

May 22
Sister Kathleen McLaughlin
(Sister Marie Ethna)
(1922-1996)

On the twenty-fourth day of October, 1922, Kathleen Elizabeth McLaughlin was born to John and Agatha Kelly McLaughlin, their second child, their second daughter. Three boys followed: John, James, and Edward. James died in 1943 of congenital retardation, physical and mental. John would become a surgeon; Edward, a dentist. Jane would marry after graduating from Marygrove College.

The family had settled in St. Agnes parish where Kathleen was baptized. After the family moved to Christ the King parish, Kathleen attended Cooke public school as the parish school had not yet been built. In June of 1936 she was graduated from the eighth grade. A formal commencement program done in forest green suede and metallic gold, their class colors, gave striking testimony that Cooke school was indeed a prestigious school of its day. Their motto? "No victory without a struggle."

From Cooke school to St. Mary of Redford High School was the next challenge to face Kathleen McLaughlin. Here she would experience her first IHM teachers who unquestionably made a lasting impression upon her life. Two weeks after graduation, on July 2, 1940, Kathleen entered St. Mary Postulate. On January 2, 1941 she received the habit and the name, Sister Marie Ethna, after an obscure Irish saint who has been described as "Ethnea of the Golden Hair", daughter of the pagan King Laoighaires of Ireland; reputedly she was converted by St. Patrick himself!

As a novice she taught Grades 5-6 at St. Mary, Monroe but her first genuine mission experience was at Gesu in Detroit where she taught third graders. After that she spent the next two decades of her life as a first grade teacher in several schools in Detroit and outlying suburbs. It was at St. Francis de Sales, Detroit that she forged her friendship with Sister Nivard [Jan Soleau] who taught second grade. For seven years these two idealistic and creative women shared not only their living but their work together. Under the encouragement of their superior, Sister Christine Hattendorf they wrote and illustrated a Mass book for the children they taught that was within reach of their interest and understanding.

After a long and successful career as a primary teacher with ongoing experience as a junior high CCD teacher she was assigned to Grade 7-8 at Holy Name, Birmingham for a year and then as principal of St. Joseph, Erie for the following year. She was well prepared for her assignment as principal of St. Matthew School in Detroit, a position she held for six years.

Education took another form and direction as Kay accepted the ministerial challenge as Religious Education Administrator, first in a rural parish of Sts. Peter and Paul Parish of Ruth, Michigan, then eight years as RE Coordinator at St. Peter Parish in Harper Woods. After forty-two years of active ministry, Kay was given a sabbatical, a period of transition in which to discern where the Spirit was calling her to minister next.

Her many years in education prepared her well for Adult Education in the Refugee Employment Services in Oak Park and before long she was fully immersed in the ministry of Refugee Resettlement, a work that involved seeking employment for the clients and providing counseling when necessary. During these years she facilitated Survival Skills Workshops for Refugee Women, designed and executed publicity brochures, flyers, posters; even designed layouts for a small newspaper. Her artistic talents served her well in all these endeavors.

Kay was truly an artist, both on the appreciative and performance level. In 1990 she traced some personal reflections of her own personal 'odyssey in art.' She writes:

"My interest and talent in art dates back to my third and fourth grades at Cooke School. There I learned the trick of reflecting light by leaving little white spots on my apples and balloons.....I fondly recall a summer when I was ten or eleven. Mrs. Dewey, a neighbor-artist-mom offered art lessons to relieve the boredom of long vacation days for some of the children in our neighborhood. However, it was not until the death of my father in 1978, and the dismantling of the family home, that I realized that my artistic talent had been passed on to me from both my father and mother!"

Later she would take classes in water color and oil painting, producing many beautiful works in both media. If asked which she preferred her reply was water color although some of her friends would choose the strong pieces done in oil. In 1984 a trip to Europe with her friend Jean Hengesbaugh capped her personal art odyssey, a time of inundation of the great cathedrals and museums of Europe...Notre Dame, Chartres, Cologne, the Sistine Chapel, the Louvre, the treasures of Florence, Rome, Amsterdam. She sums it up as follows:

"For me, this was the ultimate experience! I was on pilgrimage, caught up by the vision of artistic giants, whose genius was complimented by the natural splendor of Alpine peaks, pastoral landscapes, and the winding course of the Rhine River and the sparkle of the Mediterranean Sea. In my enjoyment of both the magnificent and the simple, I was awed by the presence of God, Creator and Source of all Art!"

The beauty of God's splendor found its fullest expression in the people in her life--her family and many friends, her IHM community, her colleagues in ministry and those to whom she ministered all down the years. Her gentle and compassionate spirit, her warmth and respect for life in all its forms drew others to her and drew her out of herself, expanding her heart to embrace the entire universe.

It was this human heart that literally wore itself out in the loving service of others. Symptoms of shortness of breath, weakness and tiredness began to show themselves early in June, 1995. Colds and bronchitis followed in the winter months and more tests were ordered. It became more and more difficult to carry on her ministry with the refugees. It was a work she dearly loved and it grieved her to have to give in to the rapid diminishment of her physical powers. At the end of April a heart catharization was ordered; her heart was functioning at 20% of its capacity. During the night of this

catharization, Kay's heart failed and she was rushed to the Intensive Care Unit and put on life support systems. On May 21 she was moved out of ICU and all supports were withdrawn except oxygen. The following morning her family and close friends were sent for to be with her in the final moments of her life. Jean Hengesbaugh, her friend of many years and devoted care giver during these difficult and painful months was alone with her when she peacefully breathed her last breath at mid-morning of May 22, 1997.

In the words of the graveside prayer we "return you Kay, to mother earth from which all life comes. Go forth, oh gentle soul, out of this world, in the name of God who created you, in the name of Jesus Christ who suffered for you, and in the name of the Holy Spirit who sanctified you. May your life be this day in peace and your rest and light perpetual."

Sister Helen Oprysek