

Obituary



Sister Mary Louise Theisen, IHM, 86, died Sunday, Jan. 24, at her home, the IHM Motherhouse.

Born May 27, 1929 in Detroit, Mary Louise Theisen was one of 13 children born to Edward and Agnes (Kreucher) Theisen. She attended St. Boniface and St. Cecilia Elementary Schools and graduated from St. Cecilia High School. Mary Lou entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe in 1947, and received the religious name, Sister Agnes Patrice.

As an undergraduate, she attended Catholic University of Puerto Rico and earned a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College. Sister Mary Lou studied at Laval University, Quebec City, Quebec, and earned a master of arts degree in French.

She began her teaching career with the elementary grades at St. Mary, Marshall, Mich., and San Joaquin, Adjuntas, Puerto Rico. She taught high school French and Latin for 10 years at Immaculata and St. Catherine, Detroit; St. Mary, Lorain, Ohio; and Immaculate Heart of Mary in Westchester, Ill.

In 1970, Sister Mary Lou began retreat work and spiritual direction that spanned 20 years at Visitation House of Prayer, Monroe. She served her community as a Northwest Provincial Team member and as assistant to the provincial. She ministered as a nurse's aide at the Monroe Care Center and as house manager for mentally and physically disabled adults with H.O.M.E. Inc. in Monroe and Temperance.

Sister Mary Lou also held counseling positions at Misericordia Home (Chicago) and Hill Manor (Hermendo, Miss.). Returning to work at Visitation before becoming assistant coordinator at Crawfton, a community retreat facility in Kingsville, Ont., over 10 years, she provided prayer and hospitality for those seeking respite at Crawfton. Sister Mary Lou retired to the Motherhouse in 2008 and volunteered prayer and presence ministry to the residents.

Remembering

Mary Lou was born in Detroit on May 27, 1929. She was the third child of Edward and Agnes (Kreucher) Theisen, both of German descent. There were 13 children in the family, eight boys and five girls. Today, four are living: Leona, Edward, Rita and Elizabeth. Their home was across the street from St. Boniface School, where the family met the IHM Sisters. Mary Lou told the story of when in the third grade, a sister came and got her out of class and asked her to accompany her to Monroe, so that sister could attend a funeral. No doubt the proximity of their home to the school played a part in this decision. When Mary Lou was in the middle of grade school, the family moved to the neighborhood of St. Cecilia Parish, where again IHM Sisters taught school.

Mary Lou entered the congregation in July 1947. She earned her bachelor degree at Marygrove and a master of arts in French language at Laval University in Quebec. Her teaching career spanned 20 years, seven in elementary and 13 in high school education. Assignments included St. Mary in Marshall, Mich.; Colegio de San Joaquin in Puerto Rico; Immaculata High School in Detroit; Immaculate Heart of Mary in Westchester, Ill.; St. Mary in Lorain, Ohio; East Catholic High School, Detroit; and St. Pius X High School in Atlanta, Ga. She taught religion, French and Latin.

In 1970 Mary Lou began a new ministry at the House of Prayer (Visitation). From March until June of 1972, Mary Lou spent four months in India working with Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity. The mission came about when Sister Margaret Brennan was in Rome at an International Superiors' General meeting and heard Mother Teresa ask for sisters to come to India to help her sisters. They were being overwhelmed by the refugees coming into India because of the Bangladesh-Pakistani war. Mary Lou wrote, "My personal prayer at that time was focused on Hebrews 5 and Philippians 2, reflecting on Jesus' desire to share the human condition out of his deep love for each of us. My own prayer and desire was to do the same." She served in a home for the dying, bathing the women, feeding them, and providing an atmosphere of love, care and compassion. In the afternoons, she would meet with about 50 novices for Scripture study in English. Mary Lou found the people of India very spiritual and very respectful of others. She wrote, "Walking and working among these people of various faiths, I became more conscious of my human connectedness with all peoples."

The refugee crisis in India being resolved, Mary Lou returned to Michigan to serve on an administrative team for the Northeast Province, which she did from 1972 to 1974.

In the following years, her ministry was with elderly poor as a nursing aid in Monroe Care Center. Soon after, she accepted a position working with parents who wanted to open a group home for their mentally challenged adult children. Mary Lou became the house manager for H.O.M.E., Inc. and opened the first group home in Temperance, Mich. A few years later, the IHMs offered property next to the Hall of the Divine Child, (now known as Norman Towers), so that a larger group home could be built in Monroe, which is called "Elm House."

She was later approached by her provincial and asked if she would be willing to manage a HUD (federal Housing and Urban Development) apartment building where some 30 elderly black men and women were living in great neglect by the building's owner. The mayor of that Mississippi town told the owner that he would close the building unless he agreed to hire someone to manage the building. When visiting Mississippi, Mary Lou saw the beautiful people and their situation and decided that she had to say yes. Since it was a HUD complex and she was not old enough to live there herself, a Sister of Charity from Kentucky, who was of age, came to work with her. Mary Lou wrote, "Again I was overwhelmed by the beauty and faith of these elderly people and was able to help them gain the respect and living conditions they deserve."

In 1981 and 1982, Mary Lou had a year of renewal at Mt. St. Joseph in Ohio. Mary Lou wrote, "It was during this time of ministry that I became more aware of the Spirit's desire to be prayer in me by entering into the joys, sufferings and struggles of the world within my person." This led her to become more involved with social justice issues. In an article titled "Prayer as an Act of Justice," published in *Review for Religious*, May 1982, she wrote,

As with Jesus, this inner conviction of who we are in truth and of the power of God's faithfulness working in and through us will form us as authentic persons of justice at the core of our being... this conviction will at times take the form of speaking out against the injustices of our day, of working to bring about a more just social order, and of supporting others who do this. In our daily lives it will affect our attitude toward others moving us to accept and affirm the integrity of each individual we

encounter, for each has been loved, forgiven and called to salvation by God.

Animated by the spirit of Jesus we will become doers of justice, of liberation in our world, each according to the call experienced in his or her honest encounter with God in prayer.

Mary Lou's prayer and reflection led her to become involved with justice issues, such as the protest of the Iraq Wars, stopping the "White Train" that was hauling nuclear material, Pax Christi and being one of the founding members of the IHM Peacemakers. These years of involvement saw times of real integration of prayer

There are several interesting letters in her Archives file, one from Joseph Cardinal Bernadin of Chicago. Someone had written a scathing letter about the Cardinal and the church in the local newspaper to which Mary Lou wrote a long response. The Cardinal, in turn, wrote a lovely note to her.

In 1985, she applied and was accepted at Visitation for the ministry of retreats, spiritual direction and hospitality. Mary Lou wrote in her autobiography, "I was privileged to walk with so many beautiful men and women who made private or group retreats at Visitation and also able to bring more beauty to the grounds of Visitation. I had noticed that there were no flowering trees on the property and began to give myself a birthday present at the end of May each of the 8 years I spent there of a new small flowering tree."

Toward the end of these years, Mary Lou requested that as a staff member her main "active" ministry would be prayer itself. This would replace the outreach ministry of spiritual direction and group work. She would continue to help with auxiliary tasks, such as maintenance, answering the telephone, preparing meals, planning prayer and liturgies and staff meetings. She realized that in sustaining a deep prayer life, it is necessary to be involved in some kind of work.

In 1993, Mary Lou went to Desert House of Prayer in Cortaro, Ariz. As part of her recommendation for this time spent away, Sister Paula Cooney wrote: "Mary Lou wrote an article that was published in which she expressed her deep belief in the link between prayer and social justice, between the person of prayer and our broken world. This belief is the core of Mary Lou's faith and what sustains her in her life journey." At another time Paula wrote: "Mary Lou is a well-integrated

person who struggles in some areas to come to wholeness. She has had a great inner desire to live a more contemplative lifestyle for many years. During our times at Visitation she taught me so much about the integration of that call and a deep and active commitment to community life and to a radical stand in peace and justice.”

From 1994 until 2006, Mary Lou and Eva Schoell served the IHM community in their ministry at Crawfton. Many of us have fond memories of times spent there on the shores of Lake Erie and of the behind-the-scenes housekeeping and gardening done by Mary Lou and Eva. Dorothy Diederichs remembers Mary Lou’s deep love of nature, even from their earliest postulant days together. In later years she also gifted the lands with a flowering tree each year. Unfortunately, the community had to sell Crawfton in 2006.

Mary Lou returned to Visitation for one more year in 2006. She retired to the Motherhouse in 2009, where she spent her days in deep prayer, visiting the sick as part of the Ruth Companions program, being active in the IHM Peacemaker Committee, and volunteering where needed. Mary Lou accepted her diminishment and entered the Memory Care Unit, totally remaining active in day-to-day activities.

Mary Lou is well-remembered for her strong sense of God’s presence in her and in the world, her deep concern for peace and justice, her sense of hospitality and her love of nature, beauty, and simplicity. She made you feel that you were her good friend whenever you met. She was truly a mystic among us.

NAMASTE Mary Lou! We honor the place in you in which the entire universe swells. When you are in that place in you and I am in that place in me. WE ARE ONE.

Farewell, our sister! We will surely miss you! You will forever be in our hearts!

Written by Roberta Richmond, IHM, with additions from Joan Kusak, IHM, and Barbara Weigand, IHM

Delivered on Jan. 29, 2016 by Joan Kusak, IHM, and Barbara Weigand, IHM