957.

Catherine Mary’s early mission life from 1957-1963 was teaching elementary school children at St Frederick, Pontiac. At St Charles, Coldwater, she taught elementary and junior high students, and for one year became assistant principal of the grade school.

From 1963-1980, she was assigned to Our Lady of the Assumption School, Albuquerque, N.M., where she at first taught in elementary grades then junior high school. She was more than a teacher as she engaged with the students in many other ways: altar boys, student council moderator, safety patrol boys and pep club moderator. She also taught CCD classes. In the convent, she was in charge of the kitchen and was house treasurer. She spent her summers working on her master’s in elementary education at the University of New Mexico. About this time in her life she later wrote:

Teaching at Assumption School in Albuquerque opened up to me a whole new culture and beauty of the southwest. I became involved in the prayer group at the

Parish. The gift of peace I received at the Baptism of the Spirit has never left me. The praying and caring community I lived and worked with opened me up to a whole new way of prayer. I received many blessings through the healing touch of God, both physical and spiritually. I treasure the many good friends I made during the seventeen years in New Mexico.

Catherine Mary had debilitating arthritis even as a younger woman. It was one of the reasons she was sent to the southwest. Sister Mary Ann Mahoney, who was part of the IHM community there, said that they knew she was suffering, but Catherine Mary never alluded to it. She never complained of pain, did not focus on herself. One wonders: was it in her deep experiences of God's healing touch in prayer that she came to accept and surrender to all that this disease demanded of her?

Every third summer, she returned from Albuquerque to the Motherhouse. One such summer, as she was volunteering in the business office, she spotted a notice asking for someone to give a two year commitment to work there. She said, "I had a sense of what they did, and I thought, 'Oh, I can do that.' I have been there ever since. I think my greatest joy is working with the sisters to help them not be overwhelmed with finances." She later reflected:

I returned to Monroe to begin a new ministry, working in the CBO. Again God blessed me with a loving caring group of sisters with whom to live, pray, and share. After a year, I was asked to join the South/West Team as Province Treasurer. During the thirteen years that I was treasurer, I was privileged to visit the sisters and witness the work they were doing among the people of God. The time as Treasurer helped me become more aware of the needs of the total Congregation.

Catherine Mary was always ready to help and so gracious in assisting us. Her hope was to help people "who don't easily get finances." So in her ministry she wanted to reach out to "the least among us" who "don't easily get finances." I remember a quip from a member of the community who would consider herself among the "least." "I don't care who gets elected as Mother General as long as I can have Catherine Mary for my Treasurer!" Catherine Mary loved what she was doing and was so efficient. Doing community taxes was one of her annual tasks. Imagine someone who really enjoyed doing tax reports! Her sense of humor and her ready laugh helped her keep perspective!

Catherine Mary loved to travel and had a real spirit of adventure. Laura described a trip they took to celebrate Laura's silver jubilee. Sister Carol Krolikowski and her mother joined them in Albuquerque, drove to Disneyland in a new Mustang, spent five great days there. Laura so impressed that Catherine Mary even did the Matterhorn!

Catherine Mary loved her many travels to treasurers' meetings around the country during her time as provincial treasurer. She liked getting to know other treasurers and learning from the great workshops that were part of the meetings. She, Sister Carol Janowiak, and the other treasurers would go a few days early to see the sights. Sister Helen Ingles shared favorite memories of Catherine Mary, who was never stopped by her physical limitations. One memory was their late night arrival at a hotel that was completely full. When the registration desk told them how to get to the replacement hotel, they convinced the clerk that Catherine Mary could not possibly navigate the walking required. They ended up that one night in the penthouse suite, complete with kitchen, living room, Jacuzzi and a canopied bed for Catherine Mary!

It was during her time as provincial treasurer that she suffered the heartbreak of death once again. She wrote:

Probably one of the most significant events in my life which has changed me and continue to stay with me is the sudden deaths of family members. The sudden death of my brother Ed and three months later my sister Jean was a difficult time. These losses brought home to me how fragile life is and that each person in my life is a gift to be treasured, and to live in the present moment as if there was no tomorrow. It has helped me put all things into perspective. Having my mother live at the Health Care Center these past seven years until her death was a blessing. I got to know her in a whole new way.

Catherine Mary loved music, loved to sing. She joined St. Joseph Parish Choir in Monroe and invited her friend Sister Janet Provost be part of the Saturday evening liturgy.

Catherine was an artist with food. She and her friend and fellow treasurer, Sister Marylyn Russ loved to cater special community celebrations like Governing Board and Assemblies. It was a diversion from their accounts and provided such a creative outlet. They did it in such a way that a meal was a work of grace, a time of Communion.

Catherine Mary had a profound love for the community. Her attitude of acceptance of each person, her companionship, her wisdom, her perspective. Sister Margaret McAnoy, a classmate and friend, described her as "my older soul sister, one I could share so much with."

About her retirement she said:

I have just retired and I am taking some time to discern what the future holds for me in regard to ministry at the Motherhouse. I feel like I am with the Community in looking to the future with great trust in God's plan for me and the Community. There are no words that can express my feeling of gratitude for all the care, concern, and love I have received as a member of the IHM Congregation.

Somewhere in the scripture Jesus says 'a hundred fold here and hereafter.' I think I really have experienced that 100-fold.

Catherine, you have been a blessing to the world, to the Church, to all who have met you, to our congregation. YOU have been part of OUR hundredfold!

We close with a blessing from Sister Juanita Bernard, Catherine Mary's friend and classmate who is in Puerto Rico:

Miles across the ocean my hands stretch out to embrace all of you with my love and to share our sorrow at the death of Catherine Mary. We celebrate her beautiful life, her generous heart, and her special gift that we receive as Community. May we all find peace, and may her spirit as a valiant woman help us to continue our journey with hope and courage.

Written and delivered by Kathleen O'Brien, IHM, June 20, 2019