

Joan Kusak

Violence ends where love begins.

Sister Joan Kusak, and her brother grew up on the west side of Detroit, in a traditional Polish-Catholic household. She attended Our Lady Queen of Angels and Immaculata Academy in Hamburg, N.Y. She was called to a religious vocation, first entering the FSSJ and later felt compelled to join the IHM community after witnessing one sister's bold freedom and deep spirituality. "I thought, 'I desire that,'" she recalls.



She recalls one Stephen Minister who visited a 28-year-old with paraplegia. They developed a friendship and worked together for two years. The Stephen Minister got the young woman's poetry published before she died. "God works in ways you can't even imagine," Sister notes.

Joan then became the state coordinator of Pax Christi, and made three trips to Palestine, two with the Michigan Peace Team. During those trips, she met with the peace groups in Palestine and Israel,

and participated in social justice activism with Palestinian and Israeli women. These women's courage to voice their opposition to the war and stand in the middle of the city, challenging those in position of power were inspiring to her. "As you begin to walk that journey of peace, you continually grow deeper into it," she says.

At reception Sister Joan received the name Sister Mary Virginia of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. After Vatican II, she went back to her baptismal name, Sister Joan Marie of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. "God's providence does lead us."



Joan spent some years teaching junior high school and in the late 1970s, she served in pastoral ministry. She began in and around Detroit, first at St. Thomas Aquinas and then at St. Matthias (Sterling Heights) and St. Dennis, Royal Oak. While at St. Dennis, she co-founded the South Oakland Shelter, where each parish in the district housed homeless people for a week.

Sister Joan also started two Stephen Ministry programs, where she taught parishioners to care for and visit those in need. The training program consisted of 50 hours of instruction to help participants understand their own strengths and weaknesses in order to offer support to others.



After leaving Saginaw, she went into campus ministry at Oakland Community College and later, at Schoolcraft College. During those 20 years, she stretched her skills as she worked with ecumenical groups and invited students to volunteer at soup kitchens and homeless shelters. "I loved my campus ministry years — they were very transforming for both students and me," she reflects.

Semi-retiring, Joan went on to lead adult spirituality, ecology and prayer workshops at River House – IHM Spirituality Center and served as a spiritual

director. As she looks back over the years, she has always been grateful for her IHM family because of her education and numerous experiences, especially those in peace and justice. "My life's work was in peace and prayer and pastoring," she says. "Now, as I reflect, I realize that it is in the ordinary that we become

extraordinary and love is always the answer."