

Remembering Therese Kearney, IHM

May 20, 1927 – Oct. 9, 2023

Kelwin and Anita (Spicer) Kearney welcomed daughter Marguerite Therese to their family in Detroit May 20, 1927. Her parents were raised and married in Ontario, Canada. In Michigan, the family belonged to St. Cecilia Parish and later St. Scholastica. As a child, Marguerite attended Cooke, a Detroit public school and graduated from Redford High School. She studied at the University of Detroit and the Detroit Institute of Musical Art, accumulating three years of undergraduate credits. Her grandmother, who lived with the family, was a great influence in religious matters and differences and shared her opinions openly. This may, at least partly, explain Therese's fierce independence and openness to a broader lens on religion.



In 1948, she entered the IHM community and received the religious name, Sister James Marie. She completed her undergraduate studies at Marygrove College, earning a bachelor's degree in music. This was very appropriate for a young woman from St. Cecilia who was already gaining recognition as a piano teacher. Throughout her life, Therese was a private person and a critical thinker. A description of Iraqi architect Zoha Hadid also applies to Therese--she "was often like a planet in her own inimitable orbit."

Her early educational ministry began at the Hall of the Divine Child, Monroe; St. Agnes, Gesu and Epiphany, Detroit; and St. Anne in Warren. In the late 1950s, she was missioned to St. Felicitas, Chicago and St. Monica in Mobile, Alabama. When asked to name the race of the children she taught for Alabama state reporting, her critical mind prompted her to write "human." Classes related to all facets of music and voice emerged as an area of expertise and students eagerly met the challenge set by Sister James Marie. In her personal chronicles, she noted the achievements of her musical and choral students in working together and the special occasions they accompanied.

Five years of teaching at Immaculata High School (Detroit) gave insight to teen students and brought out the best of their skills and talents. Sister Therese took a year of respite with the Redemptoristine Nuns of Liguori, Missouri. Back in Michigan, she began new work in Parish Music Ministry. For over 20 years, she served as Parish Music Director, Music Educator and Parish Organist, and Coordinator and Director of Applied Music and Learning. This was by way of many locations: Sacred Heart, St. Kevin, St. Sabina (Dearborn), St. Cecilia, and St. Thomas (Detroit), the Detroit Board of Education, Urban Revitalization Inc., St. Anthony Academy, Mack Educational Services, and St. Gerald Parish, Farmington. In addition, she gave private music lessons and served as a liturgist in local parishes. She took special delight in playing the organ at a Protestant church.

She was very committed to Detroit and its neighbors, often teaching and working with the homeless on the same day, as well as supporting Dignity Detroit and community. Her friends would give her gift certificates to McDonald's, which she would then share with those panhandling near Woodward Avenue and Eight Mile Road. She grew to know the homeless well. In one instance, she got out of her car and danced in the street with "Willy," a veteran and friend. Her landlord of 21 years recalled her as one of the most important people in his life, as "... high maintenance but worth it," he shared. Another Detroit resident who appreciated Therese is today's celebrant, Rev. Si Hendry from the University of Detroit Mercy. He shared how inviting Therese to speak on a panel convened on Catholic life led to enjoying her "steal the show" with her love of Jesus yet intelligent criticism of the institutional church.

For most of her life, Sister Therese resided in Detroit and remained independent. You could tell a lot about her by her bookshelf: "Brief History of Time," by Stephen Hawking, "The Elements of Celtic Christianity," by Anthony Duncan, and a book on South African comedian Trevor Noah. She was interested in the complexities of cosmological physics, her cultural-spiritual heritage and intelligent-humorous political savvy.

She treasured sharing her home with a variety of cats, who were given either Irish or musical names: Shawneen Muldoon, Aria, Scherzo and Jenny Lind. After she transitioned to the IHM Motherhouse, she often remarked that she still needed to be with the people she served in Detroit. And she missed her feline family.

Therese was preceded in death by her sister Anita Lorraine Kearney Hicks and brother Anthony K. Kearney.

And so, we pray that you, Therese, have found deep Peace as you have met the Jesus who has been the "love of your life" and that you will enjoy his presence, along with that of your family and the many IHM Sister friends you have known. We send you off with love and gratitude for your many years with us as an IHM sister.

Written by Barbara Beesley, IHM, and Elizabeth Walters, IHM

Delivered by Barbara Beesley, IHM, Oct. 25, 2023