

Remembering Mary Remi Pauwels, IHM
Dec. 22, 1925 – May 9, 2026

First of all, it is an honor, albeit somewhat daunting, to be offering this Remembering for Sister Remi (also known as Lolly, Aunt Lolly). As the consummate teacher she was, I suspect that even now she will be hoping for the best from one of her former students.

Lillian Madeline Pauwels entered the world on Dec. 22, 1925, in Jackson, Michigan, the firstborn of six children of Madeline (Thorrey) and Remi Pauwels, both immigrants from Belgium. She was predeceased by her sisters, Dorothy and Betty and infant brother, Royal. Her sister, Mary Jane and brother, Bill, remain. She described her growing-up years as happy and always surrounded by relatives, many of whom also emigrated from Belgium. According to Remi, her mother was a meticulous housekeeper and her father was an extremely hard worker. We certainly know those traits became firmly embedded in Remi's DNA!



She attended St. John's school and entered the IHM Congregation June 29, 1943. She took the name Mary Remi at her reception into the Novitiate on Jan. 2, 1944.

I'm going to skip the chronological listing of her degrees and the places where she ministered to focus on Remi as a person and teacher par excellence.

Remi was drawn to enter the IHMs because the sisters projected joy, family spirit and kindness and she wanted to emulate those traits. In every assignment, and there were some challenging ones, she found reasons to laugh and be joyful. She was happiest in small places like St. Charles, Coldwater and Adjuntas, Puerto Rico, which provided her and the other sisters the opportunity to live a more home-like, family style of community. She vividly recalls standing at the kitchen window in the convent in Coldwater, her first assignment after the novitiate, gazing out at the yard and old barn and thinking, "I'm me again."

She absolutely loved her time in Puerto Rico and described it as quite transformative. It was, in her words, the "beginning of an awareness that everyone is not like us or has to be." Her time there was a major influence on her decision to pursue further study of the language, culture and history of Hispanic peoples.

She was also drawn to religious life because she wanted to make a difference, to help others be their best selves. Teaching was her avenue for doing that. And teach she did, as well as serve as administrator in several schools for 63 years! She firmly believed that she was a conduit for her students, connecting them to their best selves.

I was fortunate to be one of her students she helped to become her best self. I had her for religion and Spanish when I was a junior and senior in 1964-66. Those were important years in my development and my discernment to become an IHM. She was one of the moderators for Young Christian Students (YCS), and I was lucky enough to be in her group. Many nights after a YCS meeting, I would drive her home and we would sit in the car behind the convent for another half hour while she patiently listened and helped me sort out my feelings and questions. She always encouraged me to be honest with myself and to trust where God was leading.

She believed that young people need role models of how to live faith-filled, compassionate, committed lives in a world of contradictory values. She felt the best way to do this was by always speaking her own truth with integrity and courage.

Despite the demanding life of an educator and administrator, Remi always made time to maintain and nurture family relationships. Most of us know of her faithfulness to help care for her mother until she died at 104, traveling to Jackson every other weekend taking her turn as caregiver. She did this for 7 years while still teaching.

What many of us may not be as aware of are the relationships she nurtured and enjoyed with nieces and nephews. Here are a few of their memories of Aunt Lolly.

From her niece, Julie: When Remi came back to Jackson to teach at Lumen Christi, she had to change her skipping school pattern until after Spanish class, knowing that relatives were not going to be given any leniency if caught. Julie credits Remi's strong belief that education was the way to a better life, for her decision to go to college. One of her best memories was from one of their "girls' weekends," at her cottage up North. That was the one when she went kayaking for the first time at 86. Julie said the biggest challenge was trying to slow her down and keep her safe. She was super proud of her 94-year-old Aunt during COVID when she learned how to Zoom. We all know, Remi would not miss an opportunity to learn something new, especially if it provided a way to stay in touch with family.

Her nephew, Remi, fondly recalls her visits to New Jersey and how she always made him feel as though spending time with him was the highlight of her day, and that meant the world to the youngest of six. When he was at Michigan State University, she would often be at Grandma Pauwels' house when he would come to visit. She would dote on him, cooking dinner, doing his laundry or simply making sure he had everything he needed at school. She made him feel so special and so loved, making those first years away from home so much easier.

Another nephew, Steve, felt the same way, noting that as his aunt Lolly popped in and out of his life over the years, she always greeted him with a big smile and had a heartfelt question about how he was doing and what was new in his world. For him, Aunt Lolly was a genuine "people person." This made sense to him because the God she served loves people, so she committed to do the same.

What stands out for her niece, Mary Jo, was how happy her mom, Dorothy, was when Remi came to stay with her. She is so grateful for the time they spent together. She feels extremely blessed to be one of the lives Lolly touched so deeply.

When it was finally time to step out of the classroom at age 90, she devoted the same enthusiasm for life here at the retirement community. She visited sisters in health care and took her house responsibilities very seriously! Whether it was acting as the communication contact for her floor or keeping the lounge and veranda in order, you knew it would be taken care of with Remi in charge! To nurture the fun part of her personality, she was instrumental in starting the monthly social hours in the dining room. She also became part of the weekly Manhattan social hour, a “by-invitation-only” group of sisters residing here. She was the last remaining member, so I am sure the others were there to greet her with the perfect heavenly Manhattan.

Remi was also motivated to enter religious life because she saw it as the best way for her to become a “good and holy” person. In her lifetime as an IHM, Vatican II and the renewal of religious life led to seismic shifts in theology and spirituality. At times, she struggled with some of those shifts. She never wanted to hop on any “band wagon,” so she took the time to learn about new theological understandings and expressions of spirituality. These new understandings had to make sense to her before they could become a part of her. She needed to be able to integrate them into her earlier understanding of what it meant to be a “good” and “holy,” person. In the first reading from Micah today, which she chose, we are told that God has made it abundantly clear what it means to be good: simply to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. I believe that her choice of that reading reflected the final evolution of her understanding of what it meant to be a good and holy person. She was able to come to this, in no small part, I believe, because of her enduring trust in God.

Another example of her trust in God was her response to being told that she needed to move to memory care. Her mission councilor at the time, Marianne Gaynor, along with me and Amanda Fosgate, the nurse in charge of memory care, met with her to explain why we thought it would be a good move. Her response was “well, I’m not happy about this, but if you think it is for the best, I want to be obedient.”

Especially during Remi’s time on our memory care unit, her sister, Mary Jane and husband, Bill, came to visit frequently. They made sure her clothes were always in order and took her for picnics and ice cream on the river. Because Remi loved flowers, Mary Jane always made sure to bring her fresh flowers when they came to visit. Thank you, Mary Jane.

When a person lives to be 100, there are so many memories, so much one could say about who they were. I hope I’ve chosen to highlight what Remi would have wanted said about her, that she desired, above all, to live a good and holy life and to make a difference by helping young people become their best selves. Calley Duffey, IHM Communications Director, was one of Remi’s students she helped become her best self at St. Mary Catholic Central. In her words: “On behalf of countless grateful students, we

thank Sister Remi for teaching us language and love, discipline and delight, faith and courage. May the God who called her so faithfully continue to surround her with peace, and may the joy she planted in classrooms, hallways and hearts return to her a hundredfold as she rests from her labors. Hermana Remi, know—today and always—how deeply you were loved.”

On behalf of the whole IHM Community, I thank you, Remi, for your steadfast and faithful living of a good and holy life that indeed made a difference in countless lives.

***Written and delivered by Margaret Chapman, IHM
May 14, 2026***