Born Marie Christine in Detroit in 1903, Anna Marie entered IHM in 1920. Having taught in elementary and secondary schools in Michigan and Chicago from 1921 to 1933, she became principal and local superior of St. Francis de Sales at the age of 31 and of Blessed Sacrament at 36. In 1941, at age 38, she opened the IHMs’ Immaculata High School as principal and superior. In 1945, she became dean of students at Marygrove, and in 1952, superior and principal of St. Mary of Redford, one of the congregation’s largest missions. Besides studying music, teaching and administering during these years, she spent summers earning a master’s degree in education at Notre Dame. Her successes as an educator, administrator and superior prepared her well for congregational leadership.

Elected to lead the congregation from 1954-66, she was the last of its pre-Vatican II general superiors. These were years of tremendous growth; in 1964, there were 1,600 members, 92 houses and 70,000 students. These were also times of significant changes. During her last four years in office, she saw the greatest changes in the Church in more than 400 years. She realized that much courage and faith would be required and she consistently called the congregation to them.

She came across as strict and “holding the line” when many were pushing for change; but, upon closer examination, she emerges as the one who led the congregation to the threshold of the sweeping changes and challenges of post-Vatican II.

Building on what was, she also expanded the congregation’s understanding of ministry. She opened schools in California, Missouri, Illinois, Florida and Alabama, outside of the IHMs’ traditional Detroit stronghold. She staffed intercongregational high schools and began Maryhill College of St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas. Broadening opportunities and expanding vistas, she sent four IHMs to Recife, Brazil, as part of a pastoral team. Aware of global needs, her vision was not limited to schools.

Nationally, as congregations were beginning to work more closely together, she was one of the first to join the newly formed National Conference of Major Superiors of Women, later called the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Intercongregationally, she helped to found the Tri-IHM Conference. She oversaw the change in congregational government from a centralized one to four regions. Following Mother Teresa McGivney’s lead, she had expanded IHM presence beyond southeastern Michigan.

Knowing that successful changes depend upon informed preparation and that breadth of vision facilitates change, she promoted theological and graduate education for the sisters. She supported and encouraged Sister Margaret Brennan’s efforts to bring the best theologians of the time to Monroe to teach, to educate IHM theologians at the doctoral level in the United States and abroad, and to develop theological education on the Monroe Campus during summers.

She also expanded educational opportunities beyond Monroe and Detroit. Local superiors were sent to Notre Dame for conferences in psychology, human relations, spirituality and leadership. Sisters earned 118 master’s and doctoral degrees in 18 different fields. Hundreds of IHMs studied during summers in graduate programs at both state and Catholic universities, in many parts of the country, with many different people, in many new areas of specialization. Those experiences changed the congregation.

Over the years, unafraid of the future, her experience and personal gifts enabled her to guide the congregation’s early steps into post-Vatican II life.

At the time of Anna Marie’s death, Sister Mary Jo Maher, her student first and later her IHM sister wrote:

[She was] an extraordinary woman, a remarkable leader, a sister in the circle of community, a loving and loyal friend, and an even dearer friend to our all-loving God…. Our own noble Anna, we love you and we will miss you. You are the best of who we were, the best of who we are, and the best of who we could ever hope to be.
As much of the former farmland in the Monroe area has been developed for housing and commercial purposes, the question of where the IHM farms were located arises. They were on N. Custer Road, the extension of Elm Avenue, about six miles west of Telegraph. Their addresses extend from 4826 to 5692.

Mary Mercy Geohegan, IHM 1913-2005

Delecta LaPorte, IHM 1914-2001

Brigid Wade, IHM

Locations of Saint Mary Farms

There were five IHM farms in all, both north and south of N. Custer Road.

No. 1: the Humphrey Farm at 5522;
No. 2: the Doty Farm at 5692;
No. 3: the Lange Farm at 5054-5620 (photo)
No. 4: the Kemmerling Farm at 5034
No. 5: the Sitterlet Farm at 4226

Doty Farm, on the south side of Custer, was well-known by novices as the place they had potato picking bees. When it was sold, the new owner retained many of the workers—some still there in 1996 when it still produced potatoes for a large Michigan potato chip firm.

Sun, Glorious Sun

The IHM temporary professed, or "Juniors," spent summer vacations at the Hall of the Divine Child (HDC) on the Motherhouse Campus during the 1950s and early 1960s. Those were times to study, get together, work and relax. It was sometimes a problem that their idea of relaxing was different from the more seasoned sisters.

It didn’t take long for the young sisters to discover that the fifth or top floor of the building had some flat roof areas that had been turned into make-shift porches. They were located in remote areas with little to no traffic. What young person wouldn’t enjoy spending some free time basking in the sun and getting a tan? In those days, however, the habit was worn all day, every day, and this presented a challenge. The solution involved pushing the bonnet with attached veil to the back of the head, removing the collar, cape, sleeves, and shoes and stockings. Then, it was possible to recline in a chair and rest bare feet on a glass skylight while exposing face, neck, arms and legs to the knees. How good it felt to actually feel the warm sun. And, remember, these were "college kids" for the most part.

One summer, the HDC’s principal Sister Theotilde O’Hara managed the building while Sister Mary Mercy Geohegan and her able assistant, Sister Delecta LaPorte, served as directresses of the juniors. The young sisters were very fond of Delecta and she seemed to understand and enjoy them.

So, one day, when a group that included Sister Brigid Mary Wade and six of her classmates asked her to join them and get some sun on their porch, she agreed. It was glorious and ordinarily all would go well, but it seemed that unbeknown to the group, the glass skylight of their sun porch was in the ceiling of Theotilde’s room. She just happened to look up and see a lot of bare feet that belonged to the sunbathers. What a scandal! She, of course, immediately reported this egregious behavior to Mary Mercy.

Suppertime was fast approaching, and the group of sunbathers had broken up to get ready. After everyone had assembled in the dining rooms, Mary Mercy took the microphone.

"Will the worldly sisters who were sunbathing on the roof this afternoon please rise." Since the only ones there with reddish tan faces were the sunbathers, the guilty parties were obvious. Gradually, all of those who had been sunning, including Delecta, stood. The situation proved to be embarrassing for Mary Mercy who was not aware her assistant had been involved. This did soften her approach a bit; but she still announced that everyone would eat in silence that night and ponder the seriousness of the offense. Sun bathing, at least for that summer, was over.

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