Sister Margaret Ann Roggenbuck, OP 1935-2019

A 485-acre farm near Harbor Beach, in Huron County, Michigan (the county at the very tip of Michigan’s “Thumb”), was home for the Roggenbuck family: Henry and Magdalene (Holdwick) and their large family, of whom Margaret Ann was the sixth child and the second daughter.

The Roggenbuck family had deep roots in Huron County; Henry’s parents arrived there from Germany in the 1800s and settled on a farm, while Magdalene’s parents were also area farmers. The two met as children in catechism class at Harbor Beach’s St. Anthony Church, the same church where they were married in 1927.

Both Henry and Magdalene left the area as young adults, Henry to attend Detroit Business University and Magdalene to study education at what was then known as Ferris Institute in Big Rapids, Michigan. But Henry loved the land too much to stay away and returned to Harbor Beach to work the family farm, and Magdalene came back to the area to spend six years as a country-school teacher before the two married.

In one of her St. Catherine letters, Sister Margaret Ann remembered her father as a man with a gentle spirit and a love for life, someone who saw goodness in everyone. “He perceived and experienced life as gift and he especially cherished each of his children as a special gift,” she wrote.

As for her mother, she had “an uncanny ability to stretch one’s potential and to challenge one to greater self-discipline. Truly she enabled me to be single-minded in responding to the challenges of life.”

The couple’s oldest child, William James, was born in 1928. Next came Barthol (known as “Bud”) in 1929, and then John Henry in 1930. Sadly, however, John died shortly after birth.

Mary June came into the family next, followed by Robert Jerome and then Margaret Ann, who was born at 12:15 a.m. on January 1, 1935. After that came Gerald Edward, Ronald Joseph, Evelyn Marie, Michael George, John Raymond, Joseph William, and finally Jean Marie.

All the boys except Joseph followed their dad into the “family business,” becoming either crop or dairy farmers in Huron County. Joseph, for his part, lived out his love of the land in a different way, earning a Ph.D. in ecology and becoming a university professor.

It was a close-knit family, Sister Margaret Ann wrote, with parents who had deep faith and siblings who loved and looked out for each other. “I do believe the love of my parents, [and] my brothers and sisters nurtured me as a person with positive self-esteem and thus enabled me to love myself, my God and others.”

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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.
Margaret Ann spent her elementary-school years at Ashmore School, a one-room country schoolhouse at which the same teacher taught for twenty-two years. For high school, she attended Our Lady of Lake Huron, which was staffed by the IHM Sisters.

It was during a high school retreat in 1949, her sophomore year, that she experienced “an overwhelming call” to enter religious life. The experience “did not delight me,” she wrote, “as my dream and desire was to marry a man like my father.” Besides that, she added, she was not drawn to the IHMs at her school at all, finding them remote and detached from the world.

She kept the resulting inner turmoil – which she described as “the hound of heaven” pursuing her – to herself until late in her senior year. When her mother asked her if she would be joining her older sister at St. Mary of the Woods College in Indiana, she replied that she was going to become a Mission Helper of the Sacred Heart sister. She had decided, she wrote, that if she was going to be a nun she would join an order that helped the rural poor.

Her mother informed her that she was too young to make a decision like that, and so, because she did not wish to go to St. Mary of the Woods College, she explored the alternatives and found herself attracted to Siena Heights College (University).

She arrived at the college in September 1952 and found herself immediately attracted to the Adrian Dominican Sisters’ joyfulness and concern for the students they taught.

> I was desperately homesick during those first weeks and I shall never forget the comfort and concern Sr. Ellen Vincent [McClain] gave to me during those painful days and nights when I so much wanted to return to the Roggenbuck family. The realness of the Adrians after my experience with the IHMs ever impressed and touched me significantly.

And so, in May of her freshman year, she told her family that she was going to enter the Adrian Dominican Sisters the following month. She did, and in August found herself at Holy Name School in Detroit, teaching fourth grade, until that December when she was received as a novice and given the religious name Sister Robert Jean.

When her canonical novitiate year was complete in December 1954, she was sent to Santa Maria del Popolo School in Mundelein, Illinois. Her three and a half years there were followed by assignments to Our Lady of Knock School, Calumet City, Illinois (August 1958-February 1962); St. Kilian School in Chicago (February 1962-June 1966); and St. Philip Neri School, also in Chicago (1966-1969).

She earned her bachelor’s degree in history in 1959 from Siena Heights and her master’s in education administration, also from Siena Heights, in 1965. With the latter degree in hand, her next stop after St. Philip Neri was St. Edmund School, Oak Park, Illinois, where she was principal from 1969 to 1972, followed by two years (1972-1974) as principal at St. Joseph School, Belding, Michigan.

Even with her firmly rural roots, she found returning to the country life in Belding a culture shock after being in and near Chicago for so many years. As she wrote in her St. Catherine letter, “I remember the moment when I asked a Belding youth, ‘What do Belding folks do for recreation?’ ‘We watch the blinker blink,’ came the apt response. And so, she was actually grateful for the opportunity to return to Chicago to work toward another master’s degree, this one in religious studies from Mundelein College, which she received in 1978.
In Belding, she was responsible not only for the principalship of the school but also for serving as director of religious education, and found herself “bursting with enthusiasm in rural ministry.”

After two years at St. Joseph School, she left there first to spend several months in the Diocese of Lansing as a religious education consultant and then followed her calling to rural ministry, spending the rest of her life in active ministry as a religious education director in numerous parishes in her beloved Huron County and elsewhere in the Diocese of Saginaw – where she also served as a Call to Action delegate. She worked with multiple parishes simultaneously while living in Kinde and Caseville, both in Huron County, from 1975 to 1980, followed by four years (1980-84) at St. Patrick and St. John parishes in, respectively, Croswell and Peck, Michigan; at Resurrection Parish in Standish, Michigan (1984-87); and at St. Philip Neri Parish, Edenville, Michigan/St. Anne Parish, Coleman, Michigan (1987-89), where she was a pastoral associate.

At that point, she returned to Lenawee County, this time to be director of religious education for St. Peter the Apostle Parish in Blissfield and St. Alphonsus Parish in Deerfield. She served those parishes until 1995, when she became a pastoral associate at St. Therese Parish in Lansing, Michigan. Then, in 2003, she returned to Huron County one final time, to serve as pastoral associate at St. Michael’s in Port Austin.

She returned to Lansing to live in 2005 and was there until 2012, except for a year and a half (January 2008-June 2009) spent teaching in Siena Heights’ Theological Studies program. One of her volunteer ministries during this time was at Jackson State Prison.

She became a resident of the Dominican Life Center in 2012 and died there on November 7, 2019, aged eighty-four and in her sixty-fifth year as an Adrian Dominican Sister.

Sister Margaret Ann was remembered at her wake service by Sister Joanne Peters, Co-Chapter Priorress of the Holy Rosary Mission Chapter, as a woman who was supportive, caring, sensitive, non-judgmental, and light-hearted, with a good sense of humor and who loved to sing. Father Brendan Walsh, pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Dexter, Michigan, and the former pastor of St. Peter the Apostle in Blissfield, spoke at the wake and celebrated the funeral Mass the next morning, with another former colleague of Sister Margaret Ann’s at St. Peter’s and later at St. Theresa’s, Father Michael Kuchar, as the homilist.

Father Brendan remembered Sister Margaret Ann as a woman of “great knowledge, wisdom and insight. ... a teacher who became a spiritual guide,” as someone who cared about the Earth and was passionate about peace, seeing to it that peace poles were installed at St. Peter and St. Alphonsus.

*Her energy, her spirit, her faith, her love, her passion to spread the Good News of the Gospel touched and changed many lives, in Chicago and here in Michigan in the Thumb and in the Diocese of Lansing. ... She inspired those around her to do and to be their best, to live the Gospel. ... She modeled for us how to be people of faith and prayer, of compassion and kindness, of love and goodness. ... to remember, and she said this to me, we are all lovable and capable of doing great things in the spirit of Jesus Christ.*
Left: The future Sister Margaret Ann Roggenbuck, back, right, with her sisters Mary June and Evelyn. Center: The future Sister Margaret Ann, left, and her sister Mary June with some 1,000 cans of food that they helped to can as part of their 4H program.

Left: The Roggenbuck family gathered on April 2, 2002 to celebrate Magdalene Roggenbuck’s 100th birthday. Shown are: back row, from left, William, Barthol, Robert, Gerald, Ronald, Michael, Joseph, and John, and front row, from left, Mary June, Jean, Magdalene, Evelyn, and Sister Margaret Ann.

Left: Crowd members, from left, Sisters Janet Wright, Margaret Ann Roggenbuck, and Pauline Richter. Right: Sister Margaret Ann out west.
Members of the 2013 Diamond Jubilee Crowd B, December 1953 reception, are: back row from left, Sisters Joan Schroeder, Margaret Ann Roggenbuck, Marie Rose Bauer, Attracta Kelly (Priorress), Dorothy Guettler, Janet Wright, and Carol Fleming; middle row, from left, Sisters Margaret Marie Ringel, Frances Wetzel, Janice Scholl, Patricia Ann McKee, Patricia Sporer, Pauline Richter, and Barbara Chenicek; and front row, from left, Sisters Joan Mary Dwyer, Josephine Gaugier, Margarita Ruiz, Mary Vianne Bayus, Lorraine Brennan, Mary E. Waldron, and Mary Cullen.