Co-founder Louis Florent Gillet, CSsR, considered the education of youth as the principal reason for the existence of the IHM congregation, while Father Edward Joos, the director from 1857-1901, wanted to make the care of orphans a prominent work. In 1860, when the congregation was first incorporated in Michigan, its objectives were described as assisting “destitute and orphan children residing in the State of Michigan and to that end, to establish and maintain within said State, asylums for their reception, support, care and relief and schools for their education.” According to No Greater Service, this difference of opinion may have been a cause for the friction between Mother Theresa Maxis and Joos. Regardless of these differences, formal education remained the IHMs’ main commitment until post-Vatican II times and the care of orphans also continued for many years.

A brief summary of the less-known work with orphans may prove interesting. From 1860-1910, an average of 24 children per year were cared for in what was called St. Mary Orphanage. These “children of the house” attended St. Mary Free School in Monroe and lived with the sisters. In later years, they were housed in various places, such as “Park Place” and “Holy Family Cottage.”

The only specific instance of IHM undertaking the administration and daily operation of an orphanage other than St. Mary Orphanage is St. Anthony Orphanage for boys in Detroit. The diocese erected a three-story brick building on 97 acres of church land on Gratiot Road about three miles from the heart of Detroit. A school operated on the second floor followed the same course of study as any IHM school.

Notice of the building’s readiness was sent to Mother Gertrude Gerretsen on May 15, 1867; three days later, four sisters—Mary Agnes McGovern, Martha Summer, Philomena Laffer-tee and Virginia O’Neil—left Monroe for St. Anthony. On May 25, the first orphans came—three brothers: George, Willie and Noble Harding. The story is told that their mother had died and their father brought them to the orphanage on the day of her burial. They were frightened when they saw the sisters, screaming and crying to go home. They did adjust, however, as three years later they were listed as orphanage residents in the United States Census of 1870. Originally, there were four sisters and 16 children; by 1877 there were seven sisters and 72 children.

Life there was not easy; in fact, it was described as primitive. In the spring of 1877, plans were underway to transfer the direction of the orphanage to the Brothers of the Poor of St. Francis from Cincinnati. This would allow boys to be taught trades and remain in the institution until they were older. The transfer occurred May 3, 1877, and the sisters left the same day. The name was changed to St. Francis Male Orphan Asylum.

The orphanage was housed in three different buildings after the original one. In 1889 it was moved to Monroe, where a year later the brothers left and the Sisters of St. Joseph took over. In 1908 it returned to a building in Highland Park. By 1916, Henry Ford wanted property there for his growing company and offered to build and equip a new building for the diocese elsewhere. In 1917 the St. Francis Home for Boys opened at Linwood and Fenkell in Detroit; by 1950 there were about 400 boys in residence. The home was closed in 1992 and remaining services relocated to Southfield. In 2000 St. Francis Family Services merged with Catholic Social Services of Oakland County where its work in child welfare has continued.

Though neither long nor extensive, the IHMs’ formal work with orphans exemplifies their desire to respond as they could to needs presented to them.
Sister Sandra (John Gregory) Schneiders today is an internationally known lecturer and writer known for her prophetic vision and the quality of her scholarship. As a postulant in the 1950s she was already a formidable figure who could challenge even confident university professors with her questions. On one particular occasion this led to bedlam in the postulants’ dining room at the Motherhouse.

The winds of change, though scarcely noticeable, were beginning to stir in houses of religious women in 1955-56. The young postulants and novices were, as a rule, still listening and learning how to behave as aspiring IHMs, which included respect and deference for the sister directors. But, occasionally, the new wave of questioning rationales or explanations surfaced. One such time involved a Friday evening in the Academy recital hall and a Saturday morning in the postulants’ dining room.

Friday evening the young sisters, who were also students at Marygrove College, Monroe Campus, attended a lecture by a Jesuit priest philosopher on existentialism. It ended about five minutes before the “solemn silence” bell at 8:30 p.m. Sandra, a promising scholar and inquisitive intellectual who could ably challenge her elders, sought out postulant directress, Sister Marie Elise (Ruth) McDonnell and said, “I’m at your table tomorrow morning and I can hardly wait because I have a lot of questions about existentialism.” The bell rang.

Marie Elise looked at the assistant directress of novices, Sister Benedicta (Margaret) Brennan, and mouthed, “Sister Schneiders said she has lots of questions!” And she threw up her hands.

At the time, the practice in the dining rooms was to move one or two places at tables, following a known pattern, every week or so. That way the postulants got to know everyone better. A problem, of course, would be created if the pattern wasn’t known and 69 postulants were moving around aimlessly. Nevertheless, Marie Elise felt she needed to take action or “face the music” of Sandra’s questions. After all had assembled, she announced, “Move 10 places.” Bedlam followed.

When some degree of order had been restored, Sandra was at another table and the secrets of existentialism were safe.