Sister Irene Marie Kerich, OP
1924-2019

For two people who meet in the “big city” and fall in love to have both come from the same small town rather defies the odds. But that’s exactly what happened for Henry Kerich and Irene Dugas.

Henry and Irene were both born in Little Falls, Minnesota, population 5,774 at the time of the 1900 Census, when each would have been four years old. As adults, they met in Minneapolis, some one hundred miles to the southeast. Henry was a laundry worker at the Nicolett Hotel and Irene worked as a secretary.

Henry was the third oldest of twelve children born into a German immigrant family, and had to leave school after the fourth grade to help with family finances. Irene came from a French immigrant family that came first to Winnipeg, Canada, and then to Minnesota to work in the lumber camps. “This was Paul Bunyan country, and how I loved the stories my mother used to tell,” their youngest child and only daughter, the future Sister Irene Marie, wrote in her first St. Catherine letter.¹

The couple had been married for three years when Mary Louise was born on September 30, 1924. Two brothers followed over time: Douglas and then William. Bill was born when Mary Louise was ten, “old enough to help with the preparations,” she wrote, “and once I recovered from my major disappointment that he was not the sister I wanted so badly, I thoroughly enjoyed being his one and only baby-sitter. I am ashamed to admit all the fights I had with Doug as we were growing up, but never was there such a problem with Bill.”

When Mary Louise was a year old, the family moved to Lansing, Michigan, after Henry was offered the laundry manager’s job at a new hotel there. It was a difficult and lonely time for Henry and Irene, being so far away from family and friends, in a job Henry found disappointing, in a city they did not like. A year later, Henry got a job in Detroit, and they moved there and made a much easier adjustment.

Mary Louise attended kindergarten at Columbus Elementary School and then went to Guardian Angels School, where she was taught by the Sisters of Charity. The Great Depression took its toll when she was in second grade; Henry lost his job and “that was a big worry for this eight-year-old,” she wrote. But she told God that her daddy needed work and that she would really appreciate a two-wheeled bike, and was not a bit surprised when her father got a job managing the laundry at the prestigious Book-Cadillac Hotel and she received a second-hand bike.

Her call to religious life first flickered into existence when she was in eighth grade, in a most unexpected way: a visitor asked Irene if their daughter had ever considered becoming a nun, and Irene’s answer was, “Heavens no, she’s never given that a thought.” Mary Louise may never have given it a thought up to that point, but the question itself lit a small spark in her.

After elementary school, she made the choice to go to Nativity High School, staffed by Racine Dominicans, because it offered a three-year business course; she wanted advanced piano lessons

¹ St. Catherine letters were begun in 1980 to mark the 600th anniversary of the death of St. Catherine of Siena. Sisters were invited to pair up to write a series of letters to each other, telling about their lives.
and because the cost was more than her family could afford, her idea was to complete high school in
three years, get a job, and be able to pay for the lessons herself.

Her first year of high school was a difficult experience and almost led her to give up any thought of
religious life. But once that year was done things improved, and she began exploring which
community to enter. Over time, that choice became Adrian.

She arrived on September 3, 1940, driven there along with her father by Nativity’s assistant priest
because the family car had been stolen. They ran out of gas along the way and had to get tractor gas
from the nearest farmhouse, but they made it to Madden Hall late in the morning and, not knowing
what to do, sat down in the lobby waiting for someone to notice them. After some time, the wheels
were put in motion and she received her postulant’s veil from Mother Gerald.

Just fifteen years of age at the time she entered, she completed her high school education at St.
Joseph Academy before being received as a novice and being given her religious name on August
12, 1941.

Her first teaching assignment, after her canonical novitiate year, was to St. Mary’s in Chelsea,
Michigan, where she taught music. The experience included teaching instruments with which she was
completely unfamiliar and directing the school band and the church’s choir with no expertise at either
task.

But she survived the year, learned how to play as many instruments as she could over the summer,
and was promptly changed to St. Kevin’s in Chicago for the next school year. It was “a little bit of
heaven,” she wrote, but that assignment too lasted for just one year; in 1944, she was sent to Sacred
Heart School in Bad Axe, Michigan for two years.

Her next assignment, in 1946, was to St. Clare of Montefalco, Chicago, where she developed arthritis
that was so severe she was told she would be in a wheelchair within two years if she did not go to a
dry climate. And so she was sent to Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1947 to teach and give private
piano lessons at Sacred Heart School. She remained there for twelve years and greatly enjoyed her
varied experiences.

At some point after completing her bachelor’s degree in English from Siena Heights College
(University) in 1951, she began her master’s work at the University of New Mexico, earning her
degree in 1957. “Going to a secular university was overwhelming in those days,” she wrote. “My
partner, Sister Josine (Skelly), and I felt that not only did we represent Sisters, but the entire Catholic
Church as well.”

Although her master’s degree was in English, she was moved to the junior high grades and taught all
the history courses. “Perhaps because I was only a page ahead of my students, I tackled that
teaching with a fervent joy,” she wrote. “After four years, I was not only a history teacher, but a lover
of it as well.” She also continued to teach music.

She left New Mexico in 1959, with a great love for the cultures to which she had been exposed there,
for Conneaut, Ohio, to teach second grade and music – including teaching Gregorian chant to first,
second, and third graders. After two years, she was sent to Dominican High School in Detroit, where
she spent five “delightful and enriching” years teaching English and history and serving as debate
coach.

In 1966, Sister Irene Marie was appointed Vicaress of the St. Catherine of Siena Province, and
carried out those duties while teaching part-time at Dominican High School. Her four years in office
overlapped with the Chapter of Renewal, and as part of a provincial team she was a delegate to the Chapter. When the Chapter delegates reorganized the provincial structure her team’s term in office was shortened, and she looked forward to returning to full-time teaching at Dominican. That only lasted another year, however; in 1971, she was asked to become the administrator of the convent there. In 1972, she was elected co-provincial and was re-elected to another two-year term in 1974.

Sister Irene Marie earned her certification in Pastoral Ministry from Sts. Cyril and Methodius Seminary in Orchard Lake, Michigan, in 1981, leading to Sister Helen Edward Duncan, the pastoral minister at St. Ambrose Parish in Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan, asking her repeatedly during her last year in office to join her at the parish when her term was up. After some deliberation on whether or not to return to teaching, she interviewed for the position and was hired. “I have never regretted my decision for one moment,” she wrote.

Clearly, the parishioners and people in the neighborhoods the church served loved her as much as she loved her ministry. Among the many ways in which Irene Marie was honored for her work was that a women’s co-op in the area named itself “Irene’s Place” after her. And, for her golden jubilee as an Adrian Dominican Sister, the parish’s gift to her was a spot in its parish tour to Italy.

In 1999, after twenty-three years at St. Ambrose, Sister Irene Marie retired, continuing to live in the area until 2003 when she returned to Adrian. She died at the Dominican Life Center on May 27, 2019, aged ninety-four and in the seventy-seventh year of her religious profession. The pastor of St. Ambrose, Father Timothy Pelc, presided at her funeral Mass.

“Irene for us represented a beginning and an ending for the Adrians, at least in our parish,” Father Pelc said, recalling the Congregation’s long history at St. Ambrose, which began one hundred years previously when the grade school was built. “That led to an incredibly long and happy and productive educational and spiritual adventure, both I think for the Adrians and for the people of St. Ambrose,” he said.

“Irene was the last Adrian Dominican to leave St. Ambrose, and so I needed to be here to close that chapter … and to say a certain depth of gratitude that is owed to this community for being adventurous a hundred years ago.”

Father Pelc went on to honor both Sister Irene Marie and Sister Helen Edward for the gifts they brought to their ministry, relating some stories about their work at St. Ambrose, and then said of Sister Irene Marie: “Well done, Irene, well done. It'll be a long time before we see that kind of model made again.”
From left: Sister Irene Marie before entrance, 1940; Profession Day, August 19, 1942; Sister Irene Marie Kerich, OP, taken in Albuquerque, New Mexico, May 1950

From left: With her father and brother Douglas, 1932; Sisters Helen Duncan, left, and Irene Marie Kerich working for homebound seniors, Christmas 1977
Gathered outside the monastery in Prouille, France, 1994, are: standing, from left, Sisters Patricia Consier, Theresa Mayrand, Barbara Hengesbach, Romona Nowak, Irene Marie Kerich, and Clare O’Connor, and seated, from left, Sisters Marilyn Winter, Patricia Dolan, Marianne O’Neill, Lois Spear, Dorothy Dempsey, Marion Coppe, and Patricia Stellmah.

Left: Enjoying their Mission Group Christmas party are, from left, Sisters Marion Coppe, Irene Marie Kerich, and Therese Craig.
Members of the 2001 Diamond Jubilee Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Thomas Josephine Lawler, Celeste Beauregard, Gertrude Sitzmann, Theresa Martin Pigott, and Mary Jane Schallert; middle row, from left, Sisters Agnes Edward McGill, Irene Marie Kerich, Marie Therese Creighton, Kathleen Scanlon, and Lucian Marie Dusseau; and front row, from left, Coletta Slatter and Marie Urban Schwartz.