

IHM Sisters Then & Now

Dorothy (Mary Seton) Diederichs, IHM

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Sister Dorothy (Mary Seton) Diederichs was born in 1928 and raised in Detroit. There were four children in the family, two boys and two girls. Her father worked as a carpenter and her mother was a secretary. Sister Dorothy attended St. Gregory until the 10th grade. When the family moved to Dearborn, she attended high school at Sacred Heart.

“We were a very Catholic family. We had our evening prayers each night and rosaries during May and October,” she recalled. “As kids, we used to play church and I would be the priest. That was until my brothers learned that you had to be a man to be a priest!”

She remembers always wanting to be a missionary. When she was a senior in high school, she contacted Mother Theresa McGiveny and told her she wanted to be an IHM Sister and about her desire to work in the missions. She joined the IHM congregation soon after she graduated from high school in 1947.

Her first assignment was at St. Frederick Mission/St. Vincent de Paul, Pontiac, where she taught first grade for a year. For the next four years she taught first and second grades at St. Hugo of the Hills, Bloomfield Hills; then taught for four years at St. George, Detroit.

Her lucky break came in 1959. Sister Dorothy was sent to Cayey, Puerto Rico, and the following year to Santurce where she was a teacher.

After six years in Puerto Rico, she sensed a calling for something a little different. It was during the years of Vatican II and some Detroit priests encouraged Cardinal Dearden to open a mission in Latin America. They chose Recife, Brazil, and sent two priests and four IHM Sisters. Sister Dorothy was one of those that went.

“The experiences I had there have influenced me and changed my life until this day,” she said. “We had modified our dress; we had studied the language, culture, and the pastoral and social needs of the people. Although we had a four-month course on this, we always continued to learn.”



Sister Dorothy in Puerto Rico with her parents

In 1965, Brazil was in full military dictatorship. This made life hard for the people, as well as for the missionaries who lived among them. The bishop, Dom Helder Camara, was under constant surveillance. Many lay people and some priests were tortured, killed or exiled during these years.

“Our work was visiting with the poor people, listening to them and eventually forming small reflection groups around scripture,” Sister Dorothy recalls. “These groups were eventually known as base Christian communities. This movement was occurring all over Latin America.”

In light of Vatican II, the Latin American bishops took the new directives and put them into practice. Brazil was in the forefront of this movement, which started a ground revolution among the poor. The military governments were threatened by this.

“We were helping the poor realize their own self-worth. Little by little, these people worked to get electricity and water, and some of their other basic needs met,” she said. “All of this was possible because reflection on the scripture empowered the people and changed their lives. It deepened my faith.”

In 1975 her father died and she returned to the United States. Sister Dorothy then spent a year in Belle Glade, Fla., working with the LCWR migrant program.

From 1976-1982, she served on the leadership team of the South/West Province of the IHM Sisters, travelling in a motor home to the states where IHM Sisters ministered.

Her mother died in 1985 while Sister Dorothy was still in the U.S. She went back to Brazil the following year. She spent 12 years in the rural area of Cabo, again helping the poor – especially women – discover their self-worth through the scripture. The military dictatorship was over, but the social and economic situation of the people was in dire need of transformation.

In 1998 Sister Dorothy returned to Detroit. She volunteered with the IHM Development Office, was a member of M.O.S.E.S. (Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength) and tutored at Marygrove College.

She recalled how different the issues are in the United States versus Latin America. She said, “I always asked myself: What is the bigger picture in our lives? How do we help the reign of God come about in this world? That’s what guided my work.

“What I learned from the poor in Cabo and Recife was the reflective love for the scripture and letting it flow over into your life. We lived as simply as we could in Brazil. That changes you, too. The people we worked with were ‘communal.’ Here in our country – our society – our focus is more on the ‘individual.’”

In 2008 she retired to the Motherhouse. Now her days are busy with various committees and justice issues and visiting those in health care. She is an auxiliary pastoral care member.

Sister Dorothy said, “Now I can enjoy the company of so many wonderful people here at the Motherhouse. I’ve been able to get to know some of my IHM Sisters better after being out of the country for more than 22 years. That’s been wonderful.”



Sister Dorothy (right) with Sister Marge Polys in front of the motor home they used to travel around visiting members of the congregation



Even at 85, she has a great curiosity for technology, using a Nook to read books and a computer to stay current on social issues.



Sister Dorothy with Dona Dedé and her husband in Charneca, Brazil



Sister Dorothy (center) with a womens' group from Cabo, Brazil



Sister Dorothy cutting Sister Ann Nett's hair while both were on mission in Charneca, Brazil