A Spirit of Cooperation and Unity

On Nov. 9, 1963, Mother Anna Marie Grix received a letter from Sister Felicitas, chair of the board of education for the Scranton IHMs. Perhaps inspired by the opening of the second session of the Second Vatican Council, sister asked, “In these days when the spirit of ecumenism breathes so blessedly upon the world and upon us in a special way, do you we think we could explore the possibility of forming an inter-community educational conference?” An identical letter had been sent to Mother Maria Pacis of the Immaculata IHMs. Sister Felicitas would later remark that positive responses from both were received within a week and on the same day.

In 1964 an inter-community planning board developed the conference idea, composed its bylaws and drafted a program for the first summer institute. The new organization was called The Immaculate Heart of Mary Education Conference. The three major superiors constituted the board and an executive council of 21 sisters advised them. All finally professed IHM Sisters were members. At biennial institutes, 50 sisters from each group would be chosen as official delegates to conduct the business session and offer proposals. The site of the institute would rotate among Scranton, Immaculata and Monroe.

Scranton IHMs graciously offered to host the first Institute at Marywood College, which was celebrating its golden anniversary. On Aug. 19, 1965, 1,122 sisters gathered for the keynote address of “The Sister in the School of Tomorrow” conference. Multiple sessions on religious education, social consciousness and social responsibility followed. Presentations, panels and discussions arranged by subject matter and educational level completed the schedule. Evening socials and musical entertainment encouraged more informal sharing. Numerous photographs show that a grand time was had by all and a thick copy of official proceedings preserves the historic event.

Over time the name and bylaws were amended. In 1976 “education conference” was removed from the title and one of several general purposes, to “fulfill the mission of the Church by strengthening the spirit of cooperation and unity among the three congregations” was given singular emphasis. The number of executive councilors was reduced to six.

In the following decades, large assemblies were less frequent but gatherings of IHMs at the annual National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), faculty exchanges and other shared activities multiplied.

Planning for the 1995 Tri-IHM Sesquicentennial Assembly in Monroe engaged sisters on many committees. Preparing for the anniversary, they became more aware of IHM connections to the Oblate Sisters of Providence (OSP) through Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin. Theresa had been a pioneer member of the Oblates and served as their superior for a time before she left for Monroe in 1845. A decision was made to invite the current OSP leaders to attend. They accepted. The August celebration was a joyous, spirit-filled experience for 1,600 IHM Sisters and their friends.

Cooperative ventures after the sesquicentennial included special projects in Haiti, a focus on racism as a critical issue and research and publication on the lives of the co-founders, Theresa Maxis Duchemin and Louis Florent Gillet, CSsR.

In 1998, when the Oblates joined the Conference, name and bylaws were again amended. Currently it is known as the OSP IHM Conference and the board expanded to include the former executive council. The general purpose, however, remains the same: “to fulfill more effectively the mission of the Church by strengthening the spirit of cooperation and unity among the member congregations.”

The next gathering of the OSP IHM Conference will be held July 12-15, 2015 in Scranton. More information may be found at www.ospihm.org
A personal meeting with Thomas Merton remains a vivid memory for some IHMs who consulted him in October 1968. An enactment of the Chapter of 1966 directed that a house of prayer be established for the congregation and a founding committee was at work. Merton had met with a small group of contemplatives who came to Our Lady of the Redwoods Abbey (Trappistines) in Whitethorn, Calif., in May 1968.

Searching for ways of renewal in religious life, they asked him to speak with them about prayer. In the fall, when he returned to the Abbey to prepare for his trip to Asia, the IHMs, including sisters Margaret Brennan, Mary McDevitt and Ann Chester, came to see him on a similar mission.

Brief notes about prayer from that meeting include the following (paraphrased):

We should not look for a method or system but cultivate an attitude, an outlook: faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy... these tell us that we are in the presence of God, that we live in Christ, that in the Spirit of God we see God without seeing...

Merton died Dec. 10, 1968, in Bangkok, Thailand when accidentally electrocuted by a faulty electric fan.

The classrooms of the mid-twentieth century in IHM schools were not the sophisticated electronic centers that many schools today enjoy. They featured desks attached to wooden slats, slate chalk boards, cork bulletin boards and wardrobes—small rooms attached to classrooms where children hung their coats on hooks and left their boots on the floor. For the most part, children brought lunches from home in brown paper bags and left them in the wardrobes until lunchtime.

Sometimes, a student asked the teacher to go into the wardrobe to retrieve a handkerchief, pencil, etc. In one first grade classroom, this proved to be problematic.

After lunchtime, the first grade sister had little boys and girls coming to her in droves saying that their candy bars, cookies, or other sweet treats had been missing from their bags. For many of them these desserts were the favorite part of lunch, so this was serious! As vigilant as sister tried to be, she was unable to solve the mystery of the missing goodies. The children were very unhappy about the whole situation.

She had an idea. The purple ink used on stencils for duplicating machines used in those days was almost impossible to remove from skin or clothes once it got on them. So, sister “planted” a candy bar in a brown bag lunch with purple ink rubbed all over its wrapper. The wrapper was dark so the ink wasn’t noticeable. Over the course of the morning, several children asked to retrieve something from the wardrobe.

Ted, a little first grade boy returned to the classroom from the wardrobe with deep purple stains all around his mouth and on his hands. The “thief” was caught.