

## Obituary



Sister Donna Mary Hart, IHM, 95, died Friday, Oct. 6, in the IHM Health Care Center, Monroe.

Sister Donna Mary was one of nine children of William and Jennie (Smith) Hart. She was born May 30, 1922, and was baptized Eleanor at St. Mary of Redford in Detroit. After attending St. Mary of Redford Elementary and High Schools, she graduated from St. Mary Academy, Monroe, in 1940. Eleanor entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe in 1945 and received the religious name Sister Donna Mary.

Sister Donna Mary, "Donna" as she was later known, earned a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College, Detroit, and set about her teaching ministry at St. Mary Academy and Detroit high schools, St. Francis de Sales and Immaculata. During the summers, she studied at Villanova University, earning a master's degree. She taught at St. Thomas High School, Ann Arbor; Immaculate Heart of Mary High School, Westchester, Ill., and Our Lady Star of the Sea, Grosse Pointe Woods, where she also served as principal.

The changes in the Church in the 1960s offered Sister Donna new ministries. She served in congregational leadership as Provincial of the Northeast Province; in adult religious education in a parish setting; and she completed a second master's degree in pastoral studies (Loyola University, Chicago). She engaged the people of St. Martin de Porres, Warren; Church of the Holy Spirit, Hamburg; St. Mary Parish, Milford, and Prince of Peace Parish, West Bloomfield.

These positions added depth and knowledge to Sister Donna's skills and prepared her to serve as an administrative team member of the IHM Motherhouse Resident Community and to coordinate the community's Theological Education Project. Living in Livonia and downriver, she commuted to Monroe. In 2005, Sister Donna moved into the Motherhouse and continued to provide pastoral ministry as part of the IHM Pastoral Care Department. Even as her health declined, sisters and staff felt her pastoral ministry every day.

## Remembering

Today, we gather to celebrate and give thanks for the gift that Donna Hart, IHM has been and will continue to be in each of our lives. We all carry memories and stories of Donna, many already shared among us during these last days and months. Indeed, it was during the Easter season this year when Donna was taken to the hospital and we all thought we would be losing her within days; a flurry of motion and activity, except for the one at the center, and, as always, Donna taught by her very presence.

In *Four Quartets*, a set of four interlinked poems, T. S. Eliot (1943/1971) observes “What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”

In the mid-1990s, as part of the community’s Theological Education Process, each IHM was asked to reflect on her life and write up a page for the community’s Book of Life. Donna wrote her page of life during the post-Easter season. She shares this reflection:

In this post-Easter season as I am recalling the ‘Turning Points’ of my life, I am struck in a new way by the beautiful Scripture passages in which Jesus reveals himself to the disciples (and us!) ... in a country walk that ends in a shared supper, ... after an evening of fishing that ends with Jesus getting breakfast for his friends on a beach, ... in a garden sharing a few minutes with a dear friend who is distraught. What then are sacred places, times, events? Where then may we expect to find Jesus in our lives?

Joyce Eleanor Hart, known to us as Donna Hart (Donna Mary), was born on May 30, 1922. Donna was the seventh of nine children born to William Herbert Hart and Genevieve Mary “Jennie” Smith. Donna’s older brothers and sisters were Herbert (Burt), Dorothy (Therese Martin Hart, IHM), Elizabeth (Betty), Bob, Jeanne and Frank. Her two younger brothers were Bill and Alan. All nine Hart children were born at their family home either, in Highland Park where the family first lived, or later in Farmington, where Donna was born.

The Irish lineage in the Hart family came from Donna’s paternal grandfather, Michael, who had come to America at age 19 during the Irish potato famine. Arriving in New York when signs clearly read “No Irish Need Apply Here,” her grandfather took himself to the newly-opened silver mines in Nevada. Later he

came to Cork Town in Detroit where Donna's father was born in 1885. The nationalities on Donna's mother's side were more mixed, with relatives coming from England, Germany and France. Donna's mother was born in Marine City in 1887; and the family moved to Detroit in her teens so Donna's grandfather, Charles Frank Smith, could establish a grocery store in Detroit's Cork Town area. By the 1930s and 1940s, C.F. Smith grocery stores marked the neighborhood food shopping landscape in the Detroit area with well over 600 stores.

The family's move to Farmington, where Donna's maternal grandfather had property, meant a childhood filled with gifts bestowed by the countryside. In spring and summer, there were wild flowers everywhere; in the woods, streams, which made great "swimming holes;" and there were apple orchards that burst into gorgeous bloom in the spring and provided the taste of harvest in fall. Then, in the winter, there were hills aplenty for tobogganing and skiing. Donna recalled summer nights when her mother would sit with her on the hillside, showing her how to locate the Milky Way and the Big Dipper and noted that it was here, in the country, where she first came in touch with both the Earth and the universe!

Donna's parents were among the couples who helped establish Our Lady of Sorrows parish in Farmington, and the parish became an integral part of the family's life. In those early days, Our Lady of Sorrows had no parish school, so Donna's father drove his children 12 miles down Grand River to St. Mary of Redford School, where over the years, grades were being added and a new school built. The oldest Hart child, Burt, was in the first high school graduating class and Dorothy, Therese Martin, in the second. St. Mary of Redford also became Donna's first contact with the IHM Sisters.

She came to know the IHMs even more deeply during high school while attending St. Mary Academy in Monroe as a boarder. This was her first time away from her family and the end of each vacation was always a painful experience. Her relationships with the IHM Sisters – coming to experience them as people, growing in her appreciation of many sisters' senses of humor – these made her homesickness a bit easier to live through.

After high school graduation, Donna began her undergraduate studies at Marygrove College in fall 1940. She majored in Latin, with minors in French, English and theology. In December of her second year, Pearl Harbor was

attacked and life changed, especially for the lives of young men who went into the service. Within the year, three of Donna's brothers were serving in Army and Navy units. At Marygrove, Sister Honora, the college president, kept students very aware of the condition of the country and the world. There was a clear expectation that each student would be engaged in some service activity in addition to her studies. Donna recalled it was at Marygrove that she became deeply aware of social justice issues.

The thought of entering religious life surfaced occasionally within Donna as early as high school, but it wasn't until after graduation from Marygrove that she began to seriously consider that possibility. Her decision to enter religious life came slowly, after serious consideration of marriage and a family of her own. Donna met with Mother Teresa in February following graduation and her entry day was set for Sept. 8, 1945 – the date chosen to allow Donna to see each of her three brothers who had been in service one more time before coming to Monroe.

Donna's teaching career started while in formation. During her second year novitiate, she taught at St. Mary Academy, meeting several young women who themselves would later join the IHM community. After first profession, Donna taught one more year at the Academy before being sent to St. Francis de Sales parish high school where she taught for the next six years. In the coming years, she would teach at Immaculata High School in Detroit, St. Thomas High School in Ann Arbor and Immaculate Heart of Mary High School in Westchester, Ill. Throughout her 16 years teaching high school, Donna taught Latin, French, English and religion. It is a testament to her teaching and to her personal presence and engagement with her students that ninth graders became enthralled and captivated when they learned that "All of Gaul was divided into three parts."

Donna was among the first sisters sent to Westchester to open the new IHM High School. As she recalled, "Opening a new school is an exciting and strenuous undertaking and is achieved only with communal effort. It was in some respects a great opportunity to develop gifts I never knew I possessed." At the end of her third year at Westchester, as the school prepared to celebrate the first graduation class, Donna learned that she was to be principal and superior at Star of the Sea parish in Grosse Pointe, Mich. High School administration was not her choice, and she had no desire to be an administrator. So, it took some time

for her to settle into the role. Donna recounted a conversation with Margaret Brennan who reminded her that leadership gives one the opportunity to help others discover their gifts and then to contribute them to the building up of community. While at Star of the Sea, Donna was also on the first Northeast IHM Regional Council; and, in 1969, she served on the Northeast Provincial Team. These roles helped her to recognize gifts she could offer to the IHM community and to her local parish community.

One of the major “turning points” in Donna’s life unfolded during the season in which the Catholic Church was experiencing its own turning and renewal. As she moved from ministry with young high school students to ministry with adults in the Archdiocese of Detroit, the best features of Vatican II were beginning to be felt. In 1970, Donna began her work in religious education at St. Martin de Porres parish in Warren. At one point in her ministry there, the parish team included two priests, a Sister of Charity, an Adrian Dominican and Donna, an IHM. This was a new experience of Church for everyone, and Donna found the teamwork a “joy to experience.” After her time in Warren, she continued in parish ministry at Our Lady of Sorrows parish and, later, at the Church of the Holy Spirit in Hamburg. In 1983, she accepted a position in pastoral ministry at St. Mary parish in Milford and, nine years later, at Prince of Peace Parish in West Bloomfield. During her years in pastoral ministry, Donna grew through her experiences with divorced and separated persons, the Stephen Ministry, and in grief work.

Donna reflected on these experiences:

Working in the Archdiocese of Detroit under the leadership of Cardinal Dearden had a strong influence in my understanding of CHURCH.

Ministering at that time gave me a positive experience of living and ministering in a Church shaped by Vatican II. ...The Church of Detroit was feeling the wonderful effects of the Laity’s input and it was a gift to be working with the adults in the parish I was serving at that time. The deep faith of many of those participating enriched all of us.

Throughout her life, Donna remained open to new horizons of learning, understanding, and growth. She reflected in her Book of Life:

SEEING may be a challenge to us at times because it may cause us to change, to lose control of what we have worked so hard to hold together. Immersed in the

world in which we were raised ... we consciously or perhaps unconsciously much of the time, developed over time a vision of reality that held together our world, religiously, economically and socially.

For Donna, a thoroughly Irish Catholic upbringing that she cherished and loved had helped shape her image of God as Creator, Judge and Lawgiver. Later as she pursued her interest in classical studies, earning a master's degree at Villanova University, she became increasingly aware of how Greek thought so permeated western thinking, neatly dividing everything in life into binary realities – good or bad, sacred or secular, body or spirit. Even as she was shifting in her understanding of Church, she was also gradually experiencing shifts in her image of God.

Largely due to her Scripture studies, she found that the Christ of Scripture revealed a compassionate face of God. In 1979, she had an opportunity to study for a year and chose to study theology, earning her master's from CTU and Loyola University in Chicago. In 1982, Donna served as a member of the Visitation staff. And through the community's six-year theological education process, she found an invitation to engage in every aspect of her faith and her religious commitment. For Donna, her vocation took on a deeper significance and meaning. She found herself looking out on the world and realizing she was called to be there. As she had moved into roles of influence and leadership, her role as a woman in the Church and the world gradually took shape.

During Donna's first retirement, she was asked to serve as a member of the Motherhouse administrative team, coordinating theology programs and spiritual aspects of life within the house. In 2000, she "retired" a second time and worked part-time as a mentor in Marygrove College's Distance-Learning Program. She returned to the Monroe campus in 2005, volunteering in Pastoral Care and in prayer ministry, and moved to the Motherhouse in 2008, where she reconnected with old friends and formed relationships with sisters she had not known as well before. Her presence in the house was tangible. There were the evening walks to regularly visit with sisters in Health Care, the Armchair Activists, retreat offerings, morning lecturing, and her reflections on Scripture.

Throughout her life, Donna retained a grace of presence. This was not an untested grace. From her youth, she experienced the hills and valleys of living;

but she also knew that no matter what happens, you see where God is present and it strengthens you.

Donna remained youthful in her life, vital in soul and mind. She loved to read, to participate in every opportunity to learn, to grow, to experience life in its fullness. She brought warmth and affection into the life of thought; and helped bring clarity and light of thought when feelings needed discernment.

Donna had an Emily Dickenson quality – “Tell the truth, but tell it slant.” When Donna asked a question or offered an insight, she knew that understanding is always emerging and so she found ways to coax you into a new possibility, a new way of seeing. She might suggest or extend an invitation, but always she believed and trusted in the integrity of your own experience, your own encounter, your own goodness.

Eliot ends his Four Quartets with a reflection:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

To arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time: It is a journey of a lifetime and a journey Donna took fully and graciously. Donna ends her Book of Life page with this reflection:

What then are sacred places, times, events? Where then may we expect to find Jesus in our lives? What was begun for me back in the sixties continues for me today. The barriers to SEEING God, the tendency to separate life's events into Sacred and secular, holy or unholy continues to diminish. Now, all of creation, and life in all its fullness, reveals the God who journeys with me where anything or anyone can be the place or fount of God's presence for me. What new ways of SEEING lie in the future for me? I wonder. ...

Wonder no longer, Donna. Now you SEE face to face.

Written and delivered by Mary Katherine Hamilton, IHM, Oct. 11, 2017

Reference: Elliot, T.S. 1943/1971. *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Com