

Remembering Marie Rebecca Vonderhaar, IHM

May 6, 1941 – March 23, 2026



We have come here today to remember and celebrate a woman known by many names. Born to parents Al and Reba Vonderhaar on May 6, 1941, she was named Elizabeth Ann. Growing up in her family with her three sisters, Mary Jane, Dorothy and Marge, she was called “Betty” or sometimes just “Sis.” At her reception into the IHM novitiate in 1961, she took the name Sister Marie Rebecca. When given the opportunity to return to her baptismal name in 1968, she chose to keep Marie Rebecca, which later evolved for many of us to simply Becky. However, I think the name that most defined who she was and how she lived was SISTER.

Being the oldest of four girls, she was the “big sister.” I will leave it to her sisters, Mary and Dorothy, to share their experiences of “Betty” in that role!

Her life as a **Sister**, Servant of the Immaculate Heart of Mary can be divided into three phases: Before Africa, Africa and After Africa. I say that because we all know how pivotal and meaningful Becky’s African experience was in her life. Although she enjoyed her initial teaching and religious education ministries at St. Cyprian, Riverview and St. Charles, Newport, her long-held desire to serve in overseas missions was fulfilled when she was asked to go to Africa in 1976 to teach at Notre Dame Seminary in Navrongo, Ghana, West Africa.

For the next 20 years in Africa, she had the opportunity to be “sister” to so many in various roles. From listening to the stories of her time in Africa, it seemed that her ministry went far beyond her official role as a classroom teacher. According to Sister Rose Graham, with whom she lived and worked in Ghana, she worked with and monitored YCS, the Young Christian Student organization throughout the diocese. She literally organized the Religious Women’s Council in the diocese, motivated by the determination to provide a forum for the voices of African and ex-patriot sisters. Although Becky may be best remembered for her organizational gifts in Africa, Rose said she always made time to visit people in the hospital or transport those without transportation.

When Becky returned from Africa in 1996, she became the Director of Religious Education at Christ the Good Shepherd in Lincoln Park, the very parish in which she grew up. For 25 years, she nurtured the faith formation of generations of families,

children and parishioners. From sacramental preparation to youth ministry activities to RCIA/OCIA, she was involved in everything. But perhaps more importantly, it was her presence to the people as **sister** that most touched their hearts. She simply “showed up” when there was a need, not waiting to be invited, whether it was showing up at the graduation of a parishioner’s niece or at the bedside of someone who was dying. She was able to help people feel recognized and valued and that’s what people will remember.

Sister Val Knoche, one of Becky’s dear friends, said she was truly a “**support’ sister**, lifting up those who were weary, offering comfort without hesitation. Her kindness wasn’t occasional; it was who she was.” Her sisterhood was a gift she freely and generously gave to everyone, never asking for anything in return.

In our Riverview community, Becky’s **sisterly care** was always evident ... in the way she showed interest in everyone’s ministry and family; preparing a nice meal (often her favorite sauerkraut and sausage), sharing the chapel ambience responsibility with Candy, always being the first to pick up everyone’s dessert plate after the news; taking care of the flower planters in front of the house ...

Finally, and perhaps the most reflective of Becky, was her deep desire to be **sister** to people who were poor or marginalized in any way. She was one of the early members of the joint IHM and Sisters of Providence Undoing Racism Committee, which formed in 2002, planning experiences to help IHMs connect with and begin healing from our own history of racism. We saw this desire lived out in her full-hearted commitment to Strangers No Longer. She worked tirelessly, inviting parishes to become circles of support for our immigrant brothers and sisters, as well as taking part in advocacy with local and state officials to change laws that made it hard for immigrants to become independent. She would often share with us the story and the needs of a particular immigrant family she was trying to help. She never let the fact that she didn’t speak the family’s language prevent her from being present to them, another example of how she kept “showing up.”

In conclusion, I would like to share two things Becky wrote that reflect her desire to be a **sister to all**. The first is something from her IHM Book of Life page, which each IHM created in 1999. On her page, Becky drew a heart with the world inside it. At the top of the page were the words: “**That the me that I am, may embrace the world that is.**” Inside the heart, she included every kind of person, poor, rich; young, old; lovable, unlovable; connected, disconnected; wise, foolish and more. Around the outside of the heart, she named herself: inhabitant of the Earth, IHM Sister, Missionary, Friend, Woman, Vonderhaar, Christian, Human Being.

The second is from her ministry commitment form, which each of us fills out every year. The form always asks us to reflect on a particular aspect of our life as IHMs and relate

that to our ministry. In 2024, the question was: In your ministry and prayer, what spaces are longing for liberation as you intentionally dare, risk and dream the unfolding of the kingdom of God. This is how Becky responded: **“I pray that I have a more daring spirit, one that is ready to risk all for a more loving and welcoming community among ourselves, in our country and in our whole human family. I dream that I close no doors to whoever knocks.”**

Indeed, Becky, your door was always open and you welcomed all as brothers and sisters in one human family, all made in the image and likeness of our loving God. Thank you for your life as **SISTER** to all!

***Written and delivered by Margaret Chapman, IHM
March 31, 2026***