

Remembering Janet (Ann Rita) Ryan, IHM March 21, 1943 – Sept. 2, 2025

Every year, from September 1 to October 4, people of faith around the world celebrate the Season of Creation. It is, perhaps, not accidental that Janet died on the second day of the Season. And further, who would have ever guessed that a small, farm girl from the tiny town of Emmett, Michigan, would turn out to be a teacher, mentor, administrator, chaplain, lover, challenger, leader and champion? All roles that Janet held, roles in which she excelled, roles in the IHM community, and roles in the communities in which she participated -- schools, parishes, hospitals, boards, committees and the Stronger Together Huddle.



Janet's ministries took her from the thumb of Michigan to an Atlanta suburb in Georgia, from cities in Iowa to Chicago, spending over 40 years in hospital ministry, most of which were located in urban areas. It was in these settings, and during her early ministry as a primary teacher at St. Rose in Detroit, in the late 1960s, that she developed her love for those on the margins, an appreciation for ecumenism, and an understanding of the diversity present in God's creation. It was in these settings that she grappled with Church teachings that were out of step with modern life and science. It was in these settings, also, that she developed her skills of listening, caring and encouraging.

While Janet's death was not unexpected, and she and we were making preparations, she did leave us sooner than we expected. Some things were left undone, like this Remembering. In preparing this, I reached out to those who knew her and those who worked with her over the years. They began to write back with their thoughts about Janet. Words most often used to describe Janet were "brilliant," "kind," "fierce," and "faithful."

Brilliant, she was, in her ability to bring light to situations which were sometimes very dark. Kind, in her way, that reflected her family's values of warm community, hospitality, and her learned skills of pastoral care.

As an IHM, she was faithful to her vows and IHM values, loyal to commitments and friends, and faithful to the care of the Earth. She was fierce in championing causes for the Earth — our common home —and of the "integrating idea" for utilizing this campus as a center for ecological education. In her final months here in residence and in healthcare, she used herself as a means to experience the reality of the system in juxtaposition with the ideal. She crafted a lengthy action list for the facility's director. This was not about what was impacting her, but what she thought should be happening for all who come here. While she had a keen sense of the system's failures, she was very

appreciative of each staff person, often saying when a mistake was made, “training, they haven’t been trained.”

There is a quote attributed to the late Mike Wallace of “60 Minutes” fame. Supposedly, he said, “I have had many successes in my life for which I am well known. Now I am in my 70s, reaching the end of my life, and what I know is that what people will remember about me is the last thing I did, not all those other good things I did.” This quote, I think, aptly applies to Janet.

For some of us, the last thing we will remember about Janet is her struggle to live, to breathe, and how she was faithful to her values till the end, wanting to be home at IHM, and refusing invasive treatment.

So, while she was engaged and productive in many ministries for many years, including twelve years of service on the IHM Leadership Council, and though her health had been declining for several years, what we will remember is that she stayed active doing the work she wanted to do. The work that was important to her included collaborating with me in forming ministers of education in our schools, promoting the “integrating idea” on this campus, and attending Huddle gatherings and civic protests, which she continued until the end. The greatest of these was her desire to save Earth, our common home.

Shortly before she died, Janet had a friend liberate her from her health care room to attend a book club gathering with her activist friends. Her friend, Sharon McNeil, was an apt liberator for this escape because she and Janet had been very involved in birthing the organic garden on campus and shared a passion for the Earth. Sharon was with Janet as she transitioned from Earth. Sharon wrote this to the women of the Huddle.

Sister Janet Ryan, a bright light, has left us this afternoon, Sept. 2, 2025. She will be sorely missed. Janet gave so much of herself in all that she did. She wore many hats throughout her life, including activism with the Stronger Together Huddle and Voters Not Politicians.

At the end of April, Janet marched a mile on her walker, demonstrated in Jackson, and stood on the street corner in front of the Social Security Office. Not much kept her down.

Janet loved the land and was a fierce environmentalist. Like some of us, she was reluctant to write a regular feature column for the local newspaper. But if she could write about climate change, she was all in -- and so she did! She was brilliant and deeply committed to sustainability, as well as to the IHM organic garden, where she served as my supervisor for several years. Gardening was in her bones.

Janet was fearless. At the Trenton Art Festival, she collected signatures for fair, safe and accessible voting rights in Michigan. Janet, of small stature with white hair, was sitting alone at a large table under the “Voters Not Politicians” tent when a declared MAGA republican from the next tent saddled up to her at the table and said, “I don’t think you know what you are talking about. “Oh, I do,” Janet said

quietly, "I am speaking about voter intimidation, and I think that's what you are trying to do to me, right now." "Oh no," the person exclaimed, "no, I'm not," and scurried back to her tent.

Janet is an inspiration and was untiring in her efforts to do good.

I accompanied Janet on the walk Sharon referred to, walking right behind her to ensure she did not fall, as she valiantly pushed ahead on her walker. When we arrived at the rally in St. Mary's Park, a woman who knew Janet asked if she would take her picture with her young granddaughter. Janet smiled and acquiesced. After the woman and her granddaughter left, Janet smiled and said, "She probably wants that picture because she thinks I am the oldest person here."

Her ability to keep a sense of humor about things was unflagging. In her last days, she was giving Monica [Stuhldreier] and me some things to do, and I said something like, "Relax, Janet, it's okay, slow down, breathe, we will do it..." She looked up at me, smiled, and in a barely audible voice said, "I am from the farm, we never quit. We are always doing...I can't help it." And in her doing, she was deeply prayerful and reflective.

Janet found in poetry a way to express her affections for the Earth and those she treasured. I will close this Remembering with a poem that Janet treasured. I think she would like us to savor, and imagine if you will, her reading it to us.

Mysteries, Yes

*Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood.*

*How grass can be nourishing in the
mouths of the lambs.
How rivers and stones are forever
in allegiance with gravity
while we ourselves dream of rising.
How two hands touch and the bonds will
never be broken.
How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.*

*Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.*

*Let me keep company always with those who say
"Look!" and laugh in astonishment,
and bow their heads.*

by Mary Oliver

And so dear Janet, on this fifth day in the Season of Creation, we thank you for your presence in our lives ... the richness you brought to us in prayer, in service **and** over a gin and tonic. We trust you are being welcomed into another realm with your parents, Rita and Martin, your brothers, Marty and Gary, your IHM companions from all down the years, where all things will be made new and all of creation will sing.

***Written and delivered by Barbara G. Stanbridge, IHM
Sept. 5, 2025***