

Alice Catherine McDonell, RSCJ
June 10, 1909-February 24, 2001

When Alice McDonell died, her longtime friend, George Anderson, S.J., wrote in his column in *America Magazine* of the way that her quiet presence in the Sursum Corda community in Washington had inspired him when he went there.

Alice was the daughter of Frank McDonell and Ida Kraemer, one of four children of the family who lived in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. She attended St. Peters High School in Oshkosh 1923-1927. She then became a registered nurse at St. Agnes School of Nursing, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin in 1930 followed by a period of nursing practice. In 1941, she entered the College of Public Health Nursing at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, and earned the B.S. in Nursing Education there in 1942. She then entered the graduate school at the University of Minnesota in March, 1943, but by November was on her way to Kenwood. It is not clear how she met the Society.

She entered at Kenwood on November 20, 1943. The Mistress of Novices changed while she was in the noviceship, first Mother Agnes Barry, then Mother Marie Louise Schroen. She received the habit on May 16, 1944 and made her first vows on May 25, 1946. Her first assignment was as teacher of third and fourth grade and “usual work of Aspirants” at Elmhurst, Providence, Rhode Island for four years. In 1950 she went for one year to Lawrence Avenue, Detroit as surveillante of the junior school. After that, it was probation in Rome under the direction of Reverend Mother Zurstrassen, with profession on February 11, 1952.

From then until 1963, Alice was at Kenwood using her nursing skills as Mistress of Health for the large community and from 1955 she was Sub-Assistant Superior. Then from 1963-1969 she was Superior at Rochester, but was able during those years to be somewhat involved in consultation on public health issues. By 1969, she was able to return to the work she loved, this time as a public health nurse with the Department of Human Resources in Washington, D.C., and to be part of the new housing initiative, Sursum Corda, where she lived. During the years at Sursum Corda, she faithfully brought homemade bread and bean soup to a group of homeless men who slept on the grates near the Department of Defense. The Catholic social justice lobbying organization NETWORK was born in discussions around the kitchen table at Sursum Corda with Alice an eager participant.

She continued her work at the Department of Human Resources until 1981, when she formally retired and became a volunteer secretary/receptionist for the Sursum Corda Tenants' Association. In 1988, she became a nursing helper at the J. B. Johnson Nursing Center, “feeding patients who are unable to feed themselves.” During her nursing years, she often did updating institutes and workshops, including on the topics of Child Abuse, Drug Abuse, Maternal and Child Health, Geriatrics, School Nursing, Communicable Disease Control, Cancer, Heart Disease, and High Blood Pressure. In answer to a province questionnaire in those years, she wrote: “I am responding to the needs of people who have lost hope—to those whom the existing social order does not recognize as being human—the person who is hardly aware that he is one—I am trying to show forth the love of Christ in a non-human world.” On the same questionnaire, she listed as strong influences on her: reflection groups on Christian feminism and American Christians toward Socialism, books on liberation theology, lectures and workshops through NETWORK,

and courses on consumerism, multinational corporations, justice and peace issues, and the “the need for a new social order.” To the question what changes have happened in your life as a result of these influences, she answered: “Justice has become the overriding concern in my life. I think I have become more open to others, ready to listen and to learn. I am trying to live more simply. But I have also become more radicalized with all that this implies.”

Declining health forced a move to the Pax Christi community at Kenwood in 1995. In her final years, her mind was not always clear and she suffered from sometimes not knowing or understanding what was happening. Nevertheless, as long as she could, she helped in the infirmary with those unable to care for themselves. God reached out to care for her in a final way on February 24, 2001.