



“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall want for nothing.”

– Psalm 23:1

SISTER M. IRENE FEDERSPIEL, SSND

December 8, 1924

July 22, 1945

December 16, 2011



Our beloved Sister M. Irene Federspiel, 87, died peacefully at 10:20 a.m., Friday, December 16, 2011, in Notre Dame Health Care Center, Good Counsel Campus, Mankato, Minnesota, just as the community was assembling for the funeral of her classmate, Sister Joseph Marie Kasel. Her community members and good friends, Sisters M. Petrann Sieben and Evelyn Dangel, and Sister Janet Wermerskirchen were with her when she died, and several others had kept faithful vigil with her.

The funeral Mass for Sister Irene, with Father Robert Schneider as presider, will be on Tuesday, December 20, at 10:30 a.m., in Good Counsel Chapel, followed by burial in our cemetery. The vigil service will be at 7:00 p.m. on December 19. Loving sympathy to her sisters Bernice Babinat, Jo-Ann Wierck and Jeanette (Roger) Klinoff, her nieces and nephews and their families, her former students and colleagues, and her sisters in community, the School Sisters of Notre Dame. She was preceded in death by her parents Louis and Magdalen (Funfsinn) Federspiel, and her brother Loren.

Sister Irene, the oldest of five children, was born December 8, 1924, on the family farm near Gilbertville, Iowa. Later in life, her father, a devout Catholic, teased her that she was the only child who made him miss Mass on a holy day. She was baptized Eileen Mary Magdalene a few days later at Immaculate Conception Church, Gilbertville. Her sister Bernice was born about two years later, and Loren about eighteen months after that. In her autobiography, Sister Irene commented on her family life, “These were hard years for my parents because of the Depression. We ate what Mother raised and canned from the garden, and Dad butchered cows, pigs and chickens.” Her parents’ strong devotion to the Blessed Mother also became part of Eileen’s life.

In 1930, Eileen started school at Immaculate Conception, Gilbertville, where she was taught by School Sisters of Notre Dame. When she was in second grade, her twin sisters, Jo-Ann and Jeanette, were born. A short time later, her mother had surgery and Eileen became the main caretaker for the twins. She wrote, “As I glance back at those years, it seems that God chose to use the love I had for these two babies as a guiding star to my religious vocation. It was through taking care of them, teaching them to walk, talk and pray, that this desire to be like the sisters grew. As the years rolled on, I wanted more and more to be a sister.” At eighth grade graduation, she told her parents of her desire, but her dad asked her to stay home for at least a year to help. She worked in the house, as well as in the fields and barn. The next year, her sister graduated and took Eileen’s place as the family helper. Eileen worked for families in the area, earning a small wage. The call of a religious vocation continued during these two years and, through a relative, she contacted the Sisters of Mercy in Cedar Rapids, who were much closer to her home.

Her parents had given their consent for Eileen to become a sister, and she made plans to enter the Sisters of Mercy. However, the pull of SSND was still strong, and Eileen was not content with her decision. She also looked into joining SSND, and had a hard time making a decision between the two groups. She wrote letters (which she did not mail) to both, saying that she would not be coming on entrance day, which was the next week. Her mother took her to their pastor, and his greeting to her was, “Well, Eileen, you are going to be a Notre Dame, aren’t you?” That confirmed her decision, and she mailed the letter to Cedar Rapids on the way home. The next week she went to Good Counsel for the first time and spent the year attending high school as an aspirant. The next year (1942) she entered the candidature, where she prepared to become a home service sister. In

1944, she was received into the novitiate and given the name Sister M. Irene. She wrote at that time, "I shall not be saving souls by teaching as I dreamed of as a child, but indirectly, with the grace of God, I will be doing it through my sisters. God's desire for me is to be a hidden flower in His service."

Following first profession in 1945, Sister Irene gave service to her community at Sacred Heart, St. Paul; St. Mary, Shakopee; Good Counsel; Holy Rosary, North Mankato; St. Mary, Madelia; St. Mary, New Trier; St. Donatus, Iowa; St. Matthias, Wanda; SS. Peter & Paul, Loretto; St. Paul, Comfrey; and St. Francis, Buffalo. As a home service sister, she had five recipes published in the 1947 *Notre Dame Centenary Cookbook*: Freola, Sausage Bean Casserole, Cheese Dumplings in Tomato Sauce, Baked Devil's Float, and Frosting for Cake – Wartime. While stationed at Wanda, she fell on an icy road and suffered internal injuries that were not discovered until much later. She almost died as a result of the treatment for those injuries.

Due to the SSND teacher shortage, Sister Irene was asked in 1959 to complete her high school work and earn a college degree, while at the same time teaching primary grades. Her graduation from Mount Mary College in 1973 marked the achievement of this goal. In her ministry as educator, she taught at St. Stanislaus, Winona; St. Theresa Catechetical, Mapleton; St. Mark, Shakopee; St. Albert, Albertville; St. John, Searles; St. Michael, Morgan; St. Adalbert, Silver Lake; Immaculate Conception-St. Joseph, Raymond, Iowa; St. Peter, Hokah; and All Saints, Madison Lake. As a teacher, she was recognized for her creativity, her interest and concern for children with special learning needs and for her ability to handle double grades. In some of her later assignments, she also spent time with the elderly of the parish, visiting them and taking Holy Communion to them. She struggled with health issues, however, and needed to give up teaching in 1985.

In a later autobiography, Sister Irene talked about her next ministry: "Now for my third career. While I was recuperating from heart trouble, a friend encouraged me to work on ceramics. This I did and loved. I moved to our motherhouse in 1985 where I worked full-time on ceramics, taking in craft sales, hosting tour groups, and selling in my shop. It has mushroomed into a big business which is therapy for sisters of many ages." She named her ministry "Ceramic Haven" and it soon outgrew its original location in Isidore Hall lower level. In addition to hand painting ceramic items of all types, Sister Irene and her helpers began restoring and repainting statues for parishes. Sister Irene and Sister Petrann Sieben also took "working vacations" as they traveled to places to do on-site restoration. One of those on-site visits was to the town in Illinois where her mother had lived and where her parents were married. She also conducted classes in ceramics and drew her students from the Mankato area, as well as sisters from the Hill. Ceramic Haven became a popular destination for tour groups and regular customers. Nativity scenes, Santas of all shapes and designs, and wildlife pieces were among the most popular items. For much of the existence of Ceramic Haven, Sister Irene was the only one with a steady enough hand to paint eyes. Sister Irene reflected on Ceramic Haven in a *Mankato Free Press* article, "Oh, I love it. I never took a class on this. I learned by doing. . . . It's exciting for all of us to have our pieces turn out so beautiful." Even in her last years, as she became weaker, she still tried to spend time daily in Ceramic Haven.

Sister Irene had a strong devotion to the rosary, and prayed it often during the day, especially when her time in Ceramic Haven became more limited. As she looked back on her life, she commented, "I've had lots of transfers, but now I have time to prepare for the surest and biggest of all transfers where we will never be separated from loved ones."

Sister Irene loved Jesus, the Good Shepherd (and probably painted a few, too). May he now shepherd her eternally, as she wants for nothing.

Sister Mary Kay Ash