

## Obituary



Sister John Louise Leahy, IHM, 90, died Tuesday, July 19, at her home, the IHM Motherhouse.

Born in Detroit on Sept. 29, 1925, Jean Gibbons Leahy was one of two daughters of John and Marion (Miner) Leahy. Baptized at SS. Peter and Paul Church, Detroit, she attended Winterhalter and St. Cecilia schools and graduated from Immaculata High School (Detroit). Jean continued on to Marygrove College, graduating in 1947. Later that year she entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe and received the religious name, Sister John Louise.

Her education at Marygrove prepared her as a teacher and she initially taught at the elementary level at St. Joseph, St. Mary and St. Mary Academy (Monroe) and St. Michael (Flint). It was her studies in art that led her to teach and exhibit at the collegiate level. Sister John Louise studied at Columbia University and held a Master of Fine Arts degree from Catholic University of America, Washington D.C. She pursued a doctorate in education from Wayne State University to support her position as professor of art at Marygrove College. Her career at Marygrove spanned 1955 to 1998 and included positions of assistant professor of art, departmental advisor, and art therapist.

She retired from Marygrove College in 1998 and remained active in the Detroit art community while residing at Marygrove Convent. During these years of “active-retirement” Sister John Louise cared for her sister Margaret (“Patti”) Leahy De Ceballos.

Sister John Louise moved to Monroe in 2004 and then to the Motherhouse in 2009. She led art classes at the Motherhouse and volunteered as art educator and art therapist. Many of her works are displayed throughout the Motherhouse.

## Remembering

One treads on holy ground in attempting to capture the life of an artist.

To reveal the life of Sister John Louise Leahy, one needs an easel and an expansive art canvas that would surround this sacred space.

Jean Gibbons Leahy was born Sept. 29, 1925, to John Gibbons and Marion Louise (Miner) Leahy. Her sister, Margaret Patricia, known as Patti, was two years her senior. Her father was an attorney for a government program that assisted families in securing their homes during the Great Depression. Her mother finished college with the Religious of the Sacred Heart in Detroit.

Jean relates, "On the paternal side of my family, my grandmother was related to Cardinal Gibbons, and my mother's grandmother is said to be descended from King George IV of England. However no attempt has been made to verify it."

Jean had fond memories of her family home life. "We were reared in a good Catholic home ...," she wrote. She often portrayed her sister as beautiful, with long blond curls, and described herself as a tomboy with short bobbed hair "cut to the bottom of the ear." She loved to join the neighborhood boys in their sports and games, while her sister played dolls with her friends. It was, however, from her father that she remembers learning the values of justice and compassion with integrity, as he related to the clients of his professional work during the Depression years.

Jean attended grade school at St. Cecilia School in Detroit. When it came time for high school, the newly opened Immaculate High School was chosen and Jean was among the second class to graduate from this IHM institution. It was here that her skill at cartoon drawing (especially of priests and nuns) came to be well known and appreciated. She tells the story of one sister who confiscated her cartoon of a priest theology professor, took it to the principal, Sister Anna Marie, who had it pinned to the convent bulletin board for the sisters' enjoyment. Later, an understanding sister-friend, recognizing her innocent talent, quietly returned the cartoon book to its owner.

Her parents valued a good education and Marygrove College was chosen. Jean joined her sister, Patti, as a student in 1943. She excelled in her studies and in 1947 received her bachelor's degree majoring in art.

Jean remembered very active college days: of escapades with other mischievous students into the Marygrove Tower for a smoke or perhaps skipping class and enjoying a bite at the then famous "Lou's Deli" across from the college on McNichols Road.

One of her most profound student experiences at Marygrove was working as the

artist on the filmstrip about racial justice that the college produced in 1946 following a major disturbance in the city. Under the direction of Sister Christina Swartz, students from various departments produced a filmstrip that was covered in the Detroit newspapers.

It was around this time Jean realized that she might be resisting her religious calling. As she wrote, "It was my mother's unselfishness which prompted me to enter the IHM community after college graduation in September 1947."

My own association with Sister Leahy began in the postulate. I, an 18-year-old just out of high school, was assigned to be "Guardian Angel" of this distinguished Marygrove graduate. What a task. In July 1948, Jean entered the Novitiate and received the name Sister John Louise, after her father and mother. During her novitiate years, she was frequently called upon to design the special greeting cards for community occasions. She admits that she never had a desire to be a teacher; however, as a novice, she was sent to teach at St. Joseph and St. Mary, Monroe and Sacred Heart, Dearborn.

After profession in August 1950, John Louise began teaching in high school at St. Michael, Flint and later returned to Monroe to teach art and math at St. Mary Academy.

Recognizing her giftedness in art, John Louise was sent to Catholic University of America and earned her master's degree in fine arts. She was assigned to the Art Department of Marygrove College in 1955.

John Louise's years with the Marygrove Art Department spanned more than 40 years and the terms of eight presidents, beginning with Sister Honora Jack, of whom she had great respect even during her college years.

In her early years on the Marygrove faculty, she recalled that it was common for art professors to rotate teaching the various courses. John Louise's tour of duty included classes on art history, design, drawing painting and printmaking. During these years she was offered multiple opportunities for enriching her career. She spent summers of study in Florence, Italy; California; Athens, Greece; and at the British Museum in London. With a Fulbright Scholarship grant, John Louise spent two summers researching Eastern African art in Kenya and Uganda. Eventually she completed her doctoral dissertation on the study of African art at Wayne State University in 1972.

During her presidency at Marygrove, Sister Andrea Lee recalls when certification programs needed to be developed in each department that would lead to increased revenue potential for the students, John Louise was called upon for the task. She trained and became a credentialed art therapist and then set out to inaugurate and coordinate a new program of double major in art and psychology to prepare the students for newly emerging professional options in art therapy.

John Louise nourished lasting friendships with her colleagues and students. Among whom we especially mention, Sister Edith Kenny (Sister Killian), who was her early mentor and dear friend; and Rosemary DeSloover, her student-turned-professor and colleague in the Marygrove Art Department.

One cannot count the numerous juried and invitational exhibitions, commissions and collections of her art that have been or are displayed in various venues over these fruitful years. Most of her works exhibit her favored medium of pastels. In the 2002 Marygrove Faculty Art Exhibit she writes: "As a Pastelist, I relate especially to the spontaneous energy of the media and strive to exploit ... capture and express those unexpected and fleeting moments in nature when light and movement constantly change color, spatial and mood impressions."

Thus at Marygrove and here, adorning many walls of our IHM Motherhouse, we have a visual memory of her unusual paintings and perhaps her mystical life.

John Louise was a very quiet, humble person, with a heart fired up for justice and attentive to those left on the margins. Her quick wit and winning smile endeared her to many, including her students. In her Book of Life page, we discern a tree with deep roots and high branches with some quotes: "He draws me from deep waters ... I mean to sing to Yahweh all my life. I mean to play for my God as long as I live ..." She ends with "May these reflections of mine give Him pleasure as much as Yahweh gives me."

Though she formally retired from Marygrove in 1999, she now had time to pursue some of her dreams. She shared her interest and expertise in art therapy programs for people, especially children with disabilities. Her participation in biannual exhibitions of pastel paintings continued into her retirement years, often along with Sister Edith Kenny. Sister Rose Ange Leddy invited John Louise to begin open studio art classes at the IHM Motherhouse, wherein retired sisters could discover their hidden talents. Despite her failing eyesight, she continued to offer classes in the Motherhouse Art Room after her moves to Norman Towers and eventually to the Motherhouse in 2007.

John Louise never missed an opportunity to participate in IHM community activities. Members of her Mosaic Mission Unit (formerly The Gardeners) shared their memories: "she is remembered as kind, loving, respectful and generous"; "her keen sense of humor was gift." One sister recalls that "prior to Vatican II, John Louise was a sincere traditionalist: it was beautiful to watch her transform (at times painfully) into a Vatican II woman of the Church."

Always the artist and with her therapist background, John Louise found her ministry among her companions on third floor. She would sit beside one and encourage a drawing or design coloring or listen and chat with another to bring out some response and frequently entertain a group with her sensitive humor.

As her body aged, some memories faded, but her keen mind and perceptive insights into people and life in general continued to amaze those who visited her. Her deep spirituality, so often portrayed in her paintings, continues to inspire all of us.

Sister John Louise, we are grateful for your presence among us these many years. Your spirit will remain with us in the beauty and variety of your creations. With you, we will remember that "We are all God's work of art."

Written and delivered by Dorothy Diederichs, IHM  
*July 21, 2016*