

Remembering Virginia Pfau, IHM
June 30, 1946 – Oct. 18, 2022

This remembering is based on conversations that Sister Virginia (Ginny) had with Sister Marie Clark over the last months. We are grateful to Marie for gathering Ginny's reflections on a life well lived. Ginny saw her life as a series of adventures until her final flight to God on Oct. 18, 2022.



Our dear Ginny Pfau was a Monroe IHM for over forty years, since 1981, though it seems that she has always been here as a Monroe IHM. Her Eastern roots were apparent at times, such as when Ginny spoke of “going to the shore” for vacation or “having a soda” for a Coke. These marked Ginny as hailing from the east coast. Ginny was not born in Michigan but came to us from the east and specifically from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She was a “Philly IHM” for seventeen years and later at the age of thirty-five, came to Monroe seeking a bit more freedom in her ministry and life.

Ginny's life story began when her mother, Theresa Virginia Pfau, also known as “Ginny,” delivered her first child, a baby girl, on June 30, 1946. Her proud father, Gordon William Pfau, rejoiced with his wife that day over their first-born child. Her baptism took place on July 28, 1946, at Good Shepherd Church in Philadelphia.

Ginny was dearly loved as an only child. When she was only three years old, she and her parents moved from Good Shepherd Parish to the suburbs of a small town called Collingdale where her parents joined St. Joseph's Catholic parish. When she was six years old, in the first grade, Ginny was given a newborn baby brother, Richard. She was no longer an only child and became a big sister, which was a role she knew well ever after.

Grade school at St. Joseph's was the first of many adventures that Ginny would have during her lifetime. For eight years she walked four miles a day including back and forth to school; as well as back and forth for lunch. She had great exercise at an early age and learned the art of speed walking, which led to many IHMs in later years running to keep up with Ginny, especially in airports.

Her next adventure was traveling by trolley and bus to get to Villa Maria Academy, an hour's trek from home. The bus and trolley offered new adventures, new friends from various parts of Philadelphia and lots of fun. Here, life became much more interesting! Ginny got involved in many new activities, one of which was the Academy's orchestra where she learned to play the trombone. Ginny was quite good at it. This is a talent that very few people knew that she had.

In her senior year at Villa Maria, Ginny felt drawn to the IHM Sisters and was attracted to the IHM way of life. These Sisters, who had taught her for eight years in Collingdale

and four years at Villa Maria Academy, had become a strong influence in her life. In 1964, right after graduation, Ginny entered the novitiate at West Chester, Penn.

In a recent message from Sr. Kathleen McClosky, formerly IHM and now SSJ, one of Ginny's dearest friends recalled:

Ginny and I were accepted into Villa Maria high school for the class of '64. From the very first bus ride on the first day of school, we had no problem finding topics for conversation. Among the many bus riders, there were four of us who became good friends. Hard to believe, but, at the end of senior year, each of the four decided to enter the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in West Chester. We were all the same "band" and remained good friends. (Sr. Kathleen McClosky and Ellen Spitel Myers are the two that have kept in touch and visited Ginny these past few years at the Motherhouse).

Ginny's reception class into the novitiate took place at Good Shepherd Church, where she had been baptized as an infant because the new Motherhouse at Immaculata had not yet been built. On a theological level, this confirms the tenet that professed religious life is a deepened commitment to those first baptismal vows.

Education for Ginny continued at Immaculata where she received a bachelor's degree in Education and studied at Saint Charles Seminary in Overbrook, Penn. Later she studied for a master's degree in Educational Leadership and another in Pastoral Ministry. She earned a Certificate from the School of Theology in Berkeley, California, and completed four units of Clinical Pastoral Education.

In her autobiography, she wrote: "When I was asked to study for my Master's, I was placed in a program at Saint Charles Seminary. I was very happy about this because the area of Religious Studies was of great interest to me for at the time I was working as a Director of Religious Education."

Ginny's life as a teacher was quite full of challenges and changes. In her younger years, she taught in four different elementary schools in the east. The one that she enjoyed the most was St. Ann's in South Carolina. It was there that she prayed and discerned regarding a transfer to Monroe.

After the transfer of her IHM membership, Ginny taught briefly at Meadow Montessori, as a transitional teacher at St. John's, Monroe, before assuming the principalship at St. Patrick's School, Carleton, on the banks of Stony Creek. Her six years there were marked with many adventures, such as learning how to round up escaped inmates from the pig farm across the street. At the same time, Ginny was earning a master's in Pastoral Theology with a specialty in rural pastoral ministry at Marygrove College.

On her *Book of Life* page, Ginny wrote of those days: "I was the first of a wave of women who longed to be free. Ironically, the place where I lived in Carleton became known as 'Ellis Island.'" Ginny never wanted a transfer from the east to arrive in Michigan without a professional position or clothing to wear. She made it her mission to care for each eastern IHM who came.

At St. Patrick's, she shared life with her very good friend, Adele Stommel, along with Marge Fogarty, Carrine Etheridge, Harriet Fitzmaurice, Mary McDevitt, and Kathy Onderbeke. They all have wonderful memories of those interesting days. However, it

was a far cry from sophisticated Philadelphia.

In her *Book of Life* page, she wrote: "My years in Michigan were great. They helped me when my mother became ill with a serious heart condition (She suffered severe cardiac arrest in 1996.) I felt the need to be close to my parents. I am the only daughter and there seems to be a responsibility that comes with that birthright. They gave me the strength to move to Washington, D. C. to minister at Our Lady of Mercy Parish." This location also meant she was much nearer to her aging parents.

Ginny's bond of love and friendship with her brother, Richard ("Rich"), his wife, Mary, and their three children: Gabrielle, Joseph and Nicholas deepened with her return to the east and was a great blessing for her. Together, Ginny and Richard, a physician, cared for their parents through sickness and death.

Our Lady of Mercy School in Potomac, Maryland, became a wonderful place of ministry for Ginny over the next ten years. Under her leadership, Mercy was recognized as a "Blue-Ribbon School." Later, Ginny became a part of a visiting team for other schools seeking to have their excellence recognized as a "Blue-Ribbon School."

During her sabbatical year in Berkeley, Ginny made new friends, among them was Fr. Chuck Branbilla who would become a lifelong friend. He has recently suffered COVID and because of that could not preside at Ginny's funeral today.

During her sabbatical year and in absentia, Ginny was elected to the IHM Leadership Council as President. Those years, 2000 to 2006, were a great adventure and a huge challenge beyond words. In accepting her election, Ginny undertook spearheading a multi-million-dollar campus renovation and restoration. In tireless fashion, Ginny grabbed a hard hat and went to work. She led the team and advanced the work.

Many remember St. Mary Academy becoming a senior living community with a health care center, the renovation of the Motherhouse and the Campus and the difficulties and the decision-making that took place. Ginny and the Leadership Council could write a book about those years filled with prayer and with great hope for the future. They even had some fun!

IHM Sisters well remember Ginny's loving and kind manner when they saw her or talked to her personally. Her unique gifts of listening and deeply caring manner were not only evident but were felt and appreciated. The atmosphere that she created grew out of her loving and other-centered heart, soul and prayer.

Ginny's own words speak to her life both before and during her leadership years: "The journey to the IHM seemed to take a thousand turns, yet it is obvious even to a casual observer that the Spirit of Wisdom was there. I have the distinct honor to be one of the naturalized citizens of the congregation. I used this term during the discerning process for leadership. It was received with laughter but it was also seen as true."

As soon as her presidency ended Ginny was back on the east coast, involved in the field of education which she had always enjoyed. She served at St. Ann's School in Delaware as the principal for nine years and pursued educational excellence.

Ginny took Clinical Pastoral Education classes at Christiana Hospital, hoping to become a certified healthcare chaplain. However, after two years it was necessary to leave

Delaware and return to Monroe where she helped the IHM pastoral care team for a while. Unfortunately, the neurological disease slowed her down and Ginny moved into Liguori Hall and eventually to the IHM Health Care Center.

Rich and Mary were unwavering supporters during Ginny's final days. Rich's innumerable visits from Maryland to Monroe gave Ginny joy, support and great encouragement. Frequently, she spoke lovingly of her brother's care and concern and about their times together, including summer vacations over the years.

Ginny wrote in her 1981 autobiography: "I love to travel. We traveled a great deal as a family when I was small. My parents felt that travel was vital to education. Our travel took us to various points along the east coast and California and Mexico." (Incidentally, while on vacation in the Bahamas once, Ginny fell off a dock and was saved by dolphins, "ocean angels," who were swimming below her and broke her fall. Remember the blue dolphin picture entitled, "ocean angels" on the wall in her room.)

Ginny continued in her autobiography: "These (travels) have been enriching opportunities. The more that I travel and read, I realize that the world is really a small community of people with basically the same chemistry who are striving in their own unique way to secure a place in the sun. We all want peace. We all want security. We all want to be loved. We are all a universal community striving for the Omega point."

Yes, Ginny, you have now traveled to Heaven—your Omega point! Thank you for your many years of love, service, generosity, dedication to education and leadership. Your life portrays that you are a true naturalized Sister, Servant in a hundred ways. Enjoy your Heavenly rewards of love and happiness forever!

Written by Marie Clark, IHM, and edited by Janet Ryan, IHM (2020)
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