SISTER VINCENT THERESE WALSH
1904-1988

The Walsh farm is among the Centennial farms in Lake Township, Huron County, the Thumb of Michigan. To this day, five generations of the family have been born and brought up there. Many of us have known Sister Vincent Therese to sit back in her chair in her Maria Hall room, as she related with eloquence her wholesome growing up in that farm home.

She, Bernice Ruth Mary Walsh, was born there on a hot day, July 13, 1904, the 10th of 11 children. Her mother, Elizabeth McGee, had come from her birthplace in Lucan County, Ontario, Canada, with her parents, who settled in Lake Township, not far from the farm where Michael Walsh was born. They had in common their ancestors who, during the potato famine, had emigrated from Ireland into Canada, and later into homestead farming in the Thumb of Michigan. In the course of time, Michael met Elizabeth, perhaps at a barn dance, and courted her. They celebrated their marriage in St. Felix Church (Felicitas) in Pinnebog, only four miles from the Walsh farm. Here, too, are the baptismal records of all the Walsh children.

Bernice, the youngest of three girls and the six boys who lived to adulthood, was her father's "pet." He used to take her in the wagon with him on his errands to town. An alert child, she caught on fast to places and names of people, in order to give her mother a full report of what went on.

In her autobiography, Sister Vincent Therese looked back on a healthful, integrated family, dwelling at some length on the small delights of the countryside, among them the ride to Pinnebog every Sunday and holyday for Mass in St. Felix Church. She felt so secure between her parents in their big surrey with side curtains. In every season, the whole family piled in, except in the winter when her brothers took turns staying home to keep the fire alive. (The farm that brought her fond recollections is still in the family, owned now by a nephew.)

She cherished her first eight years of education in a one-room school in Caseville, District 1, where, unless the weather was inclement, she walked both ways with her sisters and brothers. She held the highest esteem for her rural teachers there, "with interested pupils and good discipline." Of course, she would add, with a twinkle in her eye, most of the pupils were her own sisters and brothers. She had her first year of high school in the Pinnebog Junior High School, and the second year in Bad Axe High School.

Meanwhile, her oldest sister, Mayme, had married Alexis Kennedy, and lived in St. Agnes Parish, Detroit, Michigan, where a new high school staffed by the IHM Sisters was opened. The possibility for Bernice to attend a Catholic high school was welcomed by her parents. Consequently, they allowed her to stay with Mayme and her family during her third year, and expected her to remain until her graduation.

Apparently, Bernice was pondering on a new direction. She had never met sisters until that year at St. Agnes, but she had seen and heard of the Dominican Sisters from Adrian on visits to their homes in the Thumb. With no clear view of her future, she

accepted an offer to teach in a district school in Port Hope. Inasmuch as teacher certification was only then coming into law in Michigan, she was free to teach at least a year without the requirements. Port Hope fascinated her. It was the entrance gate to Michigan for her parents' families, as well as for the people of Mother Augustine, the Walshes, Flannerys and other Irish immigrants from Lucan County, Ontario. At the end of the year, she wanted nothing more than to be a teacher, so she decided to complete her fourth year of high school, and follow up with teacher preparation.

Contacts were made with alumnae of St. Joseph Academy in Adrian, and Bernice Walsh was among the most eager students to report for school in September, 1923. Adjustment was immediate. She became known almost instantly as both a serious student and the class jester. Her senior teacher, Se. Benedicta Marie Ledwidge, inspired her from the beginning, and she always added, "throughout my entire life." To the surprise of her classmates and friends, she did not wait to graduate. She entered the novitiate on February 2, 1924.

At the same time, she continued to study with her classmates, struggling to keep the decorum expected of a postulant, yet remaining Bernice Walsh, "whole and entire." One day, she was missing from class. Speculations mounted from bad to worse, until Sister Benedicta Marie assured the students that "Bun," as she was called, had been sent to St. Edmund, Oak Park, Illinois, to substitute for a sister who had broken her arm.

During the summer, she completed her fourth year studies and made her retreat. She was received on August 19, 1925, with the name Vincent Therese, and given short-term teaching assignments at St. Philip Neri and Queen of Angels Schools, Chicago, before going into her canonical year in preparation for the vows.

In the novitiate, she joined Academy friends and other mischievous young women, among them Sister Rose Ann McIntosh, her counterpart in the skills of narration. One day, as Sister Rose Ann tells it, she was coming out of the refectory across from "the old novitiate," and saw "Vinnie," with arms outstretched, dancing blithely down the De Profundis Hall, the hallowed spot in the Motherhouse where, according to cloister customs, we prayed for our deceased sisters and other poor souls, and kept a strict silence. Said Sister Vincent Therese, "I suppose you think I am dancing alone." "Well, I can't see anybody," answered Sister Rose Ann. "I know," answered Sister Vincent Therese. "I just picked up a poor soul at the other end."

She professed her vows August 4, 1927, and returned to Chicago to teach at St. Kilian, a favorite school to which she was to give 12 years of her energy with love, six years each on two different timelines. After the first six years at St. Kilian, she had four years of experience at Visitation, Detroit, and another four at St. Alphonsus, Dearborn, before receiving her appointment of principal-superioress to Bishop Quarter School, Oak Park, Illinois. This was a boarding school for boys, with a specialty for cadets.

In our Adrian archives, there is a sheaf of letters written by parents, along with a petition, to Mother Gerald Barry, begging her to allow Sister Vincent Therese to stay beyond the canonical term of six years as superioress. The content of these letters of praise stressed "the wise guidance and principles of living and life given to the boys."

But it was also to parents and guardians that she was teacher and friend. In glancing through these letters, and listening to her contemporaries in the Congregation, one sees a woman who had no constraints laid upon her and, therefore, would not lay constraints on others. She was an up-lifter, with an anecdotal mind and a homely philosophy, which parents referred to as "spiritual counsel."

Kindness to pupils and parents would deserve "faint praise" if it did not extend to the sisters in community with her. Just as she clearly made known that she could not have "measured up to her best" without a supportive faculty and a community of happy sisters, so did those sisters remember her with gratitude.

After her years at Bishop Quarter, Sister Vincent Therese returned to St. Kilian for another six years, preceding her appointment as principal-superioress at Our Lady of Loretto, Hometown, Illinois. During the year of 1967, she was a patient at Maria Health Care Center for a few months; and then, "back on her feet," she went to St. Elizabeth, Tecumseh, Michigan, and taught seventh grade pupils for three years.

In her 70th year, she responded to an opening for parish ministry at St. John Vianney Church in Flint, Michigan, and remained there for four years, actually until physical ailments required her to give up walking activities. This, in 1976, she retired to Maria Hall.

Although Sister Vincent Therese had a heart weakness and other obstacles to health, she was a "sitting-up" patient, and traveled around in her wheelchair to visit other sisters. The heart attack was unexpected. The ambulance brought her to the Emergency Room at Bixby Hospital, but as someone aptly remarked, "Vinnie was not one to keep God waiting for her." This was a quick death on September 22, 1988.

The readings chosen for her liturgy brought out the quality of her love. From the various testimonies of the sisters, Father Roland Calvert, OSFS, the homilist and celebrant, translated that into "going out of herself to look at the sufferings and problems of others." It was this "equanimity, this understanding of right and wrong, this balance, that seemed to personify Sister Vincent Therese."

In referring to the "joke collection" for which she was labeled, Father Roland suggested that it was only the surface of the deeper quality, joy, which is "the infallible sign of God's Presence."

Sister Vincent Therese was not one to let go of customs and symbols of faith handed down to her by her parents, among these the blessing with holy water. In evenings, she went out to the hall to sprinkle holy water in the directions of people and places cherished by her, always giving the last spray to the Thumb of Michigan. In referring to this ritual, Father Roland reminded us that it was love and loyalty she was expressing and sending with the blessing of water.

