

**Catherine Cecilia Collins, RSCJ**  
**April 14, 1937 – March 18, 2010**

Occasionally there appears among us a woman whose vision and power to implement it alter our understanding of our apostolate and our manner of carrying it out. We say these people are “ahead of their time,” as indeed, they are; but the effect of their life and work among us is to bring us into the future that they envision. Kit Collins, who died suddenly in March 2010, was such a person.

Catherine Cecilia Collins, known as Kit, was born April 14, 1937, in Boston. Her parents were James Francis Collins and Esther McCafferty Collins. Kit was the middle child of five; she had three brothers and a sister. She was educated in the public schools of Belmont, Massachusetts, finishing her secondary schooling at Newton Country Day School of the Sacred Heart, where she came to know the Society. She said later, “I have a very special place in my grateful heart for what was wrought in me as a student at the Sacred Heart.” She continued her Sacred Heart education at Manhattanville, graduating in 1958 with a major in psychology. College friends remember her as a bright, friendly person, a good student, who knew how to enjoy herself. She had an irrepressible sense of humor, was able to “shoot pins into any form of pomposity,” while at the same time she accepted all kinds of people and was “totally non-judgmental.”

Kit kept her religious vocation a secret, even from her roommate; but upon graduating from Manhattanville, she entered the Society at Kenwood in September 1958, in the face of parental opposition. She made her first vows on March 20, 1961, spent a year in the juniorate and then was sent to Eden Hall, a full time boarding school, where she taught high school classes in English, history, Latin, philosophy and religion. In summers she studied for her Master’s degree in education from Manhattanville. Towards the end of the period of aspirantship she had a heart attack. She went to probation at the motherhouse on schedule, however. Letters she wrote to Eden Hall reassure her superior that she was well and able to follow the whole program of the probation. She seems to have entered into the spiritual preparation for her final vows with deep, idealistic fervor. Her notes testify to her love of and pride in the Society. She was professed on July 20, 1966.

Sister Collins returned to Eden Hall, this time as mistress of studies; in this position her innovative approach to education began to show itself, as well as her far-seeing conception of religious life. Vatican II had barely closed when Kit began to talk about how the Society in the United States ought to be one province. She read voraciously everything that came from the Council and, much to the dismay of some of her sisters, wanted to implement it immediately. Her return to the United States coincided with the Society’s preparation for the Special Chapter of 1967. Members of the Society were being encouraged to send *desiderata* for consideration at the chapter. Always forward in her thinking, Kit took the lead in expressing hopes and wishes concerning the direction of the Society. At the same time she began to implement some of this thinking at home: for example, she refused to write the billets of modesty, judging correctly that that custom would be abandoned.

In 1968 Kit was named headmistress at Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart, outside of Washington. She immediately undertook curriculum reform in line with educational trends about which she had been studying. She brought in a curriculum expert with a degree from Harvard to advise and help implement changes in the way teachers taught and students learned. There was team teaching in interdisciplinary programs, such as humanities and American studies. At the same time a service requirement was built into the school day; and a system of school governance, in which each student and faculty member had a part, was inaugurated. The changes were not accomplished without difficulty, however; parents and some older religious who lived in the house were not ready for the transition. Kit’s term as head ended abruptly after fewer than three years.

During those years at Stone Ridge Kit developed her commitment to the poor, the underdog and the voiceless. A friend and admirer of Father Horace McKenna, S.J., she made certain that the resources of Stone Ridge would be available for the opening of the ministry at *Sursum Corda*, a subsidized housing project for the poor in Washington, D.C., where several Religious of the Sacred Heart took up residence. Beds, linens, furniture – all went straight from the recently closed boarding school at Stone Ridge to the newly formed community in the city.

While still head at Stone Ridge, Kit was named director of the schools in the Washington Province, then in 1972, national coordinator of Sacred Heart schools. She collaborated closely with her counterparts in the other provinces on curriculum reform and leadership training for future administrators. She established a Master's program in school administration, hosted by Notre Dame University, one component of which was a seminar in the educational philosophy and history of the Society. Simultaneously under her direction the Network of Sacred Heart Schools was formed and the goals and criteria elaborated and promulgated. The design of the evaluation process followed. Underlying all these activities was the concern to answer the question: "What makes a school a Sacred Heart school?" Kit believed that, "Independent but never isolated, every Sacred Heart school needs to feel the strength of belonging to a larger whole, of sharing principles and values, broad purposes, hopes and ambitions." As Kit's work became known in the wider Society, she was invited to consult with Sacred Heart educators in more than a dozen countries around the world. In 1985, she was named chair of the Society's International Education Commission, a group of seven RSCJ, who produced the working paper, *Education: a Commitment* and the video, *Seeking the Face of God*.

In 1984, Nance O'Neil, United States provincial, asked Kit to establish what became the Center for Educational Design and Communication (CEDC) in Washington, to provide educational and communications support to groups working for social justice. It was apparent that communications technology, necessary to get their message across, was beyond the resources of many such groups, both religious and secular, that worked for justice. The Center aimed at high quality, low cost productions of publications and other media; it provided meeting space for small groups. CEDC clients have included official church agencies, religious orders including the Society, human rights agencies, peace groups, over 150 over time. Kit built "an enthusiastic and talented team that yields non-stop, creative, challenging and transformative outcomes for so many outstanding organizations." This team is made up of people who, as she said, "by the vitality of their faith and their energy, plant hope."

Kit's commitment to the Society was as all-embracing as her educational work. She was a delegate to many provincial chapters and assemblies and an active member of provincial committees and task forces. She was an elected delegate to the General Chapter of 1976. In the 1980's and 90's superiors general invited her to consult with the general council on communications strategy. She also served on several boards of Sacred Heart schools.

Kit's health began to cause concern in recent years, but she was still in full activity. No one was prepared, therefore, for her sudden death, which occurred in her community house in Washington on the afternoon of March 14, 2010. Her sisters in the Washington area and her colleagues at the Center rallied to plan and carry out a "Celebration of the Life of Catherine (Kit) Collins, RSCJ" at the CEDC on March 23. So many gathered to mourn but also to rejoice in Kit's gifts, contributions and legacy. The striking inter-connections among the multi-community, multi-generational participants were a real tribute to Kit. An uplifting spirit of triumphant joy, mingled with tears, characterized the occasion. And fittingly, laughter rang out all through the sharing of memories, which followed the liturgy.

In her eulogy, Anne Dyer, a noviceship companion, remembered that Kit was the bell ringer: "None of us realized it at the time, but I think it was a metaphor of things to come. I think she was much more than a bell ringer. I think she was a bellwether, the sheep that wears a bell around its neck and goes before the flock announcing its whereabouts. Kit was always out in front. She was out there as a visionary, an educator and, above all, a story teller." Friends remember Kit as a woman of warmth and compassion for all humanity. She had vision, imagination and executive skills, which at times others experienced as control. Her impatience with poor process – or lack thereof – and poor communication sometimes blocked others' appreciation of her many, many gifts. Kit had great respect for those with small ideas, and she could help those ideas grow. She loved the Society and our vocation. She was a profoundly spiritual person in a non-traditional way. She had a theology for everything: for education, for community, for communication. That meant she could find God anywhere and everywhere. Above all, Kit was a story teller. Her stories were not about herself, but about the mundane events of life; she could see the ludicrous in the most prosaic of circumstances and could make people laugh until tears ran down their cheeks. She had a knack for mimicry and was a master of hyperbole. She never had fun at the expense of others, but her retelling of an event or humorous situation was much more amusing than the event itself. We mourn the loss of her contagious spirit of love, generosity and joy."