Mother Teresa McGivney: A Woman for the Ages

When Mother Teresa was elected, IHMs were staffing 58 schools, most of them in Michigan. During her time in office, she sent sisters to teach in Alabama, Florida, Minnesota, New Mexico and California. She also opened missions in Puerto Rico. The IHM world had expanded to include national and global perspectives.

Teresa was a forward-looking innovator. An early supporter of the Sister Formation Conference, which advanced the training of classroom teachers, she believed that sisters needed to have adequate professional preparation. She was committed to enabling the sisters to keep abreast of developments and changes within the Church, especially liturgical changes and theological education. During the summer months, IHM music directors were sent to liturgy workshops at Notre Dame University; and theologians, such as Benedictines Godfrey Dieckman, Rudolf Seidling and Paschal Botz, were invited to the Monroe campus to lecture and conduct courses.

Msgr. John M. Oesterreicher of Seton Hall University was a theologian invited to lecture at the Motherhouse. In a letter to him, Teresa responded to his question about what he should talk about. She wrote, “For our audience we would express a preference for ‘the walls are crumbling,’ rather than ‘to see Peter.’” Then, referring to his latest book, she continued, “The cosmic view, the universal thinking that breaks through these pages is the vision religious educators need today. ...You, the author, can help us in giving us at least a growing desire to share such insight.” These comments typify her futuristic thinking.

Known for her sense of humor and loving disposition, she was also a wisdom figure. The young sisters looked forward to her Friday readings and her private talks.

People enjoyed being with Teresa. She trekked with everyone else out to the berry patches to pick. She joined others for walks around the campus on hot summer nights. Often, she would point out and name the birds, explain the origin of every tree and even the genesis of a butterfly. Her awareness of nature’s beauty and the profusion of God’s bounty never failed to engross her as she walked and laughed and recounted anecdotes of life from an earlier time in community.

When Teresa and Sister Mary McGrath received the gift of a trip to Europe from St. Mary Academy alums in 1948, her letters back to the sisters reflected her brilliant powers of observation and her finesse in recording what she observed. She describes men, women and children in bare feet living in the ruins in Napoli. She tells of the Sisters of Palatine in Formia teaching in a bombed-out convent, totally destitute but happy. She recalls the drive up and down the French Alps: “You’d be surprised at the vegetation up there—homes with gardens, vineyards, fields of grain, lots of potatoes.” She remembers Hautecombe: “We saw monks shelling peas and novices coming in from the fields carrying more.” Everywhere she went, Teresa appreciated the people and places she encountered.

Scholar, administrator and visionary, Teresa was a great and gentle spirit who never wavered from her commitment to Jesus and her option for the poor. Drawing others into her largesse, Theresa welcomed them and their diversities. On her death-bed, seeing a number of sisters gathered around her, she said, “Put another potato on the fire.” All are welcome.

Mother Teresa served as the general superior of the Monroe IHMs from 1942-1954. For many she was the embodiment of IHM ideals: a woman of culture and refinement, gentleness and courage, prayerfulness and consideration, zeal and service, joy and laughter. It is probably safe to say that she was respected and loved by all.

Learn to live with yourself and make yourself agreeable to others so they can live with you … It’s the little things that count in life … Make God and others happy.
Sewing Room Shenanigans

Most novices during the 1950s didn’t like sewing any more than other young people, but it couldn’t always be avoided. We IHMs wore beautiful royal blue, French-serge habits; and, in order to wash them, we had to take them completely apart and then reassemble them. It was quite a process, taking days to complete. In fact, it could be said that many of us would avoid it at any cost, if that were possible. A proficient seamstress might get the job done in a week if she worked diligently every free hour she had. For a “run-of-the-mill, do-the-best-you-can” seamstress, this was a challenge of huge proportions. The only novices who escaped this dreaded task were those who were sent out on mission during their novitiate years. This latter fact influences the story.

Sister Norberta Callaghan was a senior sister in charge of the novices’ sewing room at the time. No matter how hectic it was for her to oversee sewing projects of about 100 novices who weren’t all that enthusiastic about this kind of work, she was always cheerful, patient, and very helpful. When a novice undertook “the big clean” of her habit, Norberta worked closely with her. On the rare occasion when a novice was told she was “going on mission,” Norberta organized a group of novices and got the job done in one day.

One Saturday morning, Sister Catherine Ann (Kate) Pierce, a struggling seamstress, was bemoaning the fact that the time for her to do the big cleaning of her “good habit” was fast approaching. Another novice listened to the complaining for awhile and then suggested, “If you’ll play along, I think we can get your habit cleaning done for you.”

Several conspirators moved around the sewing room saying, “Did you hear Sister Catherine Ann is going on mission?” Of course, Norberta heard the message and quickly assembled a work crew. She went to Catherine Ann and directed her to, “Go and get your good habit and give it to me.” Catherine Ann complied.

The crew worked intensely for the rest of the day under Norberta’s careful direction. By late afternoon, it was finished. Catherine Ann could hardly believe her good fortune. Unfortunately, her glee at having this heavy burden removed from her shoulders had prevented her from thinking about the fact that at some point the novices’ directress, Mother Alphonsine (Helene) Berry, would learn about this venture. And, in this case, Alphonsine got wind of what was going on early on.

Just before supper Alphonsine approached Catherine Ann with the quip, “Sister Catherine Ann, I understand you’re going on mission.”

Catherine Ann was known as a person who blushed easily, but we hadn’t seen quite this kind of red before. Nevertheless, she believed the embarrassment was a small price to pay for the reward of a clean, reassembled, freshly pressed habit.

Old Habits Change Slowly

When IHMs were first missioned to places distant from Monroe they were faced with new challenges—some anticipated, others not. One quandary was how to adjust to warm, humid, tropical climates wearing blue serge habits. The sisters assigned to St. Michael, Miami in the mid 1950s soon learned that during several months of the year, rain was a daily occurrence. So, what to do to avoid getting their habits wet? The customary capes and cloaks weren’t doable in this climate. This picture of five sisters depicts an early solution—clear plastic raincoats. As time went on, designs and material used for habits were altered for those in tropical areas.