

## IN MEMORIAM



# Sr. Madonna Winkeljohn

(Sister M. Irenaea)

BORN: March 1916

ENTERED CONGREGATION: September 6, 1934

DIED: May 28, 2011

**I**N March 1916, in Celina, Ohio, the eighth of nine children of August and Philomena Winkeljohn was born and given the name, Madonna.

August Winkeljohn emigrated to America with his parents when he was 14 years old. Madonna's mother, Philomena Tiettmeyer, was born in Cincinnati, where she and her husband, in the early years of marriage, lived in the Over-the-Rhine district of Cincinnati. For health reasons Mr. Winkeljohn moved his family to Celina in 1910.

In her short autobiography written in 2003, Madonna tells how she struggled with learning to read and was eventually successful thanks to the special after school tutoring of Sister Kostka Noel, a Sister of the Precious Blood. While she doesn't remember what Sister Kostka exactly did, Madonna hadn't stopped reading since.

During the Great Depression everyone was poor, and her mom worked hard to stretch dad's weekly pay. "We didn't feel poor, though," said Madonna, and "I remember Mom always fed the hoboes." To help with the family income Madonna had part-time jobs in an ice-cream parlor and in Penney's department store.

What a privilege it was for Madonna to enter high school in 1930, as her father, believing women did not need an education, did not permit his two oldest daughters to attend Immaculate Conception High School, staffed by the Sisters of the Precious Blood. At Immaculate Conception High School (ICHS), Madonna was a cheerleader for four years and was head cheerleader as a senior. In her junior year she was a drum major for the band, swinging a baton while wearing a high "major domo" hat. "I believed," wrote Madonna, "I was asked to do this because I was tall." She graduated from ICHS as valedictorian of the 1934 class.

On September 6, 1934, after work, Mr. Winkeljohn drove his daughter to the

motherhouse of the Sisters of the Precious Blood in Dayton, Ohio. When they arrived at 8:00 p.m. all the sisters were filing out of chapel from night prayer and the Grand Silence had begun. No one said a word! After saying goodbye to her father and sister, Madonna was immediately taken upstairs to the dormitory and fitted for bed and the beginning adventure of religious life — which began at 5:20 a.m. the next morning and lasted for 76 years!

In August 1935, Madonna was invested with the habit as a novice and given the religious name of Sister Mary Irenaea. After completing the novitiate in 1937 and pronouncing vows for three years, Madonna attended the University of Dayton where she majored in chemistry—one of a very few women in the chemistry lab at the time at U.D. She and Sisters Barbara Webken and Palmarita Gurren were among the first women to graduate from U.D. In 1940 she professed final vows.

Later on, Madonna received a master's degree in chemistry and biology from The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. and did post-graduate studies at four different universities. A stellar student, Madonna developed into a notable science teacher, receiving many awards and recognition in the local and national scene. She loved teaching her students at Regina High School in Cincinnati and St. Joseph School in Wapakoneta, Ohio, where at both places she served as an innovative teacher and principal.

In 1966 her Precious Blood sisters also recognized her leadership skills, electing her to the position of vice-president of the congregation. In that capacity she also served as director of the Central Service Complex, formerly the motherhouse.

In June 1974 Madonna accepted the position of administrative assistant in the newly formed Office of Clergy Personnel of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. She was well loved and respected by the diocesan

priests, whom she "learned to respect and appreciate the difficulties of their work." Fifteen years later, because of increasing vision problems, Sister Madonna retired and took up residence at our motherhouse. As is usual for our "retirees," retirement did not mean cessation of activity but rather non-paid volunteer involvement. Madonna served as secretary to the Salem Heights administrators and assumed other duties as a member of the Salem Heights community.

Madonna enjoyed many friendships in her 95 years of life. In her retirement, she enjoyed greatly her friendship with Sister Dorothy Kammerer, with whom she taught at Regina High School and also collaborated within the team-leadership of the congregation's general council. Their friendship strengthened both of them and the community. Her later years spent in Emma Hall were enriched by Dorothy's presence.

I, too, was honored to call Sister Madonna Winkeljohn my friend. She joined me in 1990 as a part-time secretary in the national office of UNDA-USA, the Catholic communicators association then located in Dayton. I was inspired by Madonna's love for learning, especially computers! She was a team player, supportive, professional, and personal. I found Madonna to be a compassionate listener who offered wisdom and encouragement. I have been blessed, enriched and loved in our 20 years of friendship. And the many others who have been recipients of Madonna's ministries as educator, leader, and administrator experienced a wonderful religious woman who touched their lives.

Sister Madonna wrote in her autobiography: "I have placed myself in the hands of a loving God and I know that whatever happens I will be all right." And because of your life, Madonna, many of us are also "all right."

—Sister Nancy Kinross