

**Remembering Eileen Houlihan, IHM**  
**Oct. 26, 1922 - March 10, 2025**

The song for communion that Eileen selected for this celebration is:

“O Lord, you are the center of my life: I will always praise you, I will always serve you, I will always keep you in my sight.” The only addition could be, “I will always sing to you in my heart.” This represents the single-hearted direction lived in Eileen’s 102 years!

Oct. 26, 1922, was an exciting day in the Houlihan household as Marie and Simon welcomed the birth of their third daughter, Eileen. Imagine what it was like for her twin sisters Kathleen and Mary, age 2, to see this newborn! The family continued to grow as twin boys, Simon and Tom, arrived, followed by their siblings, Lois, Michael and Ruth.



Eileen’s father, Simon, was one of 11 children born in Ennis, Ireland. He came to the United States at the age of 19. Young and able, he tried several jobs before joining the Detroit police force where he served for 25 years. Marie, her mother, was American-born. It has been told that Simon and Marie met at the Gaelic League, which is somewhat of a mystery, given that she came from a strong German background. Marie managed the house and cared for the children, teaching her daughters the art of sewing.

A great sorrow came to the family when Tom, one of the twin boys, died when only 11 months old. The family’s deep faith and spirit of prayer saw them through this difficult time and, in later years, inspired three of their girls to enter religious life. Kathleen and Eileen entered the IHM community, and Lois joined the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary.

The children were educated by IHM Sisters staffing St. Mary of Redford schools when Eileen began piano lessons in the fifth grade. The lessons were intermittent depending on whether Dad’s police officer’s salary could be stretched during the Depression to pay for them. No one could have imagined then that this was the beginning of music’s central place in her life.

In 1940, two weeks after graduating from high school, Eileen entered the IHM congregation in Monroe, where Kathleen was a novice. When she was received into the novitiate, she was given the name Mary Gael, in the Gaelic spelling. Regarding her calling, Eileen said, “I think I can do this. I do feel I could be a teacher. I’m not exactly sure, but I think I can do this.”

After her First Profession in 1943, she was enrolled in music studies at Marygrove and graduated in 1945. Her first assignment was at St. Matthew in Detroit, where she taught studio music and directed the choir. Summers were spent at the University of Notre

Dame, attending classes for a Masters' degree in Liturgy. Throughout her life, music and Liturgy were like twin sisters who traveled together.

Filled with zeal and love of God, she felt prepared and ready to meet the challenges in education. Having completed her studies in music, most of her ministry assignments would include music or voice-related classes and even band. She astounded folks by explaining that when working with a band, she learned how to play every instrument, further declaring, "Well, how am I going to teach the instruments if I don't know how to play them?" That's a bottom-line commitment to your craft.

Eileen described her surprise when, "the night before I was to return to Wyandotte, Sister Anna Marie told me that she was keeping me home to assist Sr. Benedine [Callahan] in the postulate as a large group of young women was expected. I taught Liturgy and Scripture using Margaret Brennan's notes! It was a rich and rewarding experience for me and a delight to work with the young women. The hardship was not agreeing with the militaristic discipline of formation, but I had to live with it. I survived four years." What she may not have realized was that the warmth and kindness that she offered to the women was deeply appreciated and never forgotten.

As times changed with Vatican II, Father Tom Sutherland was instrumental in inviting Eileen into the next stage of her life and into pastoral ministry, which continued for 35 years. Initially hearing of opportunities for women religious, she said, "I was excited, spoke to him, and received great encouragement to pray and investigate. I took driving lessons and asked questions, praying all the while that I wasn't making a mistake. Yet I continued to look forward to this ministry with anticipation." Of her ministry at St. Mary of Redford, she said, "I spent eight happy and growing years as Pastoral Associate, directing the fine men's choir. I found I could do things I never thought I could. I had found my niche!"

While true, some of the following years brought difficult times, not with the people, but with pastors who had personal difficulties. After one such experience, the ministry office told her of openings in the Saginaw Diocese. This led to four happy years at St. Stephen. But when the pastor died, the new priest did not accept her.

When Father Tom McNamara called to say, "What a gift you would be to [Our Lady of the Lake] Harbor Beach," she was on the move again. "I moved there in the summer of 1989 and spent the happiest 15 years of my life and ministry there. My ministry included RCIA, Liturgy, Christian Service, visiting the sick, Parish Council, and serving as organist and choir director. Father Kukla was the pastor for the final three years and was often affected by diabetes, which threw more responsibility on me, and I found I was equal to it. What a growing experience." When Father Kukla was called away for seven months, "Bishop Ken Untener asked me to be a 'convener' calling the staff together and taking over the care of the parish."

A member of that parish described Eileen as "a spot of joy ... a good companion, spiritually nurturing, a friend with whom you can confide, and one who had the 'get-up-and-go' to move things forward." She was determined and stood for what she believed.

As the pastoral associate, she was everywhere. This was her legacy. Inevitably, what was to come was a shock. Eileen shared,

When the pastor returned in the fall of 2003, I told him that I would work halftime with the musician who would replace me. He assured me I could continue to live in the small house across from the rectory as long as I wished. Then, it was suggested that I retire and stay on as a volunteer. However, in December, the Parish Council chair decided that if I were to retire, I should leave. I was devastated and hurt! On Jan. 4, 2004, the parish had a beautiful farewell for me and the very next morning, I left for Monroe and retirement.

A number of images came to mind after hearing this story and talking to others who have known Eileen since her return to Monroe. What about Gold that is tested in the fire? It is purified and strengthened by the challenges all down the years.

Members of the Motherhouse community characterized Eileen as “faith-full to her convictions, friends and routines,” for she kept up with news and attended every Liturgy, service and gathering. She was clearly upset if the listening devices weren’t working since it prevented her from fully participating in the Liturgy, which was always so dear to her heart. Her routine included an 11 a.m. exercise session and a 1 p.m. stationary bike session, and she never missed a hair appointment or her Sunday 1 p.m. call to her sister, Ruthy. Others saw Eileen as a strong, independent person and evangelizer. Always the pastoral one, Eileen invited conversation with staff working on her floor about faith and church. If there was an interest, she guided them accordingly to those who could accompany them on the journey. Generally not one to seek the spotlight, Eileen took delight in being invited to ceremonies or events as the community’s “oldest.” A key experience with Eileen is that when she looked at you and smiled, you just knew you were special to her. What a gift!

Those living with her on the third floor shared much comradery. Dorothy Diederichs recalls the two of them singing each other back to their rooms in the evening. When asked what they sang, she chuckled and said, “Oh, anything!” In Eileen’s room, there was a small poster that read:

Once upon a time, when women were birds, there was a simple understanding that to sing at dawn and to sing at dusk was to heal the world through joy.

On her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, Eileen summed up her long life:

I am here at home, thankful for all ... I look back and see that even when I was unaware of God, God was never unaware of me. I am gratefully a daughter of the Church, surviving the loss of three jobs at the hands of church leaders yet continuing to serve with energy, enthusiasm and *joy*.

I shall never be grateful enough for my vocation as an IHM. I have set my heart on the way, knowing that I do not walk it alone. Praise and Thanksgiving to you, O God.

We miss you, Eileen, and are grateful for all you brought into our lives. We know you are now singing full-throated praise with the most glorious chorus ever. May all the love,

faithfulness, and joy you so graciously gave be returned to you, full measure, pressed down and overflowing.

***Written and delivered by Betty Leon, based on the writings of Eileen and Margaret Babcock, IHM, March 13, 2025.***