

Obituary



Sister Ann Isabelle Tefend, IHM, 94, died Saturday, Dec. 29, at her home, the IHM Motherhouse in Monroe.

Sister Ann Isabelle was born on April 19, 1924, to Frederick and Amelia (Downey) Tefend of Detroit, and named Isabelle Catherine. The family moved to Trenton, Michigan, where Isabelle attended Trenton Public School, graduated from Slocum-Truax High School and went on to study at Marygrove College in Detroit.

In 1950, Isabelle entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, of Monroe and received the religious name, Sister Ann Isabelle. Upon completing her bachelor's degree, she began her teaching ministry in Michigan at St. Joseph, Erie; SS. Peter and Paul, Ionia; Holy Trinity Detroit; and St. Michael, Flint. Continuing into high school and business education, she taught at St. Vincent de Paul and Pontiac Catholic Central, Pontiac; Marian High School, Bloomfield Hills; St. Gabriel Richard, Riverview; and St. Mary Academy, Monroe. During this time, Sister Ann Isabelle earned a master's degree in education from Wayne State University, Detroit.

In 1977, Sister Ann Isabelle was missioned in religious education to the Diocese of Navrongo, Ghana, West Africa. After several years, she returned to the United States and taught at Monroe Community College, Monroe Catholic Central High School, Our Lady Star of the Sea, Grosse Pointe Woods, Mich.; and Bishop Borgess High School, Redford, Mich. She excelled as a business teacher, loved music and playing the violin and enjoyed writing poetry.

After leaving education, Sister Ann Isabelle enjoyed various ministries: finance director at Bishop Borgess High School; school secretary at Our Lady of Grace School, Dearborn Heights, Mich.; adult care-giver; pharmacy aide and assistant to the IHM Development Office. While she retired to the Motherhouse in 1999, Sister Ann Isabelle remained active and assisted with many community works.

Remembering

Remembering Sister Ann Isabelle evokes many images she herself evoked through her stories of family and ministry.

Ann Isabelle described her mother and father as two sturdy people, the parents of five children, inheritors of the Belgian and Irish traditions of their parents and grandparents. Both of them became breadwinners at age 12. They, Agnes Amelia Downey and Frederick William Tefend, knew hard work early and assumed their demanding and sometimes difficult roles in life with quiet pride and steady discipline.

Ann Isabelle's great-grandparents and her grandfather and grandmother Tefend settled in the area of Wyandotte and Trenton, and for a time, as far away as Florida. Her grandfather Charles went to Slocum's Island to tend the land and render service to Mr. Giles Bryan Slocum who once owned all 162 acres of "Slocum's Island." This artificial island, a part of Trenton, Mich., was willed to Wayne County and became the first county park established in the State of Michigan. It was later named St. Elizabeth's Park and is still a center of recreation.

Like her father, Ann Isabelle's mother suffered familial losses. At age 12, she too, upon the death of her mother, became the caregiver for her four younger siblings. Neither parent was able to complete high school. Being self-taught, they grew skilled in care of the land, care of the home and tending to their family. Frederick inherited part of the family farm. Amelia employed some of her skill to create her own wedding dress and the traditional fruit cake for their wedding.

Amelia's sister joined the IHM congregation in 1916 and received the name Sister Marcia. Fred's two sisters also became IHM Sisters, Tharsilla in 1913, and Marie Anne in 1920.

Amelia and Fred provided a welcoming home for their children, Marcy, Mary Jane, Archie, Isabelle and little Fred, 11 years younger than Isabelle. The Tefends vigorously supported their children's personal development, their educational and artistic tastes, and their exploration of life choices.

As Isabelle prepared to be a professional secretary, taking courses at Trenton High School, the rest of the family was unaware that she was struggling with a sense of call to religious life. They experienced her sisterly kindness. They knew she had literary and musical talents. She played in the Trenton Orchestra even when in elementary school. Her younger brother, little Fred, loved to sit in the big chair in her room to listen and to nap while Isabelle played her violin. It was she who honored his natural talent, starting him on a child-sized violin toward a lifetime of music making. By the first grade, Fred entertained his classmates and others. He was so small that the teacher put him on her desk for the performance.

As for literary interests, from childhood on Isabelle wrote poetry and produced collections of her writings from the time she was 8 or 10 through high school and adulthood. Life over the years was her subject matter: family, friends, nature, the war, school, work, love and losses, along with probing questions. She won poetry prizes in local contests. Edgar Guest, the Detroit poet, invited her to his house to encourage and endorse her talent.

As Ann Isabelle once said, "My life was poetry and music."

Even as she developed her secretarial skills, she sought more education and found a way to study for a year at Marygrove College. She had found a comfortable residence in the area with a Jewish family and also cared for the children. The dean of the college, however, told her that college rules disallowed her living with an unrelated family. As a result, she could not continue due to costs and travel limitations. Disappointed, she withdrew from Marygrove.

Soon, however, she was secretary to an executive at Ford Motor Company. She had a promising position and a new car, so she took her mother and aunt to Ste. Anne de Beaupre's shrine in Canada. During this vacation, she nurtured a special affection for St. Anne as attested to by her later name selection in the community. Shortly afterward, in 1948, Isabelle felt she had to deal with this "other call," this suspicion that maybe she was called to religious life. At the end of a novena at the Shrine of the Little Flower in Royal Oak, she set out to consult her pastor, Father Eppenbrock in Trenton.

"What community interests you?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe the Maryknolls or the Franciscans," Isabelle replied.

"What about the IHMs?"

"Well, I have three aunts there."

"Good," said Father Eppenbrock. "I am going there tomorrow. I'll take you, too, and you can see Mother Teresa."

"Oh, Father, I can go by myself. I have my own car."

"No. We can all go together."

So that was it. She was going with Father Eppenbrock, who was taking his niece back to the Academy and his nephew to the Hall after Christmas vacation. He arrived at the Tefend home the next morning to pick up Isabelle much to the family's surprise.

"He's here for me," Isabelle announced. "I'm going to Monroe today to see Mother Teresa about entering the convent."

Her siblings were stunned, but her mother said, "Oh, I think you'll like it." That was January and by the end of the month, she arrived as one of the last entrants among the class of 1950, receiving the name Ann Isabelle.

For her first 15 years of ministry Ann Isabelle, like so many IHMs, advanced in the skill and art of education, teaching first elementary school children, then older children and finally adolescents. Moving to rural areas and urban and suburban locations, she served diverse students. Her ministry took her to Erie, Ionia, Detroit, Flint, Pontiac, Birmingham and Monroe. Through those years, her love of students shaped compassionate relationships. She shared many stories about dealing with children's needs and successes. Some of them kept contact over the years.

By 1977, at age 52, at last she was able to realize her desire to be a foreign missionary. She set out for a new adventure in rugged territory, Northern Ghana in North Africa. As circumstances unfolded, she had to travel alone to meet Sisters Becky Vonderhaar and Agnes Anderson there. Her account of arriving in Accra, Ghana, exhausted and ill, with no one to meet her, her trip further north assisted by a young boy who said he knew the way, was a harrowing account of trust in God. Finally, she arrived in Navrongo, in the sub-Saharan Desert on Dec. 8. At a Mass celebration, she, Becky Vonderhaar and Agnes Anderson were brought together and renewed their vows.

Her visits to mission outposts began quickly. She visited 15 primitive schools regularly, servicing the teachers in poorly equipped schools, sometimes with only earth-covered floors. The sisters ate, she said, like the people, simply, mainly for nutrition, cooking usually outdoors on charcoal burners. She lived in a designated "compound" with other missionaries. In every way, life was very down-to-earth and full of toil. But the students valued education though they had limited faith knowledge. And she was happy in the experience. She observed that she learned there how unnecessary many material things are. She learned, she said, "the importance of people. If I had done this as a younger woman, I would gladly have made it my life work," she said.

But her parents' needs, her own health and another ministry call brought her back to the states to serve the Overseas Missions through the New York office.

Other ministries followed. Her skills in accounting and teaching business courses took her to Monroe Community College, Grosse Pointe, Redford, Dearborn Heights. These years following Ghana, Ann Isabelle described as very ordinary. In many ways it often seemed so. What distinguished her was her constant readiness to go where the needs called her. Whether it was an aging person needing special assistance, a school

looking for a business manager and, in her years of retirement, sisters with singular needs, Ann Isabelle proved ready and available.

"My life," she said, "was music and poetry." Yes. There's truth in that judgment, but Ann Isabelle's compassion firmly grounded that poetry in the prose of daily demands. And the music in her ministry flowed from a heart in synchrony with the needs of the world as she met them. She bodied forth the beauty revealed in music and poetic expression through her willingness to serve wherever called and wherever she discerned needs.

Dear Ann Isabelle, thank you for your always welcoming, loving friendship. As family, friends, students, and your IHM companions, we celebrate the gift you have been among us in whatever communities you found herself. Gratefully we carry your memory in our hearts and celebrate your eternal residence in the music and poetry of resurrection life.

Written and delivered by Joan Glisky, IHM, Jan. 4, 2019