

Sister Marie Irma Kessler, SC

Entered eternal life on November 24, 2022



I was 16 years old when I walked into the biology classroom at East Orange Catholic High School and there for the first time found myself caught by the charisma of charity through the person of Sister Marie Irma Kessler – ‘Strirma’ -as we called her!

We knew nothing of her great accomplishments and giftedness we didn’t even know her last name as in those days sisters didn’t have last names! When we tried to get her to tell us, she said she would if we guessed it- she said it was everywhere in the school! For months we tried to guess: “desk - key -books- hall- floor” - we gave up! Only to find out months later that “Kessler” was the maker of the water fountains throughout the building.

She was like that - always teaching us to be observant to pay attention to the little details around us.

Her spirit caught us as she exposed us to her life of charity in a very unassuming way. Several of us would stay after school each day as “lab assistants” to wash the equipment and help prepare the materials for the next day’s classes, but we really stayed because Sister Irma worked alongside us exposing us to so much life! We loved being with her!

We knew very little about her real life or where and what she was studying (and she was always studying) - we didn’t know that Dorothy Kessler was born in Baltimore MD on September 6th, 1933, that she had parents and four siblings Carol and Jackie and Nancy and John- we didn’t know that she was published by that time and she was working on her PhD. Like love, Irma was never boastful or proud, she was kind, patient and always giving of herself.

Irma’s accomplishments in science were many with advanced degrees from prestigious universities. Irma loved what she was doing -all the time. Years in the classrooms and labs of high schools and colleges, she invited many to love what they did regardless of what it was.

Her years of teaching at the College of Saint Elizabeth were filled with adventure -she was beloved by many. Her great interest in technology brought her to a whole new level. Because of Irma, the college faculty and staff learned how to do e-mail! She taught them one by one. They were reluctant at first saying this will never catch on! Imagine if that had not happened!

Irma was a computer “geek” in the best sense of the word. She was a licensed ham radio operator and mentor for so many who eventually excelled in IT. Who would ever think that this full-time professor would take delight in working weekends and nights at RadioShack earning longevity and performance awards from them. She found many creative ways to spread the gospel and be about the mission of charity in simple ways. At the same time, she was a faithful member of this motherhouse community Serving meticulously as their treasurer for many years.

Grateful that I have had the opportunity to learn the charisma of charity from the hands of this master, my life has been changed because of her! I often told her it was because of her “normal” way with people that I chose to enter this congregation, the Sisters of Charity nearly 50 years ago.

When I first met Irma she was “in habit” and later her habit was more like a short sleeve plaid shirt with a pocket and there was always a pen and a small piece of paper in that pocket– she stayed on top of everything. So simple and easy going, Irma was not high maintenance.

Irma was a great traveler- so often she would go off to places unknown with her friend Rosalie Curran and some of us here have had the privilege of traveling with her too. What a gift it was to share the journey to the Holy Land and to Egypt... oh what fun it was to swim in the Dead Sea, climb down into the pyramids and ride a camel. Irma was always filled with a certain sense of joy!

Years later when she was well into her treatment for multiple myeloma, Irma would talk of her numbers and counts as a true scientist would. She knew how she was responding to her treatment. She never became down or depressed rather she continued to trust her doctors and fight the good fight with faith.

In the last few years as her councilor, I came to know a different side of Irma in her sharing of her deep spirituality. Irma spoke of wanting to be one with the sufferings of Jesus -she loved The Sacred Heart and Jesus the Good Shepherd as a model for her life. Irma was always aware of the one who was lost or the one who had gone astray.

A faithful servant of God she knew that nothing could separate her from the love of God. In the last few months of Irma’s life when she knew that treatment was no longer effective, Irma accepted life on God’s terms – and then, easy and peaceful on Thanksgiving Day, she left us to go into the loving embrace of God.

Thank you, Irma, for living a life of charity and for sharing that goodness with us. We have so much to carry on in your memory. As our reading today from the book of Wisdom said: “the souls of the just are in the hand of God and no torment shall touch them” – you, just soul, Sister Marie Irma, live on in the embrace of God where there is no suffering -just pure, simple joy.

Sister Maryanne Campeotto, SC