Obituary

Sister Veronica Mary Maher, IHM, 86, died April 13, in the IHM Health Care Center, Monroe.

Sister Veronica Mary was one of six children, two boys and four girls, of Henry and Veronica (Kelly) Maher. She was born Feb. 20, 1931, in Detroit, and was baptized Catherine Lyd. Catherine attended Gesu and Haley Public Elementary schools and graduated from Immaculata High School, Detroit. She went on to earn a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College. After graduation, she followed her sister Mary Jo, "Sister Patrick Ellen," and entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, in 1951. She received the religious name, Veronica Mary.

Sister Veronica Mary began her early teaching career at St. Mary Academy, St. John and St. Mary, Monroe. In 1964, she returned to her own studies, earning a Master of Science degree in biology from Michigan State University. A gifted student, she pursued scientific studies at the University of Wisconsin, earning a PhD in molecular biology in 1968. She gained research experience at Yale University and returned to Marygrove College to teach biology for several years.

In what would become the focus of her life-long ministry, she joined the research staff of the Michigan Cancer Foundation. In 1976, she began a 30-year career at Michigan State University as medical school and cancer research professor; co-founder and research scientist of the Carcinogenesis Laboratory and Associate Dean of Graduate Study.

Sister Veronica's contributions to carcinogenic research have been invaluable to the treatment of cancer. In recognition of her contributions to the university, the nation and the international community of scientists in her field, Sister Veronica Mary was awarded the highest honor at Michigan State University, the title of University Distinguished Professor, a title held by less than 1.5 percent of the faculty.

After residing in East Lansing for many years, Sister Veronica Mary retired to the Motherhouse in 2009, living there until the time of her death.

Remembering

Many of you know my sister Catherine by her religious name, Sister Veronica Mary. But for the family she has always been called Catherine or Aunt Catherine (her baptismal name).

While many of you knew her as an internationally recognized cancer research scientist, her family (nieces, nephews, grand-nieces, grand-nephews and cousins), her friends, and students (undergraduates, graduate students and post-doctoral students), her colleagues and her IHM friends also knew her as a very warm, affectionate person who not only loved others, but was not afraid to express her love for them – verbally and in correspondence. This was especially true of her love for everyone in our family and extended family.

Catherine was also an affirming person – one who was not threatened by other people's gifts, but – on the contrary – rejoiced in another's success and wanted others to succeed and to feel good about themselves.

She was very compassionate. She had so much empathy for others – whether the other was suffering from sickness, grieving over a death or struggling with a problem or difficulty. Catherine focused her entire attention and all her feelings on the person who was suffering – no matter how busy she may have been.

For all her great knowledge and remarkable achievements as a world-renowned scientist, Catherine was very simple and utterly sincere. She did not need to impress others by using sophisticated words. She could explain very complicated matters in a clear, simple way so that anyone could understand it. Her simplicity was a sign of her greatness. Catherine was utterly sincere. She did not try to manipulate others, nor try to deceive them. She was wholeheartedly sincere – and this sincerity endeared her to others.

Catherine was also generous – very generous. Catherine would do anything she could to help others – contacting doctors, checking on medicines, interceding with school officials. In these most recent years, she reached out in multiple ways to help her companions in the Memory Care Unit.

Catherine was always that way, even as a child. She was the second of six children (four girls and two boys) born to Henry and Veronica (Kelly) Maher. Mary Joseph was the oldest, then Catherine, followed by Richard, then Margaret who died of pneumonia just before her second birthday, and finally by the twins, Henry and Veronica who were named after our parents.

Our mother died shortly after the twins were born. She was only 36 years old. Her death affected everyone and everything in our lives. How deeply it affected Catherine was especially evident when, in her late 70s, she became a resident in the Memory Care unit of the Motherhouse. Each time she showed pictures of our family to a visitor,

she would say: “My mother died when I was only 9 years old.” All through her life, Catherine struggled to accept our mother’s death at such an early age.

After our mother’s death, our father became both mother and father to us. He was our “rock” – loving us, caring for us, affirming us, always “being there” for us. He was our hero.

About eight months after our mother’s death, he invited our Aunt Julia Maher, his sister, to live with us. She was a good deal older than our father. She had cared for her parents (our grandparents) until their deaths and was principal of a large public elementary school.

Care of the twins was the central concern of the family. Our father was the principal caregiver, supported by Aunt Julia, and with Mary Jo giving special attention to little Henry and Catherine to little Veronica.

For 10 years, Mary Jo and Catherine were in the same grade, even though Catherine was more than two years younger than Mary Jo. Catherine was such an intelligent little girl, that our mother enrolled her in first grade at Gesu when she was four and a half years old. When she started second grade, she came home crying, telling our mother that she knew everything the sister was teaching. So, at our mother’s request, she was promoted – joining Mary Jo in the third grade. The two of them were together from third grade through the 12th grade, graduating from Immaculata High School in 1947.

Mary Jo entered the IHM community that summer. Catherine went on to Marygrove, graduating summa cum laude in 1951. She majored in biology because, when she told Mother Teresa McGivney that the wanted to enter the IHM community after she finished college, Mother Teresa asked her to major in biology because we needed science teachers.

In August 1951, two months after graduating from Marygrove, she entered the IHM congregation. In 1952, when she entered the novitiate, she was given the name Sister Veronica Mary. (In those days, new members were given a new name to indicate their new state of life.) Catherine asked for the name Veronica because this was both our mother’s and our youngest sister’s name.

In November 1953, while Catherine was still in the novitiate, our father died. When Mary Jo and Catherine visited him at Providence Hospital a few days before his death, he told them that our Aunt Julia would assume full responsibility for the twins. He was afraid that Catherine would feel she should leave the novitiate to care for the twins.

As a postulant, Catherine taught at St. Mary school in Monroe; and as a second year novice at St. John. With the exception of two years at St. Mary of Redford High School, Catherine taught for seven years at St. Mary Academy. She was an excellent teacher, able to explain complicated topics in very simple, clear ways. The students loved her because she enjoyed them, understood them and had fun with them. She liked to tell the story of how she showed some exasperation one day while teaching at Redford. One of the boys whispered to her, "offer it up, Sister."

At the Academy, Catherine always let the girls sit with their friends and let them tease her. She often told the story of how the girls said she would someday discover all the information necessary to get a Nobel Prize and then misplace the data. Another story she loved to tell was one about a biology test on genetics. Catherine suggested that the students pray to Gregor Mendel, the monk who discovered genetics. One student replied, "oh no, Sister. On tests like this, I go straight to the top. I pray to St. Thomas Aquinas."

As a teacher of religion, Catherine inspired in her students a profound faith in God's great love for each of them. For years after, former students told her how much this shaped their image of God and the influence this had on their families.

Catherine's ministry as a high school teacher was interrupted for one year (1957-58) when she was sent to the University of Michigan to get a master's degree in biology. She had been awarded a scholarship by the National Science Foundation when she graduated from Marygrove, but the IHM superiors waited several years before taking advantage of the scholarship. Catherine often recalled that there were about 30 men in the program (all high school teachers) and that she was the only woman. She became their tutor. One day, someone phoned St. Thomas Convent to report that she had seen an IHM Sister in full habit sitting under a tree surrounded by a whole group of men.

In 1964, after six years as a high school teacher of biology, mathematics and religion at the Academy, she was granted a scholarship from the National Cancer Institute of the National Institutes of Health to earn a PhD in molecular biology from the University of Wisconsin. There, she studied at the McArdle Laboratory for Cancer Research.

[By way of footnote, Catherine was very committed to contributing to the financial resources of the IHM congregation. It gave her great satisfaction to know that she had earned her two graduate degrees through scholarships, not money from the IHM Education Fund, and that during the four years she studied for her doctorate she was actually sending money to the congregation. During those years and all through her

33 years at Michigan State University, she lived very frugally. She sent her monthly salary check from Michigan State University to the IHM Business Office and received a stipend for her living expenses.]

Her doctoral dissertation demonstrated for the first time that chemical carcinogens could cause genetic changes in DNA, that is, could produce mutations. She was the first scientist in the world to discover the critical role DNA mutations played in causing human cancer. Because her major professor did not realize the significance of her discovery, her dissertation was not published in a major scientific journal. As a result, only a few years later, two other scientists were given credit for this very significant discovery.

After completing her doctorate, Catherine spent a year of post-doctoral research at Yale University School of Medicine (1968-1969). Then, after two years as a faculty member at Marygrove College, she worked full time for five years at the Michigan Cancer Foundation. There, she pioneered in methods for working with human cells and began her investigations of the role of DNA repair in protecting human cells from mutations that resulted from cancer-causing agents. She also demonstrated for the first time that cells from the skin of persons born with a genetic predisposition to sunlight-induced skin cancer are extremely sensitive to mutations induced by ultraviolet radiation from the sun. She later showed that the degree of sensitivity was directly related to the inability of their cells to repair DNA damage caused by UV radiation.

During her years at the University of Wisconsin, Catherine met Dr. J. Justin McCormick, a priest and member of the Paulist Fathers. In the early 1970s, he joined her as a research scientist at Michigan Cancer Foundation. In 1976, Dr. Maher and Dr. McCormick were invited by the Dean of the College of Osteopathic Medicine of Michigan State University to join the faculty and to found the Carcinogenesis Laboratory which was dedicated to an integrated, multi-faceted research program for the study of how normal human cells become changed (transformed) into malignant cancer cells.

In 1989, Dr. Maher and Dr. McCormick were the first to develop a system to transform normal human cells into malignant cells capable of forming tumors in animals.
In their years working together at Michigan States University, Catherine and Dr. McCormick had 16 international researchers, 45 postdoctoral fellows, and 35 graduate students who earned double degrees (medical and PhD). They also had 25 research technicians, several of whom went on to earn medical degrees; 76 undergraduate researchers many of whom had been professorial assistants or Howard Hughes

Scholars and then went on to earn medical or graduate degrees. Finally, more than 150 undergraduate laboratory assistants worked under their direction. In all, some 400 people worked in the lab under the direction of Dr. Maher and Dr. McCormick.

Visiting scientists and postdoctoral research associates for whom Dr. Maher served as mentor and director of scientific research, were from the United States, Japan, China, Taiwan, India, Pakistan, the Ukraine, Poland, Germany, England and Brazil.

A MSU colleague, Dr. Meek, professor of Pathology and Diagnostic Investigation said of Catherine and Justin, "I have never been at another lab where the [directors] have committed themselves to fostering growth at so many levels – even with helping undergraduate students develop their own mini-research projects."

During her 33 years at Michigan State University, Dr. Maher published more than 150 manuscripts in many of the most prestigious journals of her field, more than 65 chapters in books or review articles and published approximately 400 abstracts of research presentations given at national and international scientific meetings. She also presented lectures on her research not only in the United States, but in more than 17 nations and on five continents.

She served on numerous national review and advisory boards, including those for the National Cancer Institute, the Federal Drug Administration and the U.S.-France Cooperative Cancer Program. Dr. Maher received the MSU Women's Achievements Award in 1985, the MSU Distinguished Faculty Award in 1988 and Michigan Association of Governing Boards Distinguished Faculty Award in 1989.

In 1992, in recognition of her contributions to the university, the nation and the international community of scientists in her field, Dr. Veronica M. Maher was awarded the highest honor at Michigan State University, the title of University Distinguished Professor – a title held by less than 1.5 percent of the faculty. (The following year, Dr. McCormick also became University Distinguished Professor.)

This award was well earned. By 2006, the records of the National Institutes of Health placed Drs. Maher and McCormick in the top five percent of researchers nationally in lifetime funding from the National Institutes of Health. Together they had secured more than $18 million in direct federal funding to support their programs in cancer research.

Catherine was a very strong feminist. She attributed this, first and foremost, to our father's attitude regarding the abilities and leadership roles of women. And she often

spoke of the women "role models" in her life – our father's sisters and the IHM Sisters who taught at Immaculata High School and Marygrove College. She was delighted when President Jimmy Carter insisted that women be on national review boards and committees sponsored by the federal government. Because of her scientific research, she was among the first few women to be chosen for such positions.

Catherine always dressed in a way that reflected her professionalism and feminism. She enjoyed telling the story of a lecture she gave to a very large group of scientists – only one or two of whom knew she was also a Catholic nun. One of those was the host of the meeting who usually diminished the importance of a lecturer's message by his remarks at the conclusion of the talk. However, much to her surprise he immediately rose to his feet and said, "Sister Veronica, you and your data grow more beautiful every year!"

However, more important to Catherine than all the honors she received was her concern for the success of her students. To this, she was totally dedicated. Here are a few examples of her influence on them and their gratitude to her.

I know that you have enjoyed many honors from your accomplishments as a superior scientist but for me personally, you are entitled to another honor. You certainly made a huge difference in my life. I will always be grateful to you for encouraging me to be the best I could be. You had confidence in me and gave me the opportunity to prove to myself that I could be successful in my own personal growth. (Beckey Corner)
Another wrote:

> Words can't describe my appreciation for the concern and consideration you have shown me during my time in the Carcinogenesis Laboratory. This has been the greatest learning experience and you made that possible for me. … Your friendship and caring carried me through the rough spots and made the celebration of the good times more meaningful. (Li)

Still another said:

> You are a great scientist and more importantly to me, a fantastic mentor. I want to thank you for setting up a great example for me to follow in my career. Your influence on me is way beyond the research I conducted in your lab or my PhD degree under your guidance. My experience in your lab played a major role in my decision to stay in academics and I am trying very hard to be a good mentor to my graduate students and post-docs. (Hong Zhang)

Catherine loved to recall the Chinese post-doctoral student in her laboratory who was invited to Harvard to explain his research. Before leaving, he told her that he always

dreamed of just seeing Harvard, but never dreamed he would be invited to speak there. As he left the laboratory and walked toward the elevator, he turned around, came back, and gave her a hug. She was stunned because the Chinese are very reserved and do not express their feelings publicly by hugging someone.

I began this "Remembering" by describing Catherine as very affectionate, affirming, compassionate and generous person. It was that kind of generosity that led to her decision more than 60 years ago to give her life totally to God by becoming a Catholic religious sister. Catherine was a very prayerful, faith-filled woman – a faithful follower/disciple of Jesus Christ. Prayer and faith permeated her whole life. Her commitment to seek union with God and to help others was the motivation for her total dedication to scientific research. This life-commitment to seek union with God and to help others was the motivation for her life totally focused on scientific research. She was, indeed, a witness to Jesus' challenge to lay down one's life for others.

The pursuit of scientific truth requires integrity, discipline, perseverance and complete forgetfulness of self. Catherine's life was a witness to this. For her, the pursuit of scientific truth was a vocation within a vocation and a quest for God. In 2002, she wrote: "My research into the molecular biology of cancer brings me deeper and deeper into knowledge beyond the grasp of most persons. It is this verse from Scripture expressing God's knowledge and imminence in all of nature that inspires me: 'the Spirit of the Lord has filled the whole world.'"

However, for all of her dedication to scientific research, nothing was more important to Aunt Catherine than family. Every family member here today will testify to this. Her nephew, Michael Reilly, expressed this so beautifully in a letter he wrote to aunt Catherine soon after she returned to the Motherhouse in 2009. He said:

> I can't think of anyone I know who has spent so much time and energy fully utilizing every scintilla of the gifts God bestowed upon her. Your brilliance and hard work have advanced our understanding of God's complex universe. … I don't know the extent of your feats, but … what is most special about you is how you exerted as much (or more) energy in your personal relationships as in your career. You didn't lock yourself away in the lab. Your love and caring for others along with your brilliance and hard work is what I find so amazing about you….In addition to being a gifted scientist, you've been and you are a great mother, friend and grandmother to many. … I want you to know that you're very important and special to me. … With much love and appreciation, Mickey

Indeed, Catherine (Sister Veronica Mary) was a renowned scientist. But she would want us to remember one thing as we leave here today. “In the evening of life, we shall be judged on love.”

Written by Sister Mary Jo Maher, IHM, Jan. 11, 2012