Women Religious Have Stood Together Over the Centuries

The first two IHM general superiors, Theresa Maxis and Mary Joseph Walker, both knew the Grey Nuns. Before becoming an IHM, Phoebe Walker tried life with the Grey Nuns of Montreal in 1849, but withdrew after five months. And, after the Grey Nuns of Ottawa established their first house in the United States in Toledo in 1855, we know that Theresa visited them there.

From that time on, Theresa often turned to the Grey Nuns when she needed help. In 1866, she wrote from Susquehanna, Pa., to Mother Lavoie that she would have written Sister Blondine, whom she had known well in Toledo in 1856, but did not know how to reach her. She asked Lavoie if she would be willing to receive Sister Mary Whipple, who very much wanted to be in a “more regular order,” and added that she herself would be willing to follow Mary to Ottawa later.

Lavoie forwarded Theresa’s request to Mother Elizabeth Bruyere in Ottawa who wrote that she was willing to receive Mary and invited Theresa to consider coming later. Mary was admitted in 1866.

In 1867, Theresa and Sister Celestine Renauld left Pennsylvania and went to the Grey Nuns of Ottawa. They remained there until 1868 when they went to Detroit to appeal for readmission into the Monroe IHMs. Bishop Lefevre accepted Celestine, but refused Theresa. She went to Scranton, but Bishop William O’Hara denied her permission to stay. Finally, she travelled to Baltimore and wrote Bruyere that she was staying in St. Anthony Orphanage “for a few days only and I do not know where to go.” She asked Bruyere to take her back. She did. Virtually homeless, Theresa was rescued from destitution and profound humiliation through the kindness of Bruyere.

Theresa lived with the Grey Nuns from 1869 to 1885 when Bishop Patrick Ryan permitted her to return to the IHM Motherhouse in West Chester, Pa., where she lived the last seven years of her life.

Acts of bonding and kindness continued over the years. The Grey Nuns operated St. Vincent Hospital in Toledo, Ohio, where many doctors provided IHMs medical care gratis during years when there was no health insurance or Medicare. Sister Jamesetta Rhoads received her practical nursing training at St. Vincent, working night shifts with one of the Grey Nuns’ sister nurses. And, on June 3, 1929, when the Academy was destroyed by fire and the Motherhouse was threatened, the Grey Nuns offered to transfer the infirmary residents from Monroe to the hospital in Toledo. Although this proved unnecessary, it spoke of the close bonds between the two groups.

More recently, several Grey Nuns were received into the IHM congregation. Rachel Lambert transferred in 1977 and Camille Brouillard in 1978. Shortly before her death on May 6, 2012, Rachel told a story about her own transfer. When Mary Kinney, the IHM president, accepted Rachel, recalling the Grey Nuns’ acceptance of Theresa, said to Kinney, “Now, you can return the favor.” The bond has endured over 160 years.
Novices Sometimes Failed to Understand “The Heart of the Matter”

It was the custom on Fridays for many years to confess our faults to the sisters at a ritual called “Chapter of Faults.” Saying an unkind word, being careless carrying out a duty or breaking an item were among the things mentioned. Novices who were being initiated into the practice often blundered. Over the years, stories of different faux pas accumulated. Two serve as examples.

One concerned a young sister at the Motherhouse. As part of her charge working around the “big kitchen” and the refectories, she was carrying a raw egg from one place to another. As she climbed the stairs, she was distracted and laid the egg down. It rolled down the steps and broke. She probably dreaded having to own up and receive a penance, but she did. Beginning with the traditional formula, she described her fault. “Beloved Mother and Sisters, I confess that I laid an egg on the stairs.”

The snickering and out-loud laughter that followed forced the novice directress to call the session to an early end.

Another young sister, working in the same dining room area of the Motherhouse, had the special charge of clearing the dishes from the chaplain’s dining room, cleaning the room and making sure that everything was in place for the next meal. At the time, it was the custom not to eat or drink anything between meals, except water, without the superior’s permission. One day the food that the chaplain had not eaten looked especially good. Without much thought, she ate some, and it WAS good. As Friday approached, she began to feel some guilt about such a bold and impulsive act and decided she would have to accuse herself.

With everyone in place, she began, “Beloved Mother and Sisters, I confess that I ate the chaplain’s remains.” Again there was an abrupt conclusion to the ritual.

Welcome and Not-So-Welcome Guests Visited Over the Years

The sisters at St. Michael, Flint, were awakened at 2 a.m. on Jan. 5, 1925, by noise made by a burglar who entered the house through an upstairs bathroom window. His progress, however, was impeded by the superior, Sister Justa McNamara, who met him at the bathroom door. “Get out of here!” she ordered him emphatically. He retreated, leaving the sisters “excited, bewildered and amused. We lost considerable sleep, but no valuables. Deo gratias et Maria.”

On Aug. 25, 1967, visitors stayed overnight on the back porch of the St. John, Benton Harbor, convent. These four unusual overnight guests were Sister Carmella Kusman’s niece, Louise Walker, and three huge police dogs. Louise was on her way to Oregon where she was to work as librarian in one of the universities. She was in the habit of travelling armed with guns and in the company of three dogs.

At IHM High School in Westchester, Ill., burglars struck on Friday night, Oct. 10, 1978. Sisters John Mary Baker and Mary Vianney Conrey were walking through the building making sure all doors were locked when they saw a man’s shadow in the main corridor and called the police. They discovered the door to the business department removed from its hinges, machines moved near the door for quick removal, and an outside door to the gym propped open with a number of typewriters lined up, waiting to be placed in a van outside. The would-be thief escaped before the police arrived, but with only three typewriters. Vigilance was rewarded.

Finally, Sister Marie Heenan reported in her letter of September 1985 that a man approached Sisters Paula Marie Schloff, Margaret (Paul Therese) Babcock, and Dorothy (John Ellen) Nauer around 7 p.m. outside the front door of the Motherhouse asking to see the mother superior. Believing he was not acting normally, they told the sister receptionist at the entrance not to let him in. The man was not happy and rang the doorbell vehemently. When that didn’t work, he took off his shoe, broke the glass in the door and entered the building. The police responded to an emergency call and removed the man.

There are other stories to be told, but happily in all of them serious harm from intruders was avoided and friendly guests and people in need were always received hospitably.