Sister Ruth Anne Kelly, OP
1938 – 2016

I say, Slainte1 to one and all!

Sister Ruth Anne Kelly, known also as Sister Mary Ralph, was born June 6, 1938, in Lansing, Michigan. She was the third child and eldest daughter of the eight children born to Francis and Ruth (Burdick) Kelly. Her siblings were Howard, Francis, Jr, Robert, Mary Kathleen, Margaret Rose, Barbara and Patricia. Patricia, the youngest, was born after Sister Ruth Anne left home to attend the Prep School at St. Joseph Academy.

In her autobiography, Sister Ruth Anne wrote the following about her family:

My father was from Adrian and whenever my family visited my grandparents in Adrian, we “kids” always found ourselves hiking to the college campus and Motherhouse where the sisters lived. Grandma Kelly paid for my aunts’ education at the Academy and College by hand-sewing habits for the sisters. [My mother’s] father, James Burdick, was the lighthouse keeper at South Manitou Island, Michigan, from 1908 to 1928. He held the longest tenure of any lighthouse keeper. Grandmother [Burdick] was the postmistress.

[I was] always nourished by the unwavering respect that my parents held toward the priests and sisters. I knew how special these sisters were. Often my parents would drive the sisters to Adrian or back to Adrian from Chicago, Detroit or where the need called them. My childhood was spent in the shadow of the school and convent at Resurrection Parish in Lansing. I remember well Sister Marcus who was my kindergarten teacher. To her especially I attribute the seeds of my vocation.

Sister Ruth Anne entered the Prep School on June 29, 1952, at the age of fourteen, and began her high school education at St. Joseph Academy. On February 2, 1954, she entered the postulate and six months later began her novitiate year.

Following first profession she was assigned to teach in two elementary schools in Illinois for two years. The first year she taught at Queen of Angels in Chicago and the second year at St. Celestine in Elmwood Park. These would be Sister Ruth Anne’s only teaching assignments outside the state of Michigan.

From 1957 to 1965 she taught in elementary schools in Michigan: St. Brigid in Detroit for five years, St. Thomas Aquinas in East Lansing for one year and St. Bernard in

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1 Irish Gaelic for “Your Good Health”
Alpena for two years. Her summers during this period were spent finishing her undergraduate studies. She received her Bachelor of Philosophy Degree with a major in Spanish from Siena Heights College in 1965.

She began her high school ministry in Saginaw, Michigan, where she taught Spanish at St. Stephen High School for three years. Her next assignment took her to St. Joseph, Michigan. There, Sister Ruth Anne taught at St. Joseph High School for only one year because the school was scheduled to close in June 1969. Both St. Joseph High School and its neighbor, St. John High School, were being replaced by a new central diocesan high school named Lake Michigan Catholic High School that was scheduled to open in August 1969. Sister Ruth Anne taught at Lake Michigan Catholic High School until June 1972.

In 1972, Sister Ruth Anne decided it was time for a new location and for the next eight years she taught religion courses at Gabriel Richard High School in Riverview, Michigan. In her autobiography, she wrote, “My life unfolded in the love of the Downriver Community of [Riverview] in Southeastern Michigan.” This relatively new co-ed high school had its first graduating class just three years before Sister Ruth Anne arrived in 1972.

In her July 1980 letter to Sister Helen Morrison, her Catherine of Siena Correspondent, Sister Ruth Anne wrote about her mother’s illness and death during her years at Gabriel Richard.

My mom died this past December 23 [1979]. She was an invalid from a stroke she had April 18, 1974. All of my free time, weekends and vacations, were spent taking care of her so my dad could be relieved for a while. Needless to say it was totally a burden of love and I miss her.

Since early June [1980] I have been in Lansing with my dad, spent six days in Ireland, moved all my belongings to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where I’ll be teaching [at St. Thomas Aquinas High School] come August.

Sister Ruth Anne resigned her teaching position at St. Thomas Aquinas at the end of that semester and returned to Michigan. She served as a driver for Transportation Services at the Motherhouse until June 1983. This transition period gave her time to find a teaching position at Regina High School in Harper Woods.

During her twelve years at Regina High School her father died. In her annals, Sister Ruth Anne provided some descriptions of her ministry and of other events that were personally significant for her. She wrote:

I taught four religion classes at Regina H.S. and shared my classroom with Sr. Connie Studer. I served on several committees for the new system of outcome based achievements. I ministered to my sister Mary Kathleen on my weekends.

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2 1979-1980 program, St Catherine of Siena Letters, on the 600 Anniversary of St. Catherine’s death in 1380.
especially while she was in the hospital in 1994. She died in August 1998 of diabetic complications. I miss her greatly.

February 13, 1995, I had a complete hysterectomy due to cancer. This was a most difficult year: healing and getting my strength back. I was totally challenged as never before in my life.

In August 1995, Sister Ruth Anne began teaching at Cardinal Mooney Catholic High School in Marine City, Michigan. She wrote, “New school, classes and [theology] courses. Everything is a special challenge and I need total reliance on God to help me make it through the year.” During her five years at Cardinal Mooney, her good friend, Sister Connie Studer, with whom she had been living, had several major surgeries, was eventually diagnosed with a malignant tumor and returned to Adrian in 1999. Sister Connie died on June 3, 2000.

Sister Ruth Anne left Cardinal Mooney High School in the fall of 2000 and returned to Gabriel Richard High School, where she taught for the last two years of her teaching ministry.

Sister Ruth Anne Kelly died on January 10, 2016, at the age of seventy-seven and in the sixty-first year of her religious profession.

During the prayer and remembrance service, Sister Helen Sohn, Vicaress of Holy Rosary Mission Chapter, said,

Ruth Anne spoke mainly to the facts of her life, but her Irish wit came through in the closing lines of her autobiography. “Lots of stories and tales could be told of the many adventures affecting my life and environs, but I have been paid to not publish them!” And to you, Ruth Anne Kelly, we say thanks you for sharing your life and your beautiful family with us. We will miss your hearty laugh, your fun spirit and down-to-earth and practical wisdom.

During the wake service, her sister Margaret read a letter she had written to Ruth Anne on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee in 2004. Here is an excerpt.

You were my “champion.” Throughout my entire life, you have been a constant, loving presence. The angst of teenage years fits of giggles which could not be stifled, boyfriends, colleges, marriages, children, jobs, and joys, were all shared with you. By doing so you made them memorable. The occasional, gut-wrenching sorrow and the ensuing anguish were absorbed by you. By doing so, you made them tolerable.

Questions of faith and of church decisions were subjects of many conversations between us. Those which involved, “No one died from eating humble pie,” and “Welcome to my world” allowed me to question anything and everything without danger of being judged. You were my champion. And I am grateful.
Her sister Patricia (Patti) read an Irish blessing that opened with:

*I pray that you will have the blessing of being consoled.*
*May you know in your soul that there is no need to be afraid.*
*When your time comes, may you have every blessing and shelter you need.*
*May you have a wonderful urgency to live your life to the full.*
*May you live compassionately and creatively and transfigure everything that is negative within you and about you.*

Sister Mary Anne Ennis delivered the homily, a reflection on the readings Sister Ruth Anne had selected for her funeral liturgy. Her focus was on the Gospel passage about the journey of the two disciples to Emmaus that offers a motif of each person’s life journey with its challenges and “aha” moments when we recognize Jesus’ presence in our lives.

This theme was also reflected in Father Jim Hug’s opening prayer:

*As we listen to the words of the Gospel describing how Jesus opened the eyes of the disciples to so much that they had not understood,*
*Open our eyes now to the ways you were present in Ruth Anne, teaching us, encouraging us, revealing God’s smile to us, and sharing God’s life with us through the breaking of the bread.*

*We make our prayer in the name of Jesus and the communion of your Spirit where we all are one with You and with Ruth Anne, now and forever. Amen.*

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Left: In kindergarten, 1943
Right: October 1972

Left: Celebrating Sister Ruth Anne’s 40th birthday on June 2, 1978, are, from left: Sister Mary Joel Robin, SSND; Sister Berchan Murray, IHM; Sister Cecile Thibadeau, CSJ; and Sister Ruth Anne. Right: With her uncle, Father Ralph
Left: With her parents, Ruth and Francis Kelly, on Sister Ruth Anne’s entrance day, February 2, 1954

Left: Senator Phil Hart stands on the Capitol steps in Lansing, Michigan, with, from left, Sisters Noreen Sullivan, OP; Sister Mary Matthew, SSF; Sister Edward Vincent, SSF; and Sister Ruth Anne, during Sister Ruth Anne’s first home visit, August 1956.

Right: Members of the August Crowd celebrating their Diamond Jubilee in 2014 are: back row, from left: Sisters Ana Feliz, Clarice Moyle, Joyce Hibbert, and Patricia McCarty; middle row, from left: Sisters Diane Weifenbach, Barbara Gentry, Dorita Wotiska, Teresita Ruiz, Dorothy Dempsey, Beth Ellen Butler, and Phyllis Kreiner; and front row, from left, Sisters Jeanine Boivin, Anele Heiges, Yolanda Pomante, and Ruth Anne Kelly.