

Sister M. Irene McCarthy, OP
Born to earthly life: April 23, 1926
Religious profession: August 15, 1948
Entered eternal life: November 11, 2016



2002

*I've gone to the Concert
where Saints and Angels sing
a melody of thanks and praise
to Jesus, Friend and King.*

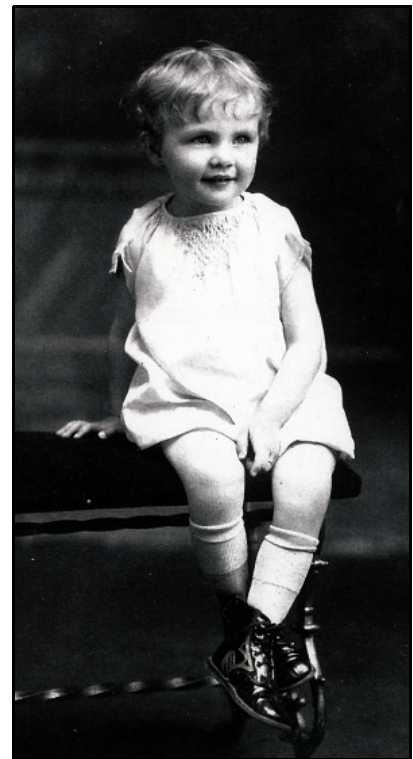
Dave Pipitone



Baby Irene and Mother

Patricia Jane McCarthy, first and only daughter of Genevieve Hart and Callahan J. McCarthy, was born on April 23, 1926, in South Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and baptized at Saint John Parish there. She had two brothers, Thomas and James.

Patricia began her education in the local public school but in fourth grade transferred to Saint John's, where the Racine Dominicans were her teachers. She hadn't thought about becoming a sister; nor did others encourage her to do so. At one point all of the seventh- and eighth-grade girls – except



Already the smile!



Irene and brother Tom with Dad

Irene – were invited to an open house at the convent. When she asked why she was not included, she was told it was because she was not a potential candidate!



Eighth-grade graduation



A perpetual love of play!

Frightened by this, her father did not allow her to attend a Catholic high school because he was afraid the sisters would lure her into their community. When she was a junior, she began to work part-time for her father's employer, Bucyrus International, a surface and underground mining equipment company. After two years the company offered her a full scholarship to earn an engineering degree at Marquette University.

But on that very same day, Mother Romana Thom, prioress general of the Racine Dominicans, happened to be visiting the sisters in South Milwaukee, where her sisters taught. After hearing Pat play the organ at the morning Mass, she asked to see her. Ever the energetic recruiter, she asked Pat, "Wouldn't you like to be a sister?" "Oh no," replied Pat, "I'm going to get married. I've already designed my house!" She hadn't yet, however, met her husband-to-be. So Mother Ramona invited her to give a year of service to the Church. She would, Pat replied, have to ask her folks before accepting. As fate would have it, Mr. McCarthy was not home that evening; so instead, Pat and her mother went to the motherhouse in Racine to see the prioress. Pat's father



Reception Day, 1946

was dismayed when she chose to become a sister rather than accept the Marquette scholarship. She was eighteen.

Pat soon moved to Racine and became third grade teacher at Saint Patrick's, at the same time pursuing evening and Saturday classes at Dominican College. After entering the postulate on September 3, 1945, she taught music at Saint Edward's and Saint Rose, while continuing her own education in piano at the Wisconsin Conservatory. With the country at war, children were not allowed to play outside during the blackouts, so she would lead the whole school in a sing-along each day at lunchtime.

The following summer, on August 4, she received the Dominican habit and the name Sister M. Irene of the Charity of Christ. During the second year of her novitiate she continued her studies at Dominican College.

Sister Irene celebrated her first profession on August 15, 1948, immediately after which she was assigned to Saint Mary's in Janesville to teach music in the classrooms and, after school hours, give private voice and piano lessons. Meanwhile, Sister Cletus (later Cleta) Freiburger, also stationed in Janesville, gave Irene private music courses, and she commuted regularly to Madison for voice lessons with Professors Florence Kaiser and Siegfried Vollstedt of the Wisconsin School of Music.

As was true for most Racine Dominican music teachers at the time, life for Sister Irene over the next decades was filled with professional responsibilities, leaving little time for community living.

In the fall of 1951 she was assigned to Saint Augustine's in Wausau, Wisconsin. There she took charge of music in the church and in the three-room school. Beyond this, during even weeks of every month she taught classroom music in Kimberly, Kaukauna, and Little Chute; and during odd weeks continued her own piano lessons at the American Conservatory in Chicago.



1963



About 1950

Assignments followed at Saints Peter and Paul in Green Bay (1953 to 1956) and Saint Bernard's in Madison (1956 to 1957). In both places she taught classroom music herself and also prepared lesson plans and demonstration tapes for the regular teachers. Her time was also occupied with private lessons, the parish choirs, and helping out in other Racine Dominican schools in the Fox Valley. One of her students from Green Bay would write several years later to thank her for the heritage of wonderful music she had given the parish and how she had helped to give him a deep love and reverence for the Eucharist.



Irene and her Mother, 1967

As if her teaching weren't enough, she studied Old Church Slavonic with Father Drabinovich at Saint Norbert's Abbey so that she would be able to lead the choir for Father George Maloney's first Mass in the Byzantine Rite, and used that experience to prepare congregations for the coming vernacular liturgy in our own Church. And in Madison she also served as fifth grade teacher!

The autumn of 1957 brought Irene back to the School of Music, Cecilia Hall on the corner of Park Avenue and Thirteenth Street in Racine. She gave voice, piano, violin, and viola lessons there and in the city's parochial schools. She played, too, for the Holy Trinity Parish ladies' choir. And in her "spare time" she continued her own studies.

The sisters in the Music House depended upon the motherhouse kitchen for their meals, and Sister Irene, as the youngest among them, could be seen every day fetching and delivering the day's provisions.

Irene spent the 1958–1959 term at Saint Bernard's in Madison before her return to the Music House in 1959. That summer she completed her undergraduate studies and was awarded a baccalaureate degree from Dominican College in music education and applied piano and voice. And in December she coordinated the music for the first Mass of a young priest named Richard Sklba (later auxiliary bishop of Milwaukee).

From late 1965 through 1967 she resided at Aquin Hall, the residence of the sisters who taught at Saint Catherine's High School. (She would take the evening walk from the Music House to Aquin slowly, so that she could enjoy the sound of the choir practicing in the Bible Church on Villa Street.) There she taught until the music department moved to Siena Center in late 1968, and Irene herself was assigned for a short time to Sacred Heart in Racine.

In November of 1968, Irene moved to Saint Luke's in Plain, Wisconsin, where for nearly two years, besides church music, she taught in the classrooms as well as giving private lessons in piano, organ, violin, and guitar.

When, beginning in 1970, sisters were allowed to choose their own ministries, she accepted a position at Saint Mary's in Janesville, her final mission away from Racine, giving lessons on piano, organ, violin, and guitar, and directing the parish choir. When the school there hired a full-time music teacher, Irene limited her own work to piano, organ, and guitar lessons. She would be the last Racine Dominican to serve in Janesville. In 1989, she moved to Siena Center and set up her studio to provide piano and organ lessons for beginners.



About 1990

Irene was sixty-three years old when, in 1989, she decided to move to Siena Center to teach music and to assist with organ and piano accompaniment for liturgies and other prayer services. She always had her music with her, even when dependent on a wheelchair. She also helped out with liturgies at Racine's Cristo Rey Parish, doing her best to master the hymns in Spanish. She put her heart into whatever she did and her love of music remained with her throughout her life. In the mid-1990s she became a charter member of a small ensemble at Siena Center, the Siena Music Makers, under the direction of Sister Esther Szabelen.



With Lillian Proctor at the keyboard, 1995

Declining health led to Irene's move to Becker Shoop Center in October of 2011, and in

May 2016 to Lakeshore Manor. In both settings, she was always ready to take her place at the piano to sing with sister residents and visitors. Everything and everyone seemed to come to life with the "golden oldies" as Irene would talk about the composers and have everyone singing! She seemed, said fellow musician Sister Jean Ackerman, to have a photographic memory, playing songs from many musical shows on request – without sheet music. And every day she would check the bulletin board to see whether someone was celebrating a birthday; if so, she would start the singing of *Happy Birthday* at the meal.

She was the very soul of endless, limitless generosity, eager to meet others' every need and wish in whatever way she could, ready to give her time, her energy, her prayer, all she had. She shared everything; if someone gave her two pieces of candy, she'd give one back to the giver. She had a very simple and deep faith and seemed to live in God's presence in extraordinary

ways. "She was always happy and exuberant," said her sister-in-law Betty, remembering how Irene would gather nieces and nephews around the piano to sing whenever she visited. At the same time, her sensitivity was such that she'd cry when she heard sad news. And Sister Jean Ackerman recalled how "humble and generous" Irene was. "I will treasure her for all she was and will always be in my heart" — a sentiment shared by many who knew and loved her.

Irene was at the noon meal in Lakeshore's dining room when she suddenly and without fanfare bowed her head and slipped into eternity. She was ninety years old and had been a professed Racine



Golden Jubilee, 1998

Dominican for sixty-eight years.

All of her immediate family, as well as all of her Racine Dominican classmates except Sister Virgine Lawinger had preceded her in death. Her sister-in-law Betty McCarthy was still living in Florida but was unable to come to Racine for Irene's funeral liturgy; but her niece Patty Burg and cousin Ann Meyerlund were able to join the community at Siena Center on the morning of November 11, with Father Ron Gramza presiding at the funeral Mass and Sister Marietta Bertelsen preaching.

Irene's body was interred later that same day in the community plot at Holy Cross Cemetery on Highway 32 in Racine.



With S. Yvonne Renner at Siena Center for Thanksgiving, 2015



The cast of "Seven Nuns in Las Vegas," 1997

Sisters Vera Bares, Kate Nilles, Associate Jan Jedlicka, Mary Jo VanderLoop, Fr. Ed Mogilka, Sisters Irene McCarthy, Barbara Fisher, Marian Diedrick; Sisters Mary Vosters, Amelia Marie Reyes, Alice Rademacher, Dorothy Ann Greiber



Ever a lover of the dramatic!