

Obituary

Sister Mary Ann Flanagan, IHM, 76, died Wednesday, Oct. 29 at her home, IHM Senior Living Community.

Sister Mary Ann was born April 14, 1943, in Dearborn, Mich., to Joseph and Marguerite "Betty" (Hinks) Flanagan. The family belonged to Sacred Heart parish where Mary Ann attended grade school and graduated from Sacred Heart High School. The IHM community was very much a part of family life with two aunts as IHM Sisters and relatives who were members of other religious communities. In 1961, Mary Ann entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, and received the religious name, Sister Marie Anne.



After earning a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College, she spent several years teaching at St. Raymond, Detroit. Sister Mary Ann was interested in adult religious education, faith formation and theology. She earned a master's degree from the University of Detroit and went on to study and earn a doctorate from Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium.

Her interests and education led to a variety of positions and places and touched many lives. She coordinated adult religious education at Holy Cross House in Atlanta; spiritual formation for the IHM community; co-directed the Institute of Apostolic Spirituality in Cincinnati and traveled to Bolivia and Chile as part of a Maryknoll team in acculturation and pastoral services.

Much of her career was spent as professor of theology: at Marygrove College and Sacred Heart Seminary, Detroit; St. Vincent de Paul Seminary, Boynton Beach, Fla.; and at Assumption University, Windsor, Ontario, from 1993 to 2001. She served the Diocese of Saginaw as director of the Office of Church Ministry until 2005.

Sister Mary Ann continued to work freelance in theological education, spiritual direction, speaking engagements and related projects for many communities until changes in health led her to move to the Motherhouse and recently to the Health Care Center within IHM Senior Living Community.

Remembering

Just three days before her death, I had a most engaging visit with Mary Ann Flanagan in her room at IHM Senior Living Community. Struggling with the end stages of cancer,

she greeted me nevertheless with that wonderful open-face smile of hers and asked me to sit down because she wanted to talk to me, and seriously so! I did of course, and with both great spiritual freedom and serious intent, she told me that she wanted me to speak in her remembrance first and foremost of the deep center of her life, her personal relationship with Jesus Christ, from whom all in her life poured out. In so many words, she said that her life is all about being in Christ, of Christ, and for Christ. "I am free," she said, "and ready to go into the fullness of Life now, and tell Susie how much I love her and that I will be with her forever."

Our dear Mary Ann Flanagan, born April 14, 1943 in Detroit, was raised in Dearborn, Mich. Her parents, Joseph Flanagan and Betty Hinks Flanagan, came from strong Catholic families and raised their three children – Philip, Mary Ann and Susan – accordingly. Betty had one brother, Robert Hinks, who became a Jesuit priest, and three sisters – twin sisters Shirley and Mary Jane, who both became IHM Sisters, and Virginia, who became a Good Shepherd Sister. The Flanagan family had a special love for Susie, the youngest, who from her birth was afflicted with special needs and Mary Ann remained devoted to her fully.

Mary Ann attended Sacred Heart School, Dearborn for 12 years. In 1961, she entered the IHM congregation, attracted by our focus on prayer, education and social justice. She thrived during the five years of her spiritual, intellectual and professional formation for ministry in Monroe and graduated in 1966 from Marygrove College with a bachelor's degree in social studies, theology and education. Later, she recalled the rich and integrated knowledge and the deep spiritual nurturance she received during these years, and especially from Sisters Margaret Brennan, Mary Jo Maher and Mary McDevitt.

In 1966, Mary Ann set out on her path of a varied practice of ministry. For two years, she taught the sixth grade at St. Raymond School in Detroit, where she first met Roberta Richmond, IHM, a special lifelong friend. In 1968, Mary Ann was missioned with Sharon Holland, IHM, and Carol Grady, IHM, to Holy Cross House in Chamblee, Ga. to engage in a new form of IHM educational ministry: adult faith formation and parish-based religious education. At the recent 50th anniversary reunion, friends and staff gathered, and retired Deacon Dick Suever said, "Mary Ann always included everyone, and set the tone for the community that persists to this day. She inspired me and many others to use our gifts for the community." He remembered too that she included in staff breakfasts the African American custodian who became like a brother to all of them.

In 1969, Mary Ann made her final vows and a year later she earned a master's degree in religious education from the Pius XII Catechetical Center and the University of Detroit. In that same year, with the encouragement of IHM President Margaret Brennan and German Redemptorist theologian Bernard Haring, Mary Ann began studies for the PhD in religious studies at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. Haring, who was so influential at Vatican II in shifting moral theology from rules only to love-based reflection for moral judgment, was a regular visitor to Monroe during post Vatican II years. He told Mary Ann to study Christian ethics, where a woman's experience and voice was desperately needed. Later, she said: "I was forever shaped by his understanding of 'epikeia' – that is, judging practically in the spirit of compassion and mercy rather than the letter of the law – and so well taught to me later by my Louvain professors."

At Louvain, Mary Ann was also introduced to Peruvian theologian, Rev. Gustavo Gutierrez, an occasional visitor to the University, his alma mater and where he later received an honorary doctorate in theology. She studied his writings in her classes on social ethics and said later that the methodology of starting with the life experience of the poor for theological reflection affected her thought and spirituality for the rest of her life. In 1974, she earned a PhD in religious studies and from then onward, she engaged in several new and challenging ministries.

In 1975, she helped to establish a sabbatical renewal program for women religious in Cincinnati, called "An Apostolic Spirituality for the Global Community." In 1979, she worked with the Maryknoll Missionary Sisters in Santiago, Chile for two years, where she experienced concretely the practical liberation theology she had learned in Louvain. She said later in her life, "I was deeply gifted during these two years and know that this moment in my life journey was truly a privileged one."

In 1981, Mary Ann returned to Detroit to help create an MA degree in pastoral ministry at Marygrove College. She also taught courses in the program and eventually became its director. Then, in 1984, she began teaching at St. Vincent de Paul Seminary in Boynton Beach, Fla., where by chance she met Trappist monk, Thomas Keating, an experience that opened her up to the transformative effects of the practice of Centering Prayer, which she taught to so many people. Susie's daughter, Karen, recently told Monica Stuhlreyer:

"Mary Ann has been such a blessing in my life. It was so wonderful to meet her and Susie my mother almost 20 years ago, and to find that in my biological family, I had a 'soul sister' – someone who perceived the Christ within and spoke a spiritual language to which I could relate. Mary Ann introduced me to Father Thomas Keating and the

monks of St Benedict's monastery, where I did a 10-day silent Centering Prayer retreat. She will be forever in my heart."

Mary Ann cultivated this gift in so many, right up to her last years here in Monroe.

In 1986, Mary Ann returned to Detroit at the invitation of the rector at Sacred Heart Seminary to teach Christian ethics. At nearly the same time, her mother became gravely ill, and so she took up residence in Dearborn to share in her mother's care with Susie, their father having passed away some years earlier. Mary Ann continued to teach at Sacred Heart Seminary but then was terminated in 1987 by a new rector who wanted, "no woman with a degree from Louvain teaching at his seminary," a bitterly agonizing moment of sexism and clericalism for Mary Ann and all of us IHM Sisters. She persisted, though, in her ministry of theological and spiritual formation from 1988 to 1993 in parish-based adult education and spiritual counselling in the Detroit area. She also pursued part-time, a master's degree in social work from a local campus of the University of Michigan, which she achieved in 1994.

Then, from 1993 to 2001, she helped to shape and teach in a new master's degree in pastoral theology program at Assumption University in Windsor, Canada, where her far-reaching influence is still spoken of and celebrated today. Many of her colleagues and students and friends from these years are here with us today, in person and via streaming. During these years, she also made significant contributions to the IHM congregation's Theological Education Program as part of the Planning Committee and also by offering lectures and workshops during its six years of ongoing theological education for IHM Sisters.

In 2002, Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw, Mich. asked Mary Ann to move there to develop courses for lay ministry training to be linked with the Assumption University program. She accepted this invitation gracefully and worked there until 2008, when the new bishop, replacing Untener after his early death, undertook a different pastoral plan and Mary Ann resigned. Again, this was a very difficult time for her and for us IHM Sisters and all whom Mary Ann had led into a deeper discipleship commitment through theologically sound spiritual and pastoral education.

In 2008, Mary Ann moved back to the Detroit area where she lived until 2016. During these years, she was diagnosed with a neurological disorder, hard news indeed to bear. She enjoyed the loving and supportive friendship of her IHM Sisters – including her co-ministers in the Storycatchers Mission Unit – and her many friends, colleagues and students whom she had taught and led into the deeper practice of prayer. She and Susie took up residence in Dearborn Heights and Mary Ann continued, as well as

she could, her ministries of spiritual formation in workshops and retreats and study days on Centering Prayer. She engaged in some interfaith learning too through her accidental encounter, while shopping, with Huda Lawhawl, a Muslim mother from Libya. When Mary Ann learned that Huda could not speak English, she offered to help her, and soon she became friends with Huda and Abdual, her husband, and their entire family extending to Libya! The seven children in the family knew Mary Ann as “Grandma” and they and their parents are all here with us today!

In 2016, Mary Ann and Susie moved to Monroe to take up residence in IHM Senior Living Community. Susie, of course, quickly won the hearts of her IHM Sister neighbors with her open and welcoming hugs and her independent and grateful spirit, and Mary Ann adjusted well to her new surroundings. She continued to do spiritual direction and Centering Prayer workshops at the Motherhouse and to teach theology to new IHM members in their candidacy and novitiate years, until she received her cancer diagnosis, another hard bit of news to receive. She braved through radiation and chemotherapy treatments, and then she became the focus of loving care, with none better than that of her beloved Susie! Shortly before her death, Mary Ann said, “I love Susie so, but even more, I know she loves me so much.” During these years, Mary Ann and Susie have also stayed in regular contact with Philip and his family in Chicago and with Karen, Susie’s dear daughter, who is also here with us today.

Our dear Mary Ann attracted so many people to the goodness of God so alive in her, through open ears and eyes for listening and regarding with love. On her page in the IHM Book of Life she wrote about learning that her name, Ann, was a derivative of the Hebrew word for “gift and one full of favor.” She also cited two key Scripture texts that grounded her life, Exodus 34:6 and Luke 13:10. In the Exodus text, our loving God says to us, “I am tenderness, compassion, ever forgiving, and ever faithful.” How fully Mary Ann embraced those words and lived from them! The Lukan text is from the story of the bent-over woman in the synagogue where Jesus was teaching. When he saw her, he called her and said that she was now rid of her infirmity. “And then she stood straight up, glorifying God.” Mary Ann wrote:

I am that bent-over woman and like her I joined in the journey of discipleship and the service of the Reign of God with Jesus, the Christ. The liberating call to follow Jesus as an IHM woman in ministerial service has been a challenging and stretching religious grace, precious in my entire life. ... Who could be luckier or happier to spend one’s ministry in theological faith-formation ministry? Over the years I have treasured studying and teaching the wisdom and challenges of pastoral theology. I am changed because of this faith interaction with a history of believers in search of God. I thank all

of you – my family, my IHM Sisters, my colleagues and friends and students over all these years! We are all gifts! Let us celebrate!

Our dear Mary Ann, with celebration and great gratitude and freedom and also with that tinge of sadness we all have today, we send you off now into the fullness of that tenderness, compassion, forgiveness, and fidelity that you lived these many years. Go now into the very Heart of our loving God!

In words paraphrased in part from the Irish poet and spiritual guide, John O'Donohue, (from [*To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Invocations and Blessings*](#)):

May the grief now in every heart that loves you
flower into great hope and love!

May you continue to be present to us
and inspire us “to stand up straight” each day
and serve with courage and a generous heart and with wisdom.

And may all whom you have loved and have gone before you,
welcome you now into the Banquet of Banquets,
a Celebration of the fullness of Love!

Written by Roberta Richmond, IHM and Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM
Delivered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM, on Nov. 7, 2019.