

Sisters of St. Francis

of Mary Immaculate

Sister Helen Vahling embraced going home to God on July 29, 2023. After a stroke in June, which caused her to be moved from the StoryPoint Memory Care unit to Ascension Villa Franciscan nursing home, she was accepted into hospice care when she could not swallow. The ability to swallow eventually returned so that she was able to eat with zest and continued life with amazing stamina into late July. Seemingly unresponsive in her final week, Helen did speak last words to a comforting caregiver. She said, "Thank you."

Helen was born on May 31, 1934, to Anna (Osterhaus) and Ferdinand Vahling. As one of five children, she grew up on a dairy farm in the Catholic German area of Teutopolis. Life on the farm nurtured her, strengthened her, brought her close to the earth, led her to understand St. Francis, and ultimately infused her with a readiness to be at home with her Creator. Being one of the oldest siblings, Helen said, "I had an over-developed sense of duty and responsibility and an under-developed sense of fun and leisure. Looking back on my life, I'm amazed how God gently and firmly led me to experiences that I would never have dreamed of or chosen."

In Teutopolis, Helen was influenced by the Franciscan novices and seminarians who were so much a part of the life of her parish. She also had an aunt, Sister Frances Osterhaus, in the Joliet Franciscan community. "Even as a small child, I knew I wanted to be a sister," said Helen. She entered the Joliet community in 1951 and was later followed by her sisters Julie (now deceased) and Rita.

With a BA degree in biology and education, Sr. Helen was an elementary school teacher in Illinois schools from 1954-1970. Then she began to have experiences that changed the direction of her life. While teaching at St. Pascal's in Chicago, Helen

Alleluia!



Sister Helen Vahling, OSF

was asked to participate in a pilot religious education program for special ed children. After about six months she realized, "I was shifting from law and rules to the spirit and values of Jesus and the Gospel as the guiding force of my life and choices." During the ensuing years, Helen discovered that without even searching, ministries were offered and she accepted.

In 1972, Helen acquired an MA in theology from the College of St. Francis while working as the Religious Education Consultant for the Diocese of Joliet. Then, being responsible for the southern rural area of the diocese, she became an itinerant religious educator, traveling to the rural parishes in her car to do religious education services. This kind of ministry had not been done prior to her commitment to bring this type of presence to these communities. Later, while working in Pastoral Ministry in southern Illinois, including in her home parish of St. Francis in Teutopolis, Helen reflected on how Jesus fared in his hometown. She said, "I learned and still frequently need to remind myself that Jesus saved the world; therefore, I don't need to." She called God's people to grow and believed they were responsible for their own way of doing it.

In 1997, Sister Helen won the community lottery for the Franciscan Study Pilgrimage. She was

joined by Sister Margaret Kacvinsky for their month-long journey of intense study. Helen filed a detailed record of her experiences in Assisi and the surrounding valleys. She said, "It is no wonder that Francis and Clare could sing God's praises in this gentle and fertile land of olive and grape groves and of wheat and sunflower fields." It seemed the heart of a farmer's daughter was responding to the Assisi experience. Helen also drew parallels between Francis' and Clare's time and our own time with regard to culture, society, and the Church. She learned about the Franciscan theologian Dun Scotus who taught a creation centered approach to understanding God's plan for Jesus entering our world.

Inspired by Francis, who lived half of his life in solitude and contemplation, Sr. Helen became a core member of the community's House of Prayer in 2005, where her prayerful presence and service to the Kankakee and Joliet areas lasted until 2020. She embraced three foundation stones of Franciscanism: faith, prayer, and service. Franciscan faith is in the power and presence of God and in the basic goodness of all creation, prayer is seen as the heart of life and of relationship with God, and service is loving care for and with one another, especially for the most needy. Helen continued to build her life on this foundation.

One of her ministries while at the House of Prayer was to lead the rosary at Emeritus Senior Living in Joliet for a group of senior citizens suffering from memory loss. Helen had already become aware of her own diminishing memory when she was applying to become a member of the House of Prayer. In her application letter she had written, "I always want to be for others as Jesus would be for them, but as I age, it takes longer to do less. Also my memory is less than it used to be."

It was because of that memory loss that Sr. Helen moved into Our Lady of Angels in 2020 and then to StoryPoint's Memory Care facility this year. Now all who love her take over the sacred task of holding *her* in memory. Helen was the last of five classmates who have died in the past nine months. As Carlene, Verene, Laura and Pat welcome her home to heaven, her sister Rita and all of her Franciscan community and family and friends hold in our hearts the memory of this gentle life well lived. Thank you, Helen, for your commitment to us and to the Lord you served so lovingly. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Sister Helen Vahling, OSF

May 31, 1934—July 29, 2023

<i>Born:</i>	May 31, 1934
<i>Parents:</i>	Ferdinand Vahling and Anna H. Osterhaus
<i>Postulancy:</i>	September 4, 1951
<i>Novitiate:</i>	August 12, 1952
<i>First Profession:</i>	August 12, 1954
<i>Final Profession:</i>	August 13, 1957
<i>Entered New Life:</i>	July 29, 2023

Ministry History

1954-1956	Teacher: Grades 3 and 4, St. Mary, Rock Island, Illinois
1956-1957	Teacher: Grade 3, St. Pascal, Chicago, Illinois
1957-1958	Teacher: Grade 5, St. John the Baptist, Joliet, Illinois
1958-1959	Teacher: Grade 2, St. Paul the Apostle, Joliet
1959-1964	Teacher: Grades 1 and 2, St. Joseph, Freeport, Illinois
1964-1967	Teacher: Grade 1, St. Pascal, Chicago
1967-1970	Teacher: Grades 1 and 2, St. Jude, Joliet
1970-1976	Religious Education Consultant: Religious Education Office, Joliet
1976-1977	Religious Education Consultant: So. Religious Education Center, Ashkum, Illinois
1977-1978	Religious Education Consultant: Religious Education Office, Joliet
1978-1983	Religious Education Coordinator, St. Francis of Assisi, Teutopolis, Illinois
1983-1985	Religious Education Director: St. Francis of Assisi, Teutopolis
1985-1989	Religious Education Director: St. Mary, Sterling, Illinois
1989-1990	Sabbatical
1990-1991	Pastoral Associate: St. Aloysius, Teutopolis
1991-1994	Director of Religious Education: Sacred Heart, Effingham, Illinois
1994-2004	Director of Religious Education: St. Joseph's Parish, Chatham, Illinois
2005-2008	Temporary Member: St. Clare House of Prayer, Kankakee, Illinois
2008-2020	Contemplative Community Member: St. Clare House of Prayer, Joliet
2020-2022	Ministry of Prayer and Presence, Our Lady of Angels, Joliet
2023	Ministry of Prayer and Presence, Ascension Villa Franciscan, Joliet

<i>Interment:</i>	Section 8, Lot 342, Grave 1, Resurrection Cemetery, Romeoville, Illinois
<i>Predeceased by:</i>	Her parents, Ferdinand Vahling and Anna H. Osterhaus and her sister Julie (Tim) Lynch
<i>Survived by:</i>	Her sisters, Rita Vahling, OSF, Joliet, and Mary (Daniel) Meinhart, Montrose, Illinois, her brother, Raymond (Joyce) Vahling, Teutopolis, and many nieces and nephews

Rest in Peace, Sister Helen!