



REMEMBERING SISTER EILEEN (PRAXEDES) MILLS, IHM July 14, 1915 - Feb. 14, 2007

Today we remember and celebrate the life of our dear Sister Eileen Mills. Eileen was a gentle person yet very assertive. When a job had to be done she was determined to complete it and do it perfectly. I was told that Eileen never gave up. She was like a dog with a bone until a project was completed.

Eileen was the second of three girls born to Lucy Adelaide Sullivan and Herbert Mills on July 14, 1915, in Detroit, Mich. Eileen's sister, Marie was two years older and Kathleen was six years younger. Eileen's maternal grandmother, Mary Hauser, was born on a boat coming from Germany. Her maternal grandfather was a second-generation Irish immigrant. Grandpa Sullivan worked on the railroad for many years.

He and his son, Joe, built a car which ran in the streets of Detroit before Henry Ford's. Mr. Mills came from County Down, Ireland about 1910. He had been a math teacher in York, England. He was employed as the treasurer for Brownlee Lumber Co. in River Rouge, Mich.

Mr. Mills came from a Protestant area of Ireland. His aunt had come to the U.S. and helped found The Miles Business College in Detroit. After Mr. Mills had graduated from the Royal University of Ireland and was teaching in York, England, he came to the States to visit his aunt. Lucy Sullivan was the secretary for Herbert's aunt. It was she who was influential in Mr. Mills becoming a Catholic. Eileen always thought her mother would have been a religious if she hadn't met her father.

Eileen spoke very warmly of her home life. Her younger sister, Kathleen, penned these lines about the Mills' family:

There's mamma and daddy, Eileen and Marie
And last but not least is me.
Eileen, she's small. And Marie, she's tall
The rest of the bunch is just right, you see.

Brown is the hair of Eileen and Marie
While black is the hair of mamma, daddy and me.
Of us kids Marie is the oldest
Then comes quiet and bright Eileen
Alone and straggling behind comes me.

Eileen frequently spoke of the tight bond the girls had.

The family lived in Annunciation Parish, Detroit. That is where the girls first went to school. Eileen remembers having Sister Kathleen Flanagan, IHM, in the first grade. The class dramatized the Annunciation. Eileen was Mary (because she had a blue dress, she thought!). "I think my vocation was born that day", Eileen wrote. When she was nine Eileen's godparents

took her to Ste. Anne de Beaupre, Quebec. "At that time I was very sure that I wanted to be a sister," she continued.

Mrs. Mills loved the sisters at Annunciation. She often sent fresh fruit from the garden to the convent. Her mother's interest in the sisters kept Eileen interested. In fact, Eileen told me, she thought her mother wanted to enter religious life herself -- until she met Herbert Mills! When Eileen was 12, the family moved to Grosse Ile, Mich. Here there was no Catholic school. Eileen's attraction to religious life faded away. It was a high school retreat for Sodality girls that awakened her desire. Eileen's pastor, Msgr. Hickey, encouraged her to be an IHM. Eileen didn't know any IHMs but Sister Mary Carmel Cloutier, IHM, was a friend of her aunt's. It was Sister Mary Carmel who guided Eileen before she entered.

After graduation from high school Eileen stayed home for a year and helped in the parish. It was on Jan. 6, 1936, the feast of the Epiphany, that Eileen came to Monroe. She wrote that her postulancy and novitiate were difficult for her as she was a bit older than the rest. When Eileen was received into the novitiate in August 1936 she was given the name Sister Praxedes. Eileen said that her mother was delighted when she entered and her father did not object. Every time they came to visit her, dad brought Eileen a jar of sweet pickles, one of Eileen's favorite treats.

In 1938, after First Profession, Eileen was assigned to Gesu School in Detroit to teach third grade. Her principal thought that the sisters should have either a new grade or a new subject to teach each year. So during her eight years at Gesu, Eileen's teaching experience broadened. She taught several subjects in third to seventh grades.

Eileen had a varied and brilliant career in education. She was elementary teacher and principal in Michigan and Alabama from 1938-1966. In the early '60s, Eileen and Sister Berchan Murray, IHM, were commissioned to write a fifth grade religion text and teacher manual for Benziger. All holidays and summer vacations were devoted to writing this book from 1959-1966. Finally, in 1966 Eileen was given the first semester to complete the text, working in Chicago with Fathers Gerard Weber and James Killgallon. These men were deeply immersed in what was happening in the post-Vatican II Church. Working with them, Eileen wrote, that she became open to a new freedom, a new openness, a whole new outlook on the Church, the Sacraments and on religious life itself. This experience affected her life so much that she emerged a different person, she claimed. The book was published in 1967.

In January 1967, Eileen had her introduction to high school. At Sacred Heart School in Roseville, Mich., she taught religion to sophomores, juniors and seniors with a homeroom of all senior boys. She survived and even came to love the students, Eileen wrote. In 1971 with the closing of the high school, Eileen transferred to parish work. She was director of religious education for Sacred Heart Parish, Roseville. She continued as religious ed coordinator at Saint Cyprian's Parish, Riverview, Mich. Then she returned to her home parish, Sacred Heart, Grosse Ile, as pastoral associate. Eileen wrote that in her RCIA classes, which she loved, she found that not only the members grew but she grew through their inspiration. After suffering a stroke in 1990, Eileen resigned from Sacred Heart but continued to live in Riverview, Mich.

In 1991, Eileen retired to the Motherhouse and continued to minister in whatever way she could. She drove sisters to the doctor, visited the sick, coordinated the tutoring program etc. About six years after coming to the Motherhouse, Eileen began to have serious back trouble. Then in 1998, just before Christmas, she suffered another stroke and had to forego her driving and other ministries. Despite her handicaps, Eileen wrote that she was always happy because God had helped her to make the transition from a very active person to a "slowed down model." "I have, since the postulate," Eileen wrote, "asked God to make me what He wanted me to be. He is working at it!"

When Eileen was living alone those years she was doing pastoral work, she made great efforts to create community with the sisters around her and was very active in IHM community affairs. At this time she wrote, "I do not feel at all separated from the community, but rather a vital part of the IHM community." While in the Health Care Center, it was important for her to pray daily with another HCC resident. She had a regular time for prayer and would invite another to join her.

Eileen wrote that she liked to read, to study Scripture, to do clerical work. She liked trees and flowers and enjoyed making a garden. Eileen liked old people and was always happy to help them.

Eileen had many travel experiences: the south and west of the U.S., Quebec, Canada, Mexico, even the Middle East: Israel, Jordan and Egypt. Eileen spoke about how her trip to the Holy Land in the 1980s with Virginia Sullivan, IHM, affected her spiritual life deeply. When speaking about the Vatican II renewal of religious life, Eileen said, "I didn't feel like anything was lost. I never felt like I was living a cloistered life." It was a deep source of sadness for Eileen that she outlived all of her immediate family. Eileen told me that it was her mother who taught her to pray. "I've had a nice life," she said, "and it was my mother and father who started it!"

Dear Eileen, you are one of the choicest of the earth. Having been granted length of days you kept yourself invested in the work of the Gospel these many years. Now, Eileen, we send you back to God from Whom you came and with Whom you have been for all eternity.

Written by Sr. Patricia A. O'Donnell, IHM
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