

Sister Mary Irene Pacekonis, OSF

Born: January 31, 1923

Entered our community: August 8, 1939

Returned to God: December 27, 2017

Little Albina Julia Pacekonis, daughter of Stanley Pacekonis and Mary Vabilis was born on January 31, 1923 in Hartford Connecticut, the third of six children. After attending Holy Trinity School for ninth grade, she came to St. Francis Academy and then entered the community as a senior in high school.

What many of us may not know about Sister Irene is that her dad was in the grocery business and the family home and store were always open to many people. In her autobiography, Sister Irene wrote that her good-hearted mother distributed food from the grocery store to many who were in need. Her dad only realized how many families were actually helped **after** his wife died. One only wonders if Sister Mary Irene's desire to distribute candy came from her generous mother. Irene herself was always very happy to receive candy for her own sweet tooth but, at the Willows in Oakmont, she had to give up being the "candy lady." She was so disappointed to be told that there were too many residents who were not permitted to have candy in their diets!

In Albina's early life we learned that under the guidance and skilled abilities of our Sister Mary Clare, she was in a Spelling Bee that took her to Washington, DC and she had the privilege of shaking hands with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It must have been this interest in learning that led her to be such an excellent teacher.

Sister Mary Irene spent more than 50 years in the educational field, teaching from nursery school level to Grade 6 in various places in the United States. Some of her students remember how she motivated them to learn new spelling words every week! Her teaching ministry in the United States ended in 1946 when she was just a young sister 22 years of age. She was asked to go to Sao Paulo to help the Oblates start the very famous Chapel school which continues today with a stellar reputation for excellence. Sister Irene's love of the Oblate Fathers with whom she worked was well known among our sisters. After seven years in Brazil Sister Mary Irene returned to the States for a year of full-time study at Duquesne which was quite a privilege in that time. The following year she began a ten year ministry to first graders at St. Casimir and St. Valentine ending with grades 2 and 5.

Again the call came to return to Brazil where Sister Irene ministered for the next five years. Returning in 1967 she then spent the next 28 years teaching grades 4-6, thirteen of which were at St. Gabriel. Young sixth graders from there remember her many stories of missionary work in Brazil. They knew if they asked a question about Brazil, Sister Irene would forget all about the spelling words she was drilling and the stories could go on and on!

She often said she loved teaching and hated to give it up. However when she began to have difficulty with hearing and vision she realized there was another ministry God was asking of her. For the next eight years, Sister Mary Irene continued to tell those stories to the little ones in our day care while doing crafts for our Gift Shoppe. She also devoted much of her time to writing to the elderly and shut-ins.

In 2003 Sister Mary Irene began her ministry of prayer but continued working as long as she could on crafts. Despite the difficulty with her sight we would often see her using the reading machine both in the motherhouse and at the Willows in Oakmont, doing word puzzles.

Sister Irene was quite skilled at these puzzles and would complete several puzzles each day. She said it was a good way to keep her mind active!

It was edifying that Sister Mary Irene was always the first one in chapel in the morning at the motherhouse. While at the Willows she could be seen using her magnifying machine to pray from her well-worn Franciscan Praise book. Everyone remembers being told she would say a rosary for them for any kindness done to her. It was in May 2014 Sister Mary Irene sent this thank you: “Dear _____, My feastday this year was extra special. Upon entering my room, I saw my desk filled with surprises. I just can’t thank you enough for your kindness to me. So far I said three chaplets of Divine Mercy for all of you. God alone can repay such goodness. You will be in my prayers always and surely God will keep you in His care. Love and prayers, Sister Mary Irene.”

Sister Mary Irene was also a skilled card player. She was happy to find someone willing to play her favorite game, *Kings around the Corner*. Even with her limited eyesight and difficulty hearing Sister Irene was able to beat other card players but always saying, “You’ll win next time!” Just this past Christmas Day when we visited our sisters, she was found in the dining room at 11:00 am for the noon meal (she was always there **very** early). She was praying her rosary and kissing each bead as she prayed it. Interrupted in her prayer, Irene was asked if she wanted to play a game of “Kings Around the Corner” and *hesitantly* she agreed! Who would have guessed these were to be her last four winning card games!

Just the next day Sister Mary Irene was rushed to St. Margaret’s Emergency Room with a dangerously low heart rate. Her breathing was clearly distressed and her blood work indicated kidney failure. After talking with the sisters and reading her Living Will desire that she be given only comfort care in this situation, the doctors began administering medications to ease her labored breathing. When we reflect, there were so many moments in the last several months when Sister Mary Irene told us she was dying. She even asked her faithful niece, Janet, to come from South Carolina so she could give her some of her special mementos.

In her room in the hospital, we wonder what was going through her mind when she said to both the doctor and the sister staying overnight with her, I AM FINISHED? Even at this time, when she would wake, she thanked those who comforted her. Unable to really hear, she could **see** loving smiles from her caring sisters and staff. When Irene was told that all of us, even her sisters in Brazil, were praying for her, she very quietly gave her last sigh. What a gift to fully enter into God’s presence in peace!

Sister Mary Irene, for your dedication, your service to God, your cheerful disposition, your candy distribution with a smile, your many rosaries and chaplets for us, we your sisters, thank you! May you fully enjoy **truly hearing** the words, “Come to me” and **clearly seeing** your God face-to-face.

Written by Sister Peg Markey
Read by Sister Althea Anne Spencer