

## MARGARET MARY HOFFMAN, RSCJ

October 18, 1935 – May 14, 2016

Margaret Mary (known as “Mike”) was the second child and only girl born to Viola Lucy Bethny and Melchior Hoffman on October 18, 1935. Her father died suddenly about seven months prior to her birth. Her mother, left with very little, remarried the following year, on Mike’s first birthday, telling Mike much later, “I had to marry in order to survive.” Mike later realized that in the womb and at the beginning of her existence she was surrounded by struggle and suffering, and she reflected that this was “the basis of her seriousness and deep silent listening to people and happenings around her.” Soon three more boys were born into the family.

Mike reported that, at a very young age, because of having a different last name from her parents, she began to act out her feelings of being different. She said, “I would withdraw from the family and hide in the bushes outside, answer back, and often respond with general angry reactions.” She felt lonely, isolated, and estranged from the family. She described herself as rebellious and naughty. In First Grade she broke her collarbone and spent much time and agony healing. In her own words, “this episode of brokenness was the forerunner of several illnesses during which I lost my aggressive behavior and became very passive.”

During these early years, Mike, feeling lost and lonely, began talking to her deceased father, telling him all her troubles. Then, by Third Grade the conversations with her father changed to talking with God, the Father. Perhaps this was a gift her father gave her, she later mused. And here began her intimate prayer life. When she was eight years old, the family moved to a fruit farm in Utica, about thirty miles from Detroit—a tremendous gift in her life. It was a “new birth” experience for Mike. The open fields of the country and the simpler life style made her feel free and more at peace. In this atmosphere, she recalled that her conversations with God became more frequent. “Many times,” she said, “I would hear the words ‘Do what Jesus did in His lifetime on earth; do the loving thing.’” This, indeed, became the earmark of her life.

At age twelve, Mike met the Carmelite Sisters of the Divine Heart of Jesus, and she felt strongly drawn to be one of them. She commuted thirty miles to the Dominican High School in Detroit, but soon became determined to enter religious life after her sophomore year. Against the wishes of her mother and step- father, she finally prevailed upon them to let her enter, later in touch with the pain her behaviors must have caused all her family. So Mike left home, as planned, in 1951. After a few months as a candidate in Detroit, she was sent to the provincial house in a suburb of Milwaukee to become a postulant with the name Sister Mary Michael, where, she reported, “things began to crumble” within a few months. She asked to leave a number of times, but was always told that things would improve very soon.

Mike made her First Vows at age seventeen, and was soon assigned to a children’s home for boys in Hammond, Indiana. During this time she not only contracted hepatitis and almost died, but later a life-threatening face infection. Her family was never notified, to their dismay. At age twenty she was transferred to elderly care in West Allis, Wisconsin, where, without training and with little expertise, she became responsible for about thirty lifetime residents.

In 1958 she was sent to the provincial house to begin six months preparation for final vows, which took place on July 2 of that year. After this, while on assignment to a Home for the Aged in Detroit, she attended a Licensed Practical Nursing program, where she learned, as she said, “so many ways to help people feel productive and creative in stages of illness” and where she was put in charge of a floor. She recalled that her prayer life was a constant reflection and conversation with Jesus over what was the loving thing to do in a given situation.

After seven years in Detroit, where she was allowed a visit from her family once a year, she was transferred to another home for the aged in Superior, Wisconsin, where, in partnership with outside help, she worked to remove thirty violations against the institution in order to reach new Medicare standards. After completing this task, she was named superior and administrator in Kenosha, where a change of direction in her life was to take place. When she began

implementing the changes in religious life strongly recommended by Vatican II, she met with support from her community, but opposition from superiors, so she wrote to the superior general in Stittard, Holland, who, after a visit to the States, accused Mike of being the source of discontent among her Sisters.

At this point Mike was sent to St. Louis to work on her RN. She worked at St. Johns/Mercy Hospital and lived with the Religious of the Sacred Heart at Maryville College. She completed her nursing credential at the end of three years. Taking a few years to discern her next move, and struggling with the chaotic situation in the Carmelite community, she was advised to transfer her vows to another congregation, so, after much prayer and good spiritual direction, she was received into the Society of the Sacred Heart on the feast of St. Madeleine Sophie in 1972.

Mike's first assignment in the Society was to the retirement center in St. Charles, where she spent, in her own words, "three wonderful years." Before any Sister came to the center, Mike would go to visit them to hear their life stories—a gesture which proved to be helpful, not only to her, but to the Sisters as well. She was then asked to join a Probation group in England—an opportunity which gave her a broad exposure to many of the Society houses in Europe.

From here she completed her B.A. degree at Maryville College, after which she moved to Grand Coteau to work with the very poor. In order to become familiar with both African American and Cajun people, she began working in a hospital setting, from which she could follow patients into their homes and teach families how to care for them. But then, her own turn came! Back surgery kept her in bed for six months, and the local people began visiting Mike, and this, she recalled, sealed her relationship with her clientele. Over a number of years, she was responsible for creating a thrift store, a recreation center, and a library program. She engaged in local government programs, meals on wheels, a food bank, and the re-creation of the Thensted Center—a work for the poor which had fallen into neglect and which, in time, even provided emergency shelter for those in need.

After eleven years of fruitful ministry in the deep South, Mike spent four years in the Uganda-Kenya province of Africa, but, unlike her situation in Grand Coteau, she felt separated from the beautiful African people by a language barrier, even though she offered her nursing gifts to them. After this, she returned to her beloved Grand Coteau, until 1990, when she took a three-year sabbatical leave at the School of Applied Theology in Berkeley, California, and completed a Masters degree with a ministry emphasis on empowering the poor.

In the late 1990's, because of poor health, Mike focused training her successor at the Thensted Center, Julia Richard. Julia called Mike a "jewel for life"—her very best friend. Julia was going through a very difficult time in her life, and reported that Mike's guidance and friendship embraced her and enabled her to meet a stressful situation at home. She said, "Mike taught me to be still, to feel God's presence, to be attentive to myself and others, to do for others. She was always so peaceful, and never argumentative; I learned so much from her: to let go, to be a better daughter, a better leader..."

In 2003, Mike moved to Oakwood, where, as health permitted, she spent time working with Sisters suffering from dementia and volunteering with hospice. In 2007 when some of our sisters needing skilled care were moved to Our Lady of Fatima in Saratoga, Mike and Sr. Mary McMahan moved to an apartment nearby so that they could be attentive to them. Mike did not spare herself in caring for them and fortunately, in less than two years Fatima was no longer needed. In time, Mike herself began suffering the effects of dementia, and spent the rest of her life moving around Oakwood in her self-propelled wheel chair endearing herself to community and staff.

Quite unexpectedly, on May 14, 2016, the Vigil of Pentecost, early in the morning, when a nurse came to check on her, she discovered that God had come to take this devoted daughter to her heavenly home. Her life was an expression of the love and compassion she shared most especially with the poor of Grand Coteau and the elderly in the many places she served in the U.S. and Africa. May she rest in peace and be an intercessor for the many needs of our world.