From 1972 to 1982, 10 IHMs were missioned to Grenada, a Caribbean nation in the West Indies. Their stories reveal a surprising invitation and an unplanned mission. One concerns Rev. Hilarion Summers, a Cistercian priest, who was on leave from his monastery and working with the poor there.

While attending a charismatic renewal meeting in Pittsburgh in May 1972, he met some IHM Sisters. He had heard of them from Bernard Haring, CSSR, who had been in Grenada giving a retreat. Haring encouraged him to ask IHMs to assist him in his ministry in Grenada. That ministry, which focused on providing a home on the island where the elderly poor could be cared for and die in dignity, led him to hope the sisters would establish a house of prayer there.

With that goal in mind, Summers accompanied the IHMs from the meeting to Monroe to present his request to Sister Margaret Brennan, the general superior. Interestingly, she was one of the original forces in the House of Prayer Movement in the United States. Margaret sent Sister Helen Smith, provincial of Puerto Rico, to visit Grenada to evaluate the situation. Because the main work would be to pray and the life would be one of radical poverty, she recommended sending sisters who were members of the charismatic renewal movement. She remarked that she had never seen an entire island or country that was so poor.


It was a beautiful day and everyone was tired from the previous day’s festivities. So, they all decided to have a quiet day. Eucharist was at 11 a.m. Around 3:40 p.m., Mary Simeon and Marie went to the beach with Hilarion. Theresa stayed home, saying the waves were too rough for her that day. It wasn’t long before Mary Simeon came running up from the beach saying, “Sister Theresa, Come! Father and Sister Marie are in the sea and I can’t find them.” They ran back to the water where they found Marie lying on the beach, safe but helpless. But, there was no sign of Hilarion.

After a few minutes, they could see his body floating in the water. It eventually came close enough to shore for two men to go out and pull him in. They worked on him for one-and-a-half hours, but couldn’t revive him. A huge wave had pulled both Marie and Hilarion under water and apparently his head struck a rock. His last act was to push Marie toward shore and tell her to float.

Father Thomas Keating, the father abbot at St. Joseph Abbey in Massachusetts came for the funeral liturgy. He described a huge crowd, five abreast, walking in procession for one-and-a-half miles carrying the body to the burial site on a hill next to the home Hilarion had built for the aged and needy. “As far as the eye could see, there was a solid mass of men, women, and children … .” Hilarion had completed his mission; the sisters had not.
From Monroe to Chicago to Texas and Home Again

An original transom sign from St. Mary Academy, a 122-year-old treasure, was returned to the IHMs by Richard Graham. He had purchased a transom with the title “St. Mary’s Academy” and the traditional heart of the Virgin Mary pierced by a sword painted on glass in red and black. Wanting information about its origin, he phoned Monroe from his home in Aransas Pass, Texas, to inquire about the Academy’s dates of construction and demolition.

Sister Celeste Rabaut, the archivist at the time, was able to verify that it was the valued transom from the main entrance of both Motherhouse and Academy dating back to 1869. She could also tell him that the first wing of the brick Motherhouse was built in 1866 and the front of the Motherhouse with the main entrance was constructed in 1869. Asked how he had acquired the transom, Graham, a dealer in antiques, explained he had purchased it from a Chicago man whose name he didn’t know. It is probable that the “find” was handed down by a member of a working crew that razed the former Academy building.

Graham was willing to return the transom to the place of its origin—Monroe. The total cost to do this was $132.09, which included shipping. It is now displayed in the Archives Heritage Display.

The Fiction of Current Events

One year the sister teaching American history at St. Mary Academy decided to devote class one day a week to current events. On Fridays, students would give oral reports. Each student was expected to spend time during the week poring over newspapers to find stories of some importance. Then she was to prepare a report on the article that most impressed her. Exactly who would be chosen was not known ahead of time. The students were not as enthused as the teacher.

Two especially recalcitrant students, whom we’ll call Joan and June Ann for purposes of this story, gambled on being able to make up a report if they happened to be called on. At least, it was a risk they were willing to take. Wouldn’t you know that on the Friday in question both were called on? Here are their stories.

Joan walked to the front of the classroom with confidence. She described in great detail a terrible train wreck. The depictions of twisted metal and mangled bodies flowed in great detail from her lips before she concluded her sad tale. While her classmates were “silently giggling,” Sister felt compelled to comment on the horror of it all and the need for prayers for the victims and their families.

As luck would have it, June Ann was the next one called on to report. She was not as confident, but began her story. She introduced Jo Mendi as a man who was a famous trainer for a circus. A devout man, he was very generous to Catholic charities. She created an especially large carnival where the attraction in the Big Tent was the show Jo and his talented chimpanzee put on. She embellished the story with a comment about the very large cash donation Jo had made to the Catholic Church. Sister would like that. The class knew that June Ann had made a mistake: Jo Mendi, as circus fans were aware, was actually the chimp—not the trainer.

All might have ended well if Sister had not felt compelled to demonstrate how up-to-date she was on all the events the girls reported on. She added, “Yes, Jo Mendi has long been known as an outstanding figure in the Church who donates large amounts of money to Catholic causes. We are indeed indebted to him.”

The class ended and the girls could leave the room and laugh out loud.

Over time, there were four Jo Mendis. Some of them entertained visitors at the Detroit Zoo from the 1940s until 1983 when the Jo Mendi Theater was dismantled. In 1989, a four-acre chimp habitat, the most naturalistic in the world, replaced it.