

April 26
Sister Vera Kelly
(B. Margaret Kelly)
(1910-1994)

Margaret Kelly was the first child born to Louis and Ella Hart Kelly on June 13, 1910 in Flint, Michigan. Two years later, a son, Leo Michael followed and in 1916 another daughter, Catherine Mary increased the family to three children. A first cousin, Catherine Beatrice Salter, who was only three years old when her mother died in childbirth, became a member of the Kelly family at that time and was legally adopted during her high school years. She was always called Bea to avoid confusion with Catherine Mary. Together they lived a happy home life.

Born and raised in Flint, Margaret attended St. Michael grade and high school. School, however, was more than balanced with extra-curricular interests and in the life of Margaret Kelly music quickly became her life passion. From ages 6-7-8 she attended the School of Scottish Dancing where she became adept at the Highland Fling and Sword Dances. The next three years she studied Irish Folk Dancing--jigs and reels and hornpipes. From grades three to twelve she took piano lessons and played the drums and bells in the school orchestra during her junior and senior high years. Somehow she managed to find time to teach CCD classes in the parish religious education program all through high school under the direction of Mrs. Duffy (Sister Bethany's mother). In her own words she writes:

"I am convinced that my involvement in this program was instrumental in winning me the graces necessary to accept the grace of my religious vocation when it was offered me during my senior year in high school." Such was the deep faith of this young Irish lass.

When the day came she was ready to set off for Monroe on June 24, 1927. She received the habit on January 2, 1928 and the name Sister Vera by which she would lovingly be known until her death. Two weeks after reception she was sent to St. John School in Monroe to replace Sister Louis Marie in grades 5-6 where she finished out the year and returned in September to teach grades 6-7. In October of that year (1928) occurred the famous 'novitiate accident' involving the bus carrying eight novices. Some suffered severe injuries. Only Sister Vera was able to return to her classroom the following Monday. Her only ill effects were an injured shoulder and two bruised shins.

Sister Vera sums up her teaching career as follows: "My first six years of teaching were spent in the grade school classroom teaching the regular subjects. For the next twenty years I was a music teacher exclusively--giving private lessons, teaching choral, choir, orchestra and marching band. During the last twenty years of my teaching career I taught both school and music. In high school my subjects included religion, Latin, Spanish, English, and history. I might add that during these "music" and "school and music" programs were part and parcel of my schedule, taking a variety of forms: from Christmas and Founders' Day programs to spring recitals, musicals, and operettas."

She recalled that her most productive years along dramatic lines were her years in Akron, Ohio in her collaborative efforts with Sister Marie Edward Patton turning Sister Marie Edward's pageants into musicals. But the most rewarding of all her dramatic efforts was the production of *I Remember Mama* with her Creative Writing and Drama Class at Good Shepherd School in Chicago. As she describes it so poignantly: "To everyone's surprise, my Dear Delinquents who knew nothing of a happy home life, chose *I Remember Mama* over all the other works, making a real production of it to the surprise of all the faculty, Sisters, student body, relatives and friends!"

Just when most people are getting ready to wind down at age sixty-five, Vera was invited to step to a different drummer, out of the classroom and into the nursing profession, exchanging her teacher's hat for a nurse's cap. While she knew she did not have the science requirements as well as the advantage of youth on her side to go for an RN, she agreed to try for a degree as an LPN. With characteristic humility she declared that "Thanks to the Sisters' prayers she 'made it' and even managed to pass the State Board exams." She loved the work and continued to serve in this capacity for ten years, bringing to it the same enthusiasm that energized her entire life.

Even while she was doing full time nursing Vera still found time for her primary love, music. She organized a "Sisters' Orchestra" of Sisters from the Academy and Motherhouse which gradually became a 'community' orchestra comprised of students from junior and senior high, and men and women from the Monroe community at large. For a number of years, Sister Marie Heenan was the piano accompanist for this struggling orchestra. More than one amusing story can be recalled from this period like the time Sister Marie was grandly playing the introduction to the wrong number. Sister Vera, with complete composure, eyes riveted to the score, and lips scarcely moving as she muttered more and more desperately. "Marie....Marie" whose eyes were equally riveted to her music. It was enough to send the rest of the orchestra members into controlled spasms of laughter.

"Don't stop to pick the flowers," Sister Vera would admonish the orchestra members to remind them to keep up a spirited tempo. In music this was her hallmark, but in her relationships with people especially her own sisters in community, Vera always found time to stop and chat, or recommend a good "Cat" mystery book to read for relaxation, or run an errand for someone who needed something to be picked up or purchased. Even on the day she died she was concerned about picking up a book at the local public library for someone. Many who met and chatted briefly with Vera on that last day of her life had their own treasured stories to tell.

Sister Vera Kelly was a woman of prayer and deep faith, possessed of a generous and grateful heart, a woman who took herself lightly and her God seriously. Not too many years before she died, she wrote in her autobiography:

"I shall be eternally grateful for the gift of my religious vocation to our beloved community because through my vow of Obedience I have the assurance that when I am doing the work assigned or approved and blessed by my Superiors, I am doing the will of God. Even in these days of "Open Placement" He has continued "invite" me to each new assignment. This special invitation gives me the courage to accept each new work even when I realize that to all outward appearances I am totally

unprepared for the new work. If it is really His Will for me, I know He will prepare me for it.”

Her favorite prayer reveals the depth of her relationship to God:

“O Wisdom of the Sacred Head, guide me in all my ways. O Love of the Sacred Heart, consume me with your fire. Make my heart burn, and my will bend to all that I see and know is for Your glory, **no matter what it may cost me.** Amen.”

Later she notes that she “often meditates on the last sentence and examines her conscience as to whether she fully and honestly was living up to this.”

God called Sister Vera home quickly--too quickly for those she left behind. The faith and music that characterized her life on earth gave way to uninterrupted glory and songs of praise to her loving God.