

Remembering Ann Gabriel Kilsdonk, IHM June 21, 1924 – Nov. 27, 2021

Who is Sister Ann Gabriel? If you were one of the nine other diamond jubilarians with her in 2021, you could recall what entry was like in 1945. You could draw on your long memory of Margaret Mary Kilsdonk entering the IHMs. Perhaps you learned quickly that Margaret was a Detroit girl who grew up in the Old Redford neighborhood in a home built by her father.

Her parents, Catherine Sexton of Minnesota and Martin Kilsdonk of Wisconsin. They met and married. As a lawyer graduating from Georgetown University and specializing in immigration issues, he found the Detroit area suitable for his work. He was able to plan and oversee the furnishings of the home where he and Catherine and their five children enjoyed the opportunities so accessible to them. Ann Gabriel described their home life as very happy. She enjoyed her four other siblings: Joan, two years older, Martin, two years younger, and the two youngest, Kathryn and Jim. She elaborated on their home:



It has always been home to us. Its beautiful location overlooking the golf course has meant space, outdoor sports, closeness to nature and separation from the restraints of city life. (From one of her autobiographical sketches)

Margaret Mary was born on June 21, 1924 and baptized at St. Theresa Parish (Detroit). She received her First Communion at her home parish, Christ the King, where she attended catechism. Her parents regretted that the school was unable to take any more children. So Margaret attended Holcomb Elementary School until grade seven, when her father, a long-time friend of the pastor at St. Theresa's, found room for her. She moved smoothly through junior high to St. Theresa's for high school. She wrote that she loved all her school experiences.

After high school graduation in 1941, her parents insisted that she go on to college. She chose Marygrove College. In one of several autobiographical sketches Ann Gabriel herself provided the story of the choice for Marygrove:

In my second year of high school, Home Economics was introduced in the form of clothing, food and home art classes. I took the clothing. It was not my first experience with this but from then on, I made practically all my own clothes. I also began to dream of being a dress designer. It was this course that influenced me to decide on Home Economics in college. I thought that by becoming a Home Economics teacher I could give to others and help others experience the joys of family life and creative experiences within the home which I had experienced. I felt, moreover, that Home Economics was a vitally important area and that teachers should be well trained for this profession. Home Economics had the added appeal of being a very broad field encompassing my many interests,

children, nursing, home planning, writing, art, and creative activities like sewing, crafts and dress designing.

With this in mind, I decided to attend Marygrove College. It meant the rejection of a scholarship to another college which I didn't feel was of as high quality. Marygrove, moreover, provided a good liberal arts core curriculum. (Unnamed, unnumbered carbon copy, pp 6-7)

Finishing college in June 1945, she entered the postulate and was soon after received as a novice on Jan. 2, 1946 and given the religious name Sister Ann Gabriel. With a Bachelor of Science degree, she was a step ahead of some of her classmates.

Still, with them, she had this new way of life to embrace. Coming from Detroit, growing up in the Old Redford neighborhood right across from the Redford Golf Club, she had many connections to discover with her classmates in religion.

And there was her ministry to discover!

Her first mission was teaching the second and third grades at St. John's in Monroe. Soon her college background enabled her to teach at Immaculata High School which she described as "eight wonderful years." Next, she was sent to St. Mary High School in Akron, Ohio, for two years to teach and to manage the cafeteria as well.

Meanwhile, she began studies for a master's degree at Columbia University (New York), and then onto Michigan State, preparing for a new mission assignment. She returned to her alma mater, Marygrove College! Who would have predicted her long, productive, happy tenure of 45 years? She had found her niche.

If you had inquired when walking the halls of Marygrove College between 1958 and 2004 most people there would have a ready answer to your question, "Who is Sister Ann Gabriel?" Many knew her as a teacher or professor or the Department Head of Home Economics that evolved into the Department of Human Ecology. Or some might identify her as the "unofficial" historian and archivist of Marygrove. Or a visitor would be looking for her as a member of one of the seventeen or more committees and organizations she joined and actively served over the years. Ann Gabriel saw such value in a professional organization that she insisted that her students join organizations and professional clubs.

Ann Gabriel was a valued colleague, companion, student, counselor, friend, and IHM Sister. She wore many hats. At the Marygrove convent, Ann Gabriel managed and directed the activities of the kitchen; no small feat since the convent accommodated over 70 residents at capacity. Her service to IHM grew even broader when, in 1959 and 1960s, she assisted the sisters in facilitating all communications with the Snow White Company, to modify the IHM habit.

Ann Gabriel maintained lively connections with her family on home visits, shared vacations and celebrated the family's growth. In 1984 after her mother died, Ann Gabriel took up the writing of an annual family Christmas letter describing the many changes in the family's life. Her letters provided abundant details, were very warm and inclusive.

Dr. Judy Heinen, her friend and colleague, observed "The beauty of Sister Kilsdonk is that it is not just me that she has given so much to, but to thousands of others as well

...At Marygrove... the Halls resonate with her spirit of kindness, compassion and commitment to propel ordinary lives to extraordinary achievements." Dr. Heinen noted that Ann Gabriel distinguished herself not only locally, but nationally and internationally.

Ann Gabriel had absorbed the Marygrove spirit as a student herself. With a Bachelor of Science degree, she was soon on her way to a Master of Arts and doctoral degrees from Michigan State University. Of course, she believed in always learning more to be better equipped as a teacher and as a person. "Never stop learning. Develop your professional skills" was a constant theme in her interactions with students. She set the pace as she accumulated expertise and built relationships in the world of Human Ecology.

As the years passed and Home Economics expanded in scope, it became apparent to her that a name change was in order. To do this, she visited the places which would offer the expanded content and needs. Her years of service in so many organizations made her a welcomed colleague. For example, she became a consultant and analyst for the Dry Cleaning and Laundry Institute in Detroit. Thanks to the Marygrove "Wings of Wisdom" program, Ann visited other countries including Belgium, France, and England to explore textiles, fashion, art, architecture, and family life.

Much of what she learned was reflected in her dissertation (1980). One of her readers wrote a special letter to the dissertation committee noting she was "most impressed with the quality of and the logical thought" throughout the dissertation. She urged Ann Gabriel to publish it in book form and to publish a particular chapter on Human Ecology's meaning for the 1980s and beyond. "The dissertation seems, to me, the most complete plan ever presented for implementation toward a new approach to family." (Letter from Bonnie M. Morrison, dated Dec. 7, 1979 to Ann Gabriel Kilsdonk and Norma Bobbitt, Department of Human Ecology, East Lansing, Michigan.)

Ann Gabriel did publish the chapter, titled "Human Ecology, Meaning and Usage" through Michigan State University. It was also released in Japan with similar reader accolades. Comments included:

"We feel your dissertation is the very best resource available on these topics."
"Your monograph is one of the best, most lucid statements I have yet read."

When the time for retirement came, Ann did not go far. She moved to Theresa Maxis Senior Living Apartments on the Marygrove campus. She expressed a wish, "I hope I will be remembered for my longevity of efforts to foster the strength of Marygrove." Dr. Jack Shay, President of Marygrove, praised her for "her untiring dedication and support of Marygrove College, its students and mission to serve the people of the greater Detroit community." She received many awards and much recognition over the years.

In another conversation she reflected, "My basic passion is to love and serve God and to be his instrument on earth as I live and work with and for the good of others."

The chronicle of her life is an exhausting unfolding of her many activities. She saw her religious life as one of love of God and others. What she said about herself in her Book of Life still seems true:

Oh, with a gesture light and free, Lord. I give myself to Thee, Not solemnly, not grudgingly, no, I take my life and fling it at Your feet, and sing and sing that I might

give You this small thing.

With these sentiments, I entered religious life and tried to live them as an IHM.

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Modified and delivered by Mary Agnes Ryan, IHM, Dec. 7, 2021