

## Remembering Marion Duggan, IHM

Jan. 27, 1932 – Nov. 5, 2023

In a conversation with Marion Duggan several years ago, she told me that a favorite song contained the core of her Christian spirituality. She read the words to me:

Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey.  
I will tell all your people about you wherever I go.  
For our life and our peace and our love is Yourself.  
Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey.

May all my joy be a reflection of you.  
May the earth and the sea and the sky join my song.  
As long as I live, Jesus, make me your servant.  
To carry your cross and to share all your burdens and  
tears.  
And with all of my sisters ... we'll sing to you  
until the end of our journey.

And no wonder! Marion certainly lived out this song with a long life of loving service and compassion. Her life was centered on the peace and love of Jesus Christ.



Marion was born Jan. 27, 1932. She was the fifth of six children born to Margaret Mary (Healey) and John Denis Duggan. Margaret and John, or “Jack” as he was known, actually met on the ship carrying Margaret from County Kerry and Jack from County Cork, Ireland, to the United States. They were separated, though, when they arrived in New York City, for Margaret was meant to stay with an uncle in New York City and Jack was destined to meet his three brothers in Detroit. Love prevailed, however, with Jack writing letters to Margaret from Detroit. Eventually, Jack traveled to New York and he and Margaret married there Nov. 23, 1924. The family then moved to Detroit, for Jack had found work there, settling first in St. Cecelia Parish and then in 1932 on Fairfield Avenue in St. Gregory Parish.

Marion remembered that times were tough in Detroit during the thirties with the lingering effects of the economic depression. The family lived on meager means, but there was always a welcome for someone in even greater need, “down on his or her luck,” as her dad described. There was always music in the house for her dad, singing and playing the flute and Irish step dancing in the kitchen. But one event happened that tested the faith of the Duggan family. Marion’s mom was three months pregnant with Marion when Eileen, her oldest sister, died in a tragic fire. Grief for Eileen and love for Marion and later when her sister Sheila was born were held together in this loving family.

In 1949, after graduating from St. Gregory High School, Marion entered the IHM Sisters. She credits Sr. Mary Patrick and Sr. Mary Emil for developing the Sister Formation Program, a commitment that all IHM Sisters would receive a B.A. in their content majors, with a second major in theology and also a Bachelor in Developmental Education before beginning their

teaching ministries. To quote her, “We were well trained as educators, as critical thinkers and as strong advocates for social justice.” (*Oral History in Archives*) For the next 25 years, she engaged students creatively and lovingly in both grade and high schools in Michigan: Detroit, Bloomfield Hills, Monroe, Jackson, Flint, and Mobile, Alabama.

Marian fully enjoyed her teaching ministry, but she described one experience at St. Peter Claver School in Mobile, Alabama, that gradually transformed her consciousness. She witnessed blatant social injustice in structural racism that included restaurant segregation and separate entrances for the May Crowning in the church! Years later, when she was teaching at St. Michael/Luke Powers High School in Flint, she saw similar racial exclusions, especially in “white flight” to the suburbs and here in a northern state. This experience led to a dramatic change in her ministry.

While Marion was in Alabama, she began part-time a master’s degree in English at the University of Detroit. She received permission to shift her major to Sociology because she wanted to understand cultures other than hers. Later, she achieved an M.S.W. from Michigan State University. These degrees proved critical to her future work.

In 1978, Marion shifted from teaching in Flint to direct service to the poor, the ill and excluded persons. She worked for a short time with hardcore unemployed and then in two hospitals, the Flint Osteopathic Hospital and the Genesys Health Care Center. In these contexts, she processed adoptions, dealt with child and adult abuse cases in court, got health care for the uninsured, advocated for the undocumented, found shelter for the homeless and cared for the dying. (*IHM Sisters – Then and Now*, March 2012)

In 2001, at seventy, Marion retired from the Genesys Health Care Center with many commendations for her work. She remained in Flint and then took up work as a volunteer chaplain in the Genesee County Jail, ministering to women inmates, “truly the least, the lost, and the lonely of God’s flock.” (*Autobiography in IHM Archives*) She described her work there as “a ministry of presence, letting inmates know that I cared for their well-being and not judging them ... reflecting God’s unconditional love for them. When they felt valued as persons, they often took the next steps for healing and wholeness.” (*IHM Sisters – Then and Now*, March 2012)

For many years, Marian and her dear friend, Sr. Dorothy Hemmert, an Adrian Dominican, lived together in an apartment in the inner city of Flint. They were victims of three break-ins. They also experienced purse snatching and mugging. Each time, they reflected on these experiences, prayed, and discerned together to stay in the apartment as signs of hope for their neighbors who had no option to move away.

Then, at Christmas 2004, Dorothy became ill and decided to move back to Adrian, where she died on March 1, 2005; Marion, too, returned to the IHM Motherhouse. At the age of 73, she continued to serve our sisters, accompanying them to doctors, driving them to hospitals, being present with them as they were dying. She was also a cantor at our liturgies since she sang so beautifully.

In due time, Marion surrendered many of these commitments due to health reasons. She continued to sing, however, at our liturgies - as her favorite song said, "*until the end of my journey.*" In fact, in 2014, she wrote: "My dear family and friends and IHM Sisters, PLEASE SING ME TO HEAVEN." (The Final Chapter, Aug. 23, 2014)

The Duggans and the Sheehans were and still are great friends. I remember going with my dad, Pat Sheehan, to the Duggans on several Sunday afternoons. We had a great visit with the Duggans. We lived on the same street in Fairfield, the Duggans living south of Puritan in St. Gregory Parish, and the Sheehans north of Puritan in Gesu Parish. After Margaret died, Jack would come to our house to play six-handed Euchre on the yellow Formica table that we had in our kitchen. My brother Jerry, who is here today with his wife Anne, told me recently how Henry J. Brennan hired Jack to lay the bricks in this very building back in 1930. I wonder now where the bricks are that Jack Duggan had laid in the past!

My dear Marion, we are indeed "singing you into heaven today," and there is a grand reunion of all in your family, all your IHM Sisters and your dear friend Sr. Dorothy, OP, who are ready to meet you! Your dad is playing his flute and if there is a kitchen in heaven, Irish step-dancing is going on to greet you!

To quote the Irish poet, John O'Donohue, slightly amended by me:

May God bless you now into the fullness of life  
for when Eternity beckons  
at the end of a life heaped so high with love,  
May our gracious God embrace you  
with the arms that have nurtured you  
The whole length of your joy-filled days.

May you see the reflection of your life's kindness and beauty  
in all the tears that fall for you today!

John O'Donohue, *To Bless This Space Between Us*, pp. 72, 170-171, 180-183.

**Amen!**

**Alleluia!**

***Written and delivered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM, Nov. 11, 2023***