IHM Archives Notes

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Motherhouse Shrine Is a Visible Reminder of Dedication to Mary

A shrine honoring Our Mother of Perpetual Help stands in the circular bay extension at the end of the corridor leading to the Health Care Center on Main floor of the Motherhouse. It was a gift of Mrs. Jennie Smith Hart, the mother of Sisters Therese Martin and Donna Mary Hart. Sister Miriam Raymo planned and directed the project to erect the shrine in March 1955. In fact, it has been called “the crowning jewel in the work of Sister Miriam’s long years of dynamic and devoted service and planning for the Community.” The picture is a replica of the original miraculous picture in St. Mary Major in Rome. It came from Rome and has the authentication of the Rector Major of the Redemptorists on the back.

It is oil on cedar wood, framed in shadowed gold, and set in a larger filigree frame. This rests on an altar base of dark walnut with shades of birch and mahogany inlays. The walnut in the pedestal was salvaged from the main stairway in the old convent and stored away awaiting just such a use. The frame, altar, pedestal and prie-dieu are the work of our artisan cabinet-makers, Spiro Micallef and Allard Verhaeghe.

Reflecting on the shrine, Donna says she doesn’t recall the specifics of how the gift came about. She recalls her mother’s earlier response to an invitation to donate the large rose window in the west transept of the chapel in 1939. And she knows that her mother was an astute businesswoman who kept careful, precise records of all transactions and who talked over any gift she gave with the concerned parties. Noting that “Mother would respond to a specific request or suggestion,” she believes the gift of the Mother of Perpetual Help shrine in 1955 was in response to a suggestion from IHM.

To this day it is a beautiful, reflective place in the Motherhouse where people often pause, if only briefly, for a moment of prayer.

New Missions Often Not Ready for Sisters

Readers of Sister Rosalita Kelly’s Achievement of a Century can’t help but notice how many times the sisters arrive at their “new missions” only to find the school, the convent, or both, not ready for them. As far back as 1845, Mother Theresa Maxis arrived in Monroe to find that her living quarters were not yet available and she would temporarily be housed by benefactors Mr. and Mrs. Roderick O’Connor. Those who have followed have often found themselves in similar situations. Two stories from the twentieth century are illustrative. Four pioneer sisters, Louis Bertrand Burns, Rose Ethel Nestor, Felice Schwartz and Georgina Delaney went to Whitefish Bay, Wis., in 1928. Georgina told the story of their arrival and first year at St. Monica’s. The pastor phoned to say the house was ready. When they arrived, they found only one thing that could be used as a table—an ironing board. In addition, they had three wooden orange crates for chairs; no tub, only a pitcher and bowl for washing; no indoor water required them to go outside to pump their water; and no phone, so they had to go to the rectory to use the phone. They were permitted only one scuttle of coal a day for the pot-bellied stove in the community room, which also served as a parlor. In the winter, it got so cold that the superior, Louis Bertrand, would not allow the sisters to get up in the morning until she had lit a fire. She even nailed her blanket to the north wall in an attempt to keep out the cold. When the sisters arose in the morning, the water in the washing bowl was frozen.

The sisters stayed only until 1931. (Cont. Page 2)
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The problem of readiness was not limited to parish missions. The congregation’s schools also faced challenges.

Immaculata High School is a case in point. It was scheduled to open in Fall 1941. Four sisters, Anna Marie Gris, Miriam Raymo, Charlesetta Raymo and Frances Loretta Hackett left Monroe for Immaculata on Aug. 16, 1941, two days before the other sisters were to arrive. The reason for their early arrival was so that Miriam could “hurry up the workmen” as the building was far from complete and school was scheduled to open on Sept. 8.

The eight sisters scheduled to sleep in a dormitory in the school building temporarily stayed at Marygrove; the other 10 moved permanently into a house across the street at 16770 Greenlawn, a two-family flat that came to be known as “the convent.”

Surprisingly, prodded by Sister Miriam to finish up, the workmen packed their things and left during the last week of August. The building was in post-construction condition and had to be cleaned in preparation for the opening of school. Thus began the “cleaning bees” with the help of sisters from other missions in the area.

Case of the Purloined Slippers Solved

The 1960s brought many changes, significant and not so significant, to religious life. One of the smaller changes for IHMs was wearing commercially made slippers. There was one problem, however; they had to be purchased in large numbers as no one had them.

In the case of the novitiate, the directress, Mother Benedicta (Margaret) Brennan, dispatched her assistant, Sister Mary Immaculate (Mary) McDevitt, to the local J.C. Penney store to make the purchase. Mary told the sales clerk she wanted to order 90 pairs of slippers in a variety of sizes and colors. Thinking she had misunderstood, the clerk asked, “Did you say nine pairs?” To which Mary responded, “No, I said 90.” A very flustered clerk rushed to find the manager.

When the order had been filled and the slippers had arrived at the Motherhouse, they were hidden away in the attic to be brought out at Christmas as gifts.

Unfortunately, Sister Thomasina Gignac, the superior of the Motherhouse, knew nothing about Margaret’s and Mary’s plans. On a walk through the attic one day to check its condition, Thomasina noticed the many boxes of slippers. What a bonanza, she thought. I’ll be able to provide a lot of the professed sisters with slippers. And, she set about distributing them.

Thomasina was so pleased that she wanted to share the good news. As she met Margaret on a casual encounter, she enthusiastically described her good fortune in finding the slippers and being able to give them away.

“Sister Thomasina,” a flabbergasted Margaret replied, “those slippers were supposed to be for the novices. We had put them in the attic for safe keeping and to have them as Christmas surprises.”

Thomasina chirped in her usual off-hand way, “Oh, well, I’ll just have to get them back.”

The next day, she employed the typical way of communicating at one time with the whole group of professed. She made an announcement in the refectory. She followed the prescribed protocol of ringing a small handbell and then making announcements.

“Sisters, so sorry, a mistake has been made. Please give back the slippers that you were given.”