

Remembering Therese Leblanc, IHM Sept. 11, 1930 - June 16, 2021



Sometime ago, I read the memoirs of Michelle Obama entitled, *Becoming*, she wrote about her feelings, thoughts, and actions — on the whole, a good read. What caught my attention was the organization of the book in three parts: Becoming me; Becoming us; Become more. When sharing with Therese, I mentioned, wouldn't it be interesting if we organized our life in that three-part fashion? She agreed.

Becoming me

Marie Therese LeBlanc was born Sept. 11, 1930, the same day as her mother's birthday. A double joy and blessing for the LeBlanc family. Alice (Henri) and Joseph Oscar LeBlanc were both born in Canada but in different provinces, Ontario, and Quebec respectively. They then migrated to Detroit for work and found each other. Therese's birth was met with great gratitude because the LeBlancs had been working on starting a family for some time. Alice had five miscarriages, so when little Therese arrived, they dedicated her in gratitude and love to our Blessed Mother and offered to dress her in blue and white for her first seven years. Perhaps this was a harbinger for her long life of gratitude as an IHM.

Life in the LeBlanc household was loving, French-speaking, and harmonious. Mr. LeBlanc loved to sing. Therese recalls him singing, "Just Molly and me and baby makes three." Therese thought for years her mother's English name was "Molly."

Therese was baptized and attended Most Holy Redeemer grade school, one through seven, Gesu, then Immaculata for high school, except for two years of study in Rigaud, Quebec. A most notable remembrance that undergirded her entire life happened in the second grade. Sister Leontine, IHM prepared Therese for first communion (and Therese stated, "was so eager to receive Jesus.") Sister Leontine told stories. She also had a sister who was a missionary who worked all over the world or so it seemed to Therese. Many stories were told about this missionary's work with poor children and a two-part seed was planted deeply in Therese's heart: to be with little children and a love for the missions.

Becoming Us

Upon graduation from Immaculata High School, Therese entered the IHM congregation in September of 1948 as a response to love. Her father told her that if he had to let her go then he couldn't think of a finer man to give her to.

Therese's love of God and the world evolved. As an IHM, her ongoing creational relationships were more like a song she continued to sing than a statue to view. Though, within, and beyond the congregation God created, Therese embraced endless possibilities, harmonies, and unpredictable futures.

Becoming More

In 1953, Therese's first mission was St. Raymond, Detroit. In 1957, Therese went to St.

Thomas, Ann Arbor. In 1963, Therese went to St. Joseph, Monroe. She taught first grade in each of these schools, and amazingly these schools were her only formal educational settings. Most IHMs at this time taught in numerous schools. From 1967 through 1971 Therese was principal at St. Joe and life began to change. First, her clothing: going from habit to regular dress. On that day, in regular dress she arrived at school and asked one of the male teachers, "do you notice anything different about me today?" He looked and responded, "oh yes, you cut your hair!" So much for clothing! Second change: Therese worked in the parish at St. Joe for a year and loved the people. Third change: Therese was asked by Margaret Brennan, then president of our congregation, if she would be willing to go to India, work with Mother Teresa and be with the poor and dying children. Of course, Therese said "yes". Then in a short yet very full time, Therese went to India — twice but not even Mother Teresa could persuade the government to grant a temporary visa.

Returning home, Therese volunteered to go to Puerto Rico to work with women addicted to drugs, and their children. Unbeknown to me, Therese came to work at Casa La Providencia where I was working and living to help young women achieve their education and their GED. One morning when I arrived in the kitchen for coffee, a beautiful little girl named Marisol said, "Bon jour ma sour" I responded, "Bon jour, Marisol." Wondering and puzzled, I spoke with Therese who related that when she couldn't think of the appropriate Spanish word, she just substituted French.

In 1974, Margaret Brennan gave a retreat in Puerto Rico and asked Therese if she would consider going to Vietnam to care for orphans, fathered by Americans as the war continued. In 1975, Therese and Sister Nancy Ayotte went to Vietnam and were met by Cherie Clark, director of a center in Thu Duc, housing 45 toddlers and 12 older children 10 miles from Saigon. Therese and Nancy worked tirelessly and later both were part of Operation Babylift, each accompanying infants and toddlers on two different flights. Therese told me that on the last flight out of Saigon on a gutted-out cargo plan, she gently placed her body with her arm extended over the crates in which the babies were placed for lift off.

Therese's work with refugees continued upon return to the States. She worked at Indiantown Gap with other religious sisters to find placements, and permanent homes for these little ones. After Indiantown Gap, Therese was chaplain and recipient rights advisor at Detroit Psychiatric Hospital for four years; then chaplain at Harper Rehab Center for four years; and then Detroit Rehabilitation Center for 19 years. Within this time frame she also served on the Northeast Provincial team for the congregation.

In 2007, Therese returned to the Motherhouse, first as a volunteer for several years then as a patient in the long-term residence unit. During her stay on this unit, she was a cheerful presence and the staff worked diligently to support her. Therese was grateful and so is the entire congregation for a sustaining staff.

There is an ancient legend that holds when an infant is created, God kisses its soul and sings to it. As its guardian angel carries the soul to Earth to join the body, she also sings to it. The legend says God's kiss and song, as well as the song of the angel remain in the soul forever. So now, Therese's guardian angel has accompanied her again singing softly back to God where she is embraced, kissed, and sung a lullaby. May she rest in eternal unity.

Amen.

Written and delivered by C. Vita Pierce, IHM
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