Sister Imelda Marie Eckhoff, OP
1931-2020

Vero Beach, Florida, was the birthplace – and the site of a very happy childhood – for Viola Mary Eckhoff, who would go on to become Sister Imelda Marie.

Viola Mary was the fourth child, and the third girl, born to Joseph and Viola (Dothage) Eckhoff on October 24, 1931. Her older siblings were Marilyn, Evelyn, and Joe, with Carole the youngest in the family.

Sister Imelda recalled in her 2019 “A Sister’s Story” video that Vero Beach had much open land in those days, and she and the other children spent much of their time hiking as well as fishing and swimming. They were good times, she recalled, even if her childhood did come during the Great Depression and the family did not have much.

At Christmas, she wrote in her autobiography, each child would get one present, and for the Christmas when she was perhaps three years old, all the girls got dolls and Joe got a ball. As the family would later tell the story, “I cried and said I didn’t want a dolly, I wanted a ball. Daddy went out on Christmas Day to find me a ball.”

And so began her childhood as a tomboy, generally spent doing things with Joe, with whom she became inseparable.

Her early schooling came in public school, until in 1940 when the Adrian Dominican Sisters came to Vero Beach to open St. Helen School. All eight of the grades were in just two classrooms; when the children changed grades, they simply moved over a row.

Never in those days did she consider herself to have a religious vocation. As she said in her autobiography, the Sisters would tell the children that after they said their night prayers they were to say three Hail Marys for a religious vocation. “I always said them, but I added at the end, ‘I don’t really mean it, Lord.’”

In fact, by eighth grade, she intended to become either a professional ballplayer, a doctor, or a pilot. But the sisters had other ideas; they encouraged her toward a vocation, telling her she was a good student, came from a good family, was kind and considerate, and liked to help others. Her family was very surprised when she relayed that to them, but then, after completing eighth grade in 1945, Viola decided to check out the idea by entering the Congregation’s “prep” program to see if she had a vocation.

She had never been away from home before and had no idea where Adrian really even was, and she told her parents she would be back in two weeks. But when she arrived, she and the other preps were taken to Innisfail, where the sisters vacationed and where the preps spent summers while the Sisters were on campus taking their summer college classes. She said in her “Sister’s Story” that because the preps studied in the morning, swam in the afternoons, and played softball in the evenings – all things she enjoyed doing – “I never was homesick. I enjoyed everything. So I stayed. For seventy-three years.”

She graduated from the prep school, with its accelerated two-year high school program, in 1947, and in February of her senior year entered the Congregation. When she became a novice that August,
she received the religious name Sister Imelda Marie, one of the names she had listed as a choice because, like Blessed Imelda, she was very young.

She said in her “Sister’s Story” video that when her oldest sister, Marilyn, graduated from high school, their father wanted her to enroll at Siena Heights College (now University) so as to keep an eye on Viola. But, of course, the worlds of the postulants and novices, and the world of the girls at the College, intersected rarely if ever, and while the two girls were able to steal some moments together it was a risky endeavor.

Incidentally, Evelyn decided to come to Siena Heights as well, to study art with Sister Helene O’Connor. But while she enjoyed the art classes, she did not enjoy the rest of the academic work required to earn a degree, and she only stayed at the college for one year.

After making first profession in August 1948, Sister Imelda was sent to teach at St. Edward School in Detroit, and started the art program there – the first of several times in her ministry that she did that. But being a Sister didn’t mean leaving her love of playing sports behind; in her “Sister’s Story,” she said that while she was at St. Edward, her father enrolled at the University of Detroit, and he would come visit her every Sunday with two baseball mitts so they could play catch.

She was at St. Edward until 1952, and then was sent to St. Patrick School in Miami Beach, Florida. The rest of her sixty-four years in active ministry, in fact, were spent in either Florida or the Caribbean.

After three years at St. Patrick (1952-1955), she was missioned to Assumption School, Jacksonville, Florida (1955-1958); St. Rose of Lima School, Miami Shores, Florida (1958-1960); and St. Thomas Aquinas High School, Fort Lauderdale, Florida (1960-1964). She earned her bachelor’s degree in chemistry from Barry College (University) in 1960, followed in 1969 by a master’s degree in mixed science from Siena Heights.

For the 1964-1965 school year, she was sent to teach high school at the Colegio Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. Her time there coincided with a time of tremendous upheaval in that country. When the democratically elected president, Juan Bosch, was overthrown and civil war broke out, the United States began a military intervention, sending U.S. Marines into the country and evacuating American citizens onto Navy ships stationed offshore.

The Adrian Dominican Sisters and other Americans in the capital city were told to assemble at the Hotel Embajador, where they spent a harrowing day until the Marines took them to the port to be transported to the ships. Other Sisters serving elsewhere in the country were similarly evacuated. They spent several days on one Navy ship or the other until they finally arrived in Puerto Rico, where they were met by the Adrian Dominican Sisters serving in Santurce and taken to the convent there before eventually boarding a plane for Miami.

Sister Imelda spent the 1965-1966 school year teaching high school at Rosarian Academy in West Palm Beach, Florida, and then returned to St. Patrick School in Miami Beach, this time to teach on the high school level, from 1966 to 1968. She then went to Santurce, Puerto Rico, to teach at Sacred Heart High School until 1971. At that point, her father was diagnosed with acute leukemia and she asked to be missioned to a school near the family home in Vero Beach. She was sent to John Carroll High School in Fort Pierce, and her father died that same year.

Her time at John Carroll spanned the next thirty years, until 2001, followed by ten years teaching art and math at Rosarian Academy. In 2011, she left formal teaching but continued to teach as a volunteer tutor in Rosarian’s math department for another year. That was followed by two years
(2012-2014) working on her art, and four years (2014-2018) tutoring at the Congregation-sponsored DePorres P.L.A.C.E. Literacy Center in West Palm Beach.

Having to undergo several surgeries brought Sister Imelda to the Dominican Life Center in 2018 to recuperate. Originally, she intended to return to her Florida home, but when Sister Jean Crane, her longtime housemate, decided it was time for her to move to Adrian, she came to realize that Adrian was the best place for her to be as well.

Sister Imelda died at the Dominican Life Center on March 31, 2020. She was eighty-eight years old and in her seventy-second year of religious profession.

She was remembered at her wake service by Sister Pat Dulka, Holy Rosary Chapter Prioress, as “a friendly, sensitive, peaceful, fun-loving woman who always reached out to others.” Many remembrances poured in to be read at the wake, including several from her brother, Joe, and from nieces and nephews with fond memories of their “Aunt Vi” — memories often involving card games, playing softball or touch football with them, or making art projects together.

In her homily at Sister Imelda’s funeral the next day, Sister Fran Madigan remembered her as:

… the one who understood well the message of Jesus in today’s Gospel.\(^1\) Imelda was Imelda, the one who God wanted her to be: giving, caring, and concerned for others. She didn’t mind if others did not understand her, as she was sure that God did and that was enough for her.

... She was a faith-filled follower of the God who guided her steps to our Adrian Dominican Congregation. Here is where she lived the childlike traits of which today’s Gospel calls us.

… Imelda was Imelda. She did not put on airs. At times she may have been humble to a fault. She was always encouraging and affirming others to consider ministry on campus.

In her life choices she truly earned the Kingdom of Heaven. She understood her responsibility to be a follower of Jesus.

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\(^1\) Matthew 18:1-4.