

Remembering



Sister Mary Irene Flanagan, CSJ

May 25, 1928 ~ September 19, 2016

Colleen Marie Flanagan was born in Los Angeles on May 25, 1928. Her parents were Joseph Leo Flanagan and Irene Catherine Steinbroner. This loving couple also raised Joseph, her older brother, Colleen, James and Patricia, her other siblings, during the Depression years. Her father died when Colleen was four years old—certainly a hardship for the young family. Colleen attended Catholic Girls High School, (*later known as Bishop Conaty High School*), and was elected the class president. She entered religious life on Feb. 11, 1947, received the habit on August 15, 1947 and was given the name Sister Mary Irene. Her first profession was on August 15, 1949, and on August 15, 1952, Sister Mary Irene pronounced her final vows as a Sister of St. Joseph. In 2007 Sister celebrated her 60th Jubilee.

Sister's first mission was at St. Emydius School in San Francisco, where she taught almost every grade. In 1956 Sister transferred to teaching high school. First

she taught at Cathedral High School in San Diego, then Regina Coeli, also in San Diego. Later Sister was assigned to Alemany High School in Mission Hills. She taught Home Economics, History and Art. Sister was awarded a B.A. in Home Economics from the Mount, and later a M.A. in Home Economics from San Jose State College. From 1962 to 1974 Sister taught Home Economics at the Doheny Campus. During this time she did a great deal of research on the Doheny Mansion for her Master's degree as well as providing early childhood care to youngsters, many living in the area around Doheny. For ten years she was the Pre-school Religious Coordinator for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. After this leadership role, she and Holy Family Sister Bernadette began a new program at American Martyrs in Manhattan Beach.

When she moved to Manhattan Beach, her family moved nearby to be close to her. Sister cooked a meal for them every Sunday, and they all looked forward to the gathering. Sister lived in the Manhattan Beach area for approximately 30 years. Sister Mary Irene was dedicated to her family. They in turn loved her. To her family she was "Auntie Sister."

Sister Mary Irene spent eight years at American Martyrs in Manhattan Beach in Family Ministry. Then in 1992, Sister initiated an Early Childhood Ministry there. This ministry was highly regarded, and brought many adults back to the faith. Sister remained in this position for 22 years. During these years she wrote a series of books, *Me at Three*, *Me at Four*, *Me at Five*, a religious education program for pre-school children. The curriculum, which took many years to develop, became so popular, it is used across the country. Sister Mary Irene traveled in the United States and Canada teaching this curriculum. Sister was also honored to speak at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress on the philosophy of early childhood religious education and its practical application to the classroom.

Over the years, and especially as Sister's health declined, her niece Colleen Donatucci, and nephews Joe Flanagan and Tim Flanagan were frequent visitors and brought her comfort and support. Sister Kathleen DuRoss and Sister Patricia Moore also visited her often and helped to meet her needs. Sister Maureen Petrone, her Regional Superior, was especially attentive to her. Sister Maureen once said,

"It has been a delight to get to know Sister Mary Irene for the past four plus years. Implicit in getting to know Sister is the fact that you will get to know lots of her friends and family." Sister Patricia Moore described Sister Mary Irene as "Lady Graciousness." Sister Kathleen DuRoss recalled a class she had from Sister Mary Irene during Kathleen's formation years. Kathleen said, "Sister was a dynamic teacher of early childhood." Sister Roseagnes Haskins said, "I remember her incredible artistic ability in decorating. She was a generous, gracious person, always ready to help." Others have commented that Sister used her gifts for others, and that Sister Mary Irene spent her life for others.

Colleen, Sister's niece, related that Sister loved parties and attended in various costumes. She was nicknamed "The Queen of the Villa", while residing at the Manhattan Beach Villa. Sister also enjoyed travel and visited Ireland and the Far East. Sister was very fond of animals, especially dogs.

As changes occurred over the last year, Sister often said, "Community has always been good to me." She would add, "Life is what it is" and found herself letting go of more and more things in her life. Sister became a member of the Holy Family Community during the summer of 2014. This was a difficult transition for Sister Mary Irene, but she was able to make the most of her new situation.

Sister once wrote, "There have been many, many blessings connected with my ministry. Often parents return to the Church or entered the RCIA program based on the simple awakening of their

child to the wonders of God's world or the gifts God has given to each of us. Our Charism tells us to go out to the dear neighbor. I am privileged to be ministering to a very large community."

Sister Mary Irene touched many lives, and has many friends who will miss her gracious ways. The 6000 families of American Martyrs will especially experience this loss. Her love of and devotion to children will always be remembered: As Jesus said: "of such is the kingdom of God." ✠

Written by Sister Frances Baker, CSJ



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