

December 19

Sister Margaret Mary King
1896-1983
(Sister Mary Stephen)

"Deo Gratias et Mariae.!

The initials, "D.G." sprinkled through her autobiographical records, may be baffling until one realizes that "Deo Gratias!" was indeed the keynote of Sister Margaret Mary's long and interesting lifetime.

Born in Coatbridge, Scotland, on March 21, 1896, Margaret Mary was the third child of Peter and Margaret (Cassidy) King, both of whom were Irish but working in Scotland. At the age of three, the little one was sent to her maternal grandparents in Roscommon, Ireland, at the suggestion of the doctor, who judged that the milder climate would benefit the delicate child. Here she grew and developed, surrounded by love and culture in a family of education.

"The system of education," she remembered later, "was very thorough and comprehensive. The Gaelic language, formerly forbidden by penal law, was again taught in the schools, and hopes of freedom were strong."

Religion, of course, was of primary importance in the Irish schools. Sister recalls:

"Father Curley, our parish priest, came daily to teach and every day said to me: 'Margaret Mary you will be a nun, and teach in my diocese.' I did not lose any sleep over these words, but finished what was equivalent to a high school education.

"Every spring and fall, a strong sermon was preached by our parish priest against emigration. 'Our girls,' said he, 'who go to the United States are led astray morally. The United States is no place for any good Irish girl.' Secretly I vowed to live and die there."

In this same "evil" country lived Peter's brother, Mike and his wife, who were childless. Repeatedly Mike wrote to Scotland urging Peter to bring his family to "God's country." But the good Irish wife would not hear of her family ever setting foot on American soil. So, one day Peter King secretly sailed away to the forbidden land without his family. He

went to his brother in Akron, Ohio, then wrote to his wife, telling her to bring the children. Mrs. King insisted on taking all of them, including the seventeen-year old Margaret Mary, who returned to Scotland to help with the children before the whole family sailed on September 13, 1913.

On September 22, they were reunited in Akron, where the far-seeing Peter King had jobs waiting for the older children, and arrangements made to enter the younger ones in St. Vincent School. At last, Mrs. King was satisfied that America was not so wicked after all! Margaret Mary and her older sister worked at the M.O'Neil Department Store, where the former enjoyed her position as desk girl, wrapping packages and sending bills and money up the tube to the office. It was not a difficult job, and she even had time, occasionally, to do a little thinking and praying.

Margaret Mary was fully aware that Father Curley back in Ireland, must still be praying for her vocation. The Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters were teaching in St. Vincent School, and the young girl was greatly attracted to them; but one sad Sunday morning, in church, Mrs. King actually saw a ring on a Sister's finger! Jewelry! They fled from the church, and never was a daughter of hers to consider such a lax community.

In her mother's Sacred Heart Messenger, though, Margaret Mary read an invitation to join a certain Pittsburg community. She wrote, was accepted, but needed a letter from her confessor. After work, that Saturday night, she ran "like an athlete" up the hill to go to confession to her pastor, Father Mahar. She was to go to the rectory for the precious letter next day after Vespers. She took with her Lilly, her younger sister, sworn to secrecy. "When we reached Father's parlor, he "hit the ceiling about why you did not join the I.H.M's!" He immediately called Sister Seraphine

(O'Brien), telling her he was sending a girl to the convent. Sister declared, without further ado, "We'll be leaving at five o'clock tomorrow morning, and will pick up your trunk as we go. We always go on the train."

Margaret Mary flew home "with a high pulse." It was absolutely the greatest Sunday I had ever lived!" Her mother showed no surprise, but her father brought up many objections, and left the house to spend the night at his brother's home. Not daunted, and confiding in the Sacred Heart, the blissful eighteen-year-old daughter left home at five a.m. on June 24, 1914.

"I was marvelously welcomed, because of being from Ireland, and though I was, like everyone else, a bit sad at first, I have lived happily ever since. D.G....

"I had a pleasant novitiate with few trials. I loved all the things I had to do, and the beautiful novices and professed of ten years, who then formed a part of the novitiate community. We attended classes in the Normal, a sacred room near the professed wing. Sister Xaveria (McHugh,) a rugged educator, who had strong likes and dislikes, was the sole professorial voice there. I happened to be one of her likes."

On her Reception Day, Margaret Mary became Sister Mary Stephen. The new novice experienced a special joy at the presence of her father, as well as her mother, Lilly, and the only American born child, Francis. She made her first vows December 28, 1916, and final vows December 30, 1919.

Sister Mary Stephen began teaching at St. Thomas School. Ann Arbor, replacing a sister who was ill. Her early teaching, in several parochial schools of Michigan, was with the middle grades. She strove to inspire her pupils with love for the Catholic faith in all aspects, especially the liturgy, including a study of the Mass in English, "even as far back as 1916."

A long interval from active duty came in 1927, when serious surgery caused her return to the Motherhouse, with hospitalization in Toledo and a lengthy convalescence. As a result, Sister Mary Stephen suffered serious injury to her sight, so return to the classroom was out of the question. In April of 1927, then, she was given charge of a group of orphans called Holy Family Girls. At first they were housed in a residence named Park Place, on the grounds of the Hall of the Divine Child, soon they moved into a larger, more convenient home on Elm Street called Holy Family Cottage.

As guardian of the orphan girls for seventeen years, Sister Mary Stephen kept a firm but kindly hand on everything, and on every one of her charges. Many vocations resulted from the spirit of prayer and unquestioning obedience she instilled. Indeed, it was not too great a step from the well-disciplined Holy Family Cottage into St. Mary Novitiate. Of course, Sister Mary Stephen could not see; but a slight flaw in stitching was soon discovered, and re-done until perfection was achieved. "It was a precious ministry and a demanding one - - a 24 hour job." One trivial incident had a lasting result on the remainder of Sister's life:

A barrel of old books was donated to the orphans. Before consigning the contents to the flames, Sister Mary Stephen spotted a very old book about angels, including a Litany of St. Raphael. She had it typed to give to Sister Ann Raphael (Brady), her nurse during her long illness. It happened that Sister Ann Raphael was assigned to Marygrove, where she heard Sister Mary Jerome (Sanford), an ardent devotee of St. Raphael, say that there were no prayers to the great archangel extant. Sister Ann Raphael promptly produced her precious litany in her poverty book. Sister Mary Jerome wasted no time: the prayer was duplicated, distributed to students

thence spread worldwide even to Rome. Bishop Gallagher, at Sister Mary Jerome's request, gave it an imprimatur. None had greater devotion to St. Raphael than Sister Mary Stephen, who attributed to him the gift of partial recovery of her eyesight.

With recovery, Sister was even able to return to other duties; she was nurse's aide to Sister Mary Mark (Dwyer) in the Infirmary; she taught high school typing and became librarian at several high schools until her retirement to the Motherhouse in 1968. During her teaching years, she was also active in teaching religion to public school children and enjoyed two summers at Our Lady of Victory in Detroit with the black people.

In retirement, Sister Margaret Mary's prayers of praise and thanksgiving, her devotion to Our Lady's rosary, to St. Joseph and the Archangel Raphael, continued and intensified. One more great adventure was hers. In 1974, at the age of 78, she received from some of her "old girls" the gift of a trip to her homeland, Ireland. In Detroit, waiting for her passport, Sister made the disconcerting discovery that she had never legally become a U.S. citizen!

Of course, she had saluted the Stars and Stripes; voted as a good American should; taught American history, government, and patriotic songs. But her father, she learned, had delayed five years in becoming naturalized. "I barely escaped deporting; but now, being labeled as a British subject, my humiliation and chagrin knew no bounds." The next six weeks brought numerous questionnaires, fees, photographings, etc. Fortunately, there was a nephew in the State Department who applied to the Irish Consul in Washington; and, at last, Sister Margaret Mary King received permission to enter Shannon. With the help of kindly friends, she went to Ireland, enjoyed her stay there, and safely returned. Needless to say, one of her first acts

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when back in this country was to secure her own citizenship. "Now I have a gorgeous Certificate of Naturalization." Fervently, with 136 others, she swore her allegiance to the United States of America "forever."

"The future," she stated when in her late 70's, "holds a great apostolic duty of praying for the Church, the Community and the world. ...His goodness shall follow me always, to the end of my days. Deo Gratias et Mariae."

The "end of my days" here on earth came for Sister Margaret Mary King, on December 19, 1983.

By- Sister Marie Angela Kreitz