Cemetery Cross Becomes Chapel Cross

As the liturgy began on the first Sunday of Lent, members of the congregation in the IHM Motherhouse chapel turned to face the main aisle and saw a full-size cross being carried by four worshipers. At the end of the procession, the cross was placed in a stand near the altar for the remainder of the service. Later, questions arose about this practice.

Genevieve “Gen” (William Joseph) Petrak, IHM, was appointed administrator of worship and spirituality for the Motherhouse in July 2000, a time when a major renovation project began. It required residents and staff to move to the St. Mary Academy building and Gen to plan for liturgies in new surroundings. A worship space was set up in the former Recital Hall. One of the things she wanted to do was obtain a large and realistic cross for use in 2001 Lenten services on Sundays and during Holy Week. Staff told her that there was such a cross in storage. It was retrieved and cleaned up. At some point the white paint was removed and the wood was stained.

This cross has been in IHM worship space ever since. From the time the sisters returned to the Motherhouse in early 2003, it has stood either in the sanctuary area or in the back of the chapel. 2015 was the first year the cross was carried up the aisle.

Audrey Cousino, IHM, who was familiar with the story of where the cross came from, agreed to Gen’s request that she write it up. This is a summary of what she said.

The cross is one of four white crosses placed on the north, south, east and west sides of the cemetery in preparation for the dedication ceremony on Aug. 2, 1929. Audrey speculated that they were probably made by Spiro Micallef, who was the IHMs’ master carpenter for many years. She noted that the cornerstone on the cemetery chapel has the same cross design. She said that this cross was probably from the west side of the cemetery and removed when the crucifixion statuary was erected there.

Audrey explained that when she first saw the cross in the worship space in 2001 it brought back memories.

I can’t tell you what I felt when I walked into the Worship Space on Ash Wednesday and saw the beautiful cross so artistically draped. What memories it recalled of those hot summer evenings in July when we went out to the cemetery under the direction of Sister Marie Therese [Daly] to rehearse for the great occasion as we walked from cross to cross and ended at the chapel for a solemn Mass celebrated by Bishop Casimir Plagens, accompanied by many priests.

Not only was the cemetery to be consecrated, but the remains of Father Gillet had come to us from Hautecombe on Laetare Sunday, 1929. They were placed in the Joos Chapel until the dedication of the Louis Florent Gillet Chapel. At the end of the Mass they were placed in the crypt behind the altar.

Now, 87 years later, IHM and all of the worshippers in the Motherhouse Chapel are experiencing this cross during liturgies.
After Louis Gillet left Monroe in 1847, he served in various parishes in North America before returning to Europe. Eventually he became Pere Marie-Celestin, a Cistercian monk in France. During those years he had lost touch with the IHM congregation and was not sure that it was still in existence. A letter from the United States brought news that the congregation he had co-founded was very much alive. Re-establishing contact during the last months of his life delighted him.

It was in February 1891 that the IHM Sisters in West Chester, Pa., received the first in a series of letters from him. It expressed his happiness and excitement at learning that the congregation was flourishing. He shared some vivid memories of the early days in Monroe with Mother Theresa and the first members. This letter was familiar in tone; in May he wrote a formal account of the founding.

Mother Theresa [sic] could tell you the story of the veil and our going to Toledo for the purpose of obtaining a pattern of the habit. How great was their poverty! Even before taking the vow, they were forced to practice it, and to add to their miseries, not one of them knew how to cook! They were afraid at night, and many a time I told them that they were more trouble to me than my congregation and all my missions (and I had ten of these). Then they would weep.

You tell me that Mother Theresa is still living? She was so frail, so delicate! I thought she had long ago, gone to Heaven. I cannot believe she is so old! Eighty-one years! I thought she was much younger than myself, and I am now in my seventy-eighth year.

Gillet expressed what he called sentiments of paternal affection for the members of the congregation he had co-founded and asked to be remembered in their prayers. He hoped to be reunited with them in eternal life.

After 82 years, Gillet’s remains were brought to Monroe where he was reunited “with the Sisters of his blue-robed congregation.”

Marygrove students for many years attended assemblies/lectures by well-known people from around the country. They were held in the college auditorium in the Liberal Arts Building and attendance was expected. During the 1950s, each woman was allowed three “cuts” over the course of the academic year and exceeding the limit could result in a long and serious meeting with Dean of Students Sister Anna Marie Grix.

In order to enforce the policy, students were assigned seats and Anna Marie went to the balcony and took attendance. If there was an empty seat, she marked that person absent.

On one occasion, Lorraine “Honey” Humphrey (later Sister Paul Joseph) realized that the upcoming lecture would interfere with a social event and that she had already maxed out the allotted cuts. So, what to do?

Her friend Pat Fette was always willing to help when needed; and she hadn’t missed an assembly yet. When asked, she said yes. It was unfortunate that Honey with her light brown hair had failed to take into account that her replacement was a redhead. Anna Marie, however, noted it immediately.

Not too long after, Anna Marie ran into Honey and greeted her with a suggestion: “Next time you get somebody to sit in your seat at assembly, don’t ask a redhead.”