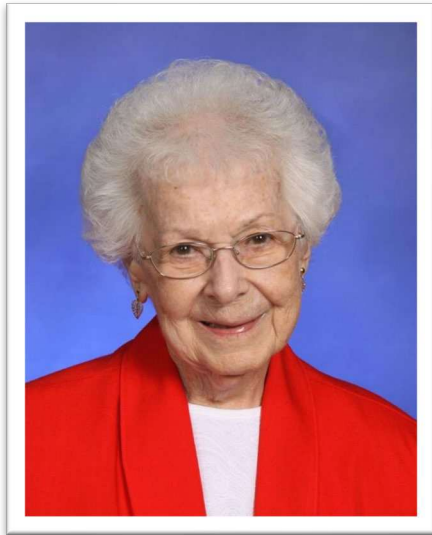


Remembering Eileen Semonin, IHM
Sept. 4, 1926 – July 27, 2024



Eileen Marie Semonin was born in Akron, Ohio, in 1926. Her parents met when Catherine Schooley was in the Secretarial Science program at St. Mary High School (Akron) and Charles "Chick" Semonin was vice president of the Semonin Candy Company looking for a secretary. IHM Sister Gilberta introduced them. They married after his service in World War I.

Cathrine had a difficult pregnancy with Eileen. When Eileen was three years old, her mother died with the birth of her fourth child, Dick. Her father remarried to a wonderful woman, Bertha Gearhart, who Eileen said was truly a mother to her. Bertha convinced the family members to let her keep the four children together when their father died six years later. When Eileen was just 14, Bertha died, and the four siblings managed to stay together and share their resources.

Upon graduating from high school, Eileen expected to be married that summer, but she suddenly became convinced that she should enter religious life. Later, she thought, "I wanted someone I knew would always be there for me. And that's only God." She wrote to her fiancé, who was serving in France, and to his chaplain that she needed to break the engagement.

Eileen entered the Immaculate Heart of Mary Congregation of Monroe in 1945. She taught primary grades in Detroit for three years and one year at Harbor Beach (in Michigan's "thumb"). She explained to a visitor that, as she had no familial responsibilities, she could cook and sew and would be free to go to California or Puerto Rico. She was amazed when Mother Theresa told her she was being sent to Kalamazoo to study nursing.

Upon graduation from Nazareth College Nursing School, Eileen worked with two other IHM nurses for the Congregation. These three women provided 24-hour care in 12-hour shifts to active, retired members and critical and/or chronic patients, seven days a week. Eileen was a staff nurse for 18 years and director of nursing for six years. During these years, she was chairperson for 23 Red Cross Blood drives and received their Ann Magnussen Award.

Among her many certificates of program and workshop participation, a report card from St. Mary High School shows her to have attained a Gregg Shorthand proficiency of 70 words per minute with an accuracy of 97%. Doubtless, this led to her six years of secretarial service to the Monroe Council of Churches, where she received their Wilfred Simpson Award.

She loved nursing and had close relationships with her co-workers. She was a joyful person with a great sense of humor, eager to initiate celebrations, loved by co-workers on and off the job, and valued as a valiant woman by her community. Gradually, a rotation of shifts and more lay help were initiated in the Infirmary. Eileen enjoyed community life and relished the opportunity to participate in all aspects when the community house at 408 W. Elm was reserved for nurses and other health care providers.

Eileen participated in a year of renewal in Cincinnati in 1977. In 1978, she began nursing at a clinic for farmworkers in Apopka, Florida and later at a public health clinic. In the 10 years she ministered in Florida, she encountered many conditions for the first time: migrant workers had

reactions from chemicals used on crops and complications from AIDS, which was first diagnosed in 1980. Eileen saw child abuse, domestic violence and maternal health issues. She provided preservice orientation for VISTA volunteers who would enter Cuban and Haitian worker resettlements. In Florida and later in Temperance, Michigan, Eileen was dubbed "the FBI" as she could find patients other staff could not locate.

In 1988, she was elected provincial of the Southwest Province. From her experiences working with pregnant women, many of whom were teenagers, she reflected on the lack of relational support these women faced. As a provincial, she saw "how rich we are in supportive relationships."

Eileen greatly appreciated fun, trees (when making a retreat, she always chose a tree to converse), Mexican restaurants, cats, parakeets and her Kentucky neighbor, Secretariat. She loved her vacations at Lake Geneva with her family. She walked the Mackinac Bridge with friends... with her birthday being Sept. 4 and always on or near Labor Day, why not walk 5 miles for a good cause? Her snubbed family commissioned tee-shirts reading "I walked Berlin Lake Bridge!"

When provinces were dissolved, Eileen chose Toledo, Ohio, as her home. With three other IHMs living in the same apartment building, this became a base for volunteer work with an outpatient clinic of Mercy Hospital and David's House, which provided AIDS-related services to patients. She was a contingency nurse for maternal patients in Temperance and attended doctor visits with IHMs being treated for cancer.

Her service continued tutoring children in Luna Pier, Monroe and Lenawee counties. With the assistance of a former migrant, the two coordinators empowered migrant women to provide first aid, specific health information, translation and referrals to providers. With Pat O'Donnell, she presented retirement for religious programs.

A picture in her room shows Jesus washing feet. Eileen saw the divine in the intricacies of the human body and is grateful for having had the opportunity to be of such service. She paid attention to the evolution of her spirituality, moving from a patriarchal orientation to an inclusive understanding of the Divine. She wrote:

As I sit down to share some thoughts about obstacles encountered on my journey, I am looking at a very tightly closed carnation bud. Buds are special in any flower arrangement. They are a sign of potential, of beauty yet to be realized. We feel saddened when a bud droops and withers without opening. Did it somehow reject the light, air, water and nutrients present to help it unfold?

Trying to be responsive and faithful to the creative process remains key for me in my life and my faith journey; the process asks of me vulnerability and open readiness to hear and experience the Holy One present always in the diverse events and people met in an ordinary day.

Eileen, we treasure the time we had with you and rejoice that you are reunited with your family and friends. You were a flower that opened fully to the goodness of God.

Written and delivered by Anne Marie Murphy, IHM, July 31, 2024