Theresa Renauld, One of Three Original IHMs

In response to Fr. Louis Gillet’s invitation to begin a congregation of teaching sisters, the three founding IHMs came to Monroe in 1845: Theresa Maxis and Charlotte Shaaff from Baltimore, and Theresa Renauld from Grosse Pointe, Mich. Theresa had never met the other women, but they had three things in common: faith, a desire to serve God as religious teachers, and a friend—Gillet. Her parents, Joseph and Theotiste Forton, the owners of a comfortable farm in Grosse Pointe, had given the land where the first St. Paul Church was built. When Gillet preached a mission there in 1843, Theresa promised him she would join the congregation he hoped to found. This she did in 1845.

Given the name Celestine on the day she received the habit, she was professed in 1846. She lived at the Motherhouse until December 1858 when she and Sister Stanislaus Labadie were sent to St. Joseph, Susquehanna, Pa., to join the four who had gone the previous August. In April 1859, Mother Theresa was replaced as general superior and sent to Susquehanna by Bishop Lefevere. Eventually the Michigan and Pennsylvania communities were separated at the direction of bishops in both places and were allowed little contact.

They were no longer members of the Pennsylvania community. After little more than a year there, they travelled to Monroe. They were welcomed by Fr. Edward Joos, and Sisters Alphonsine Godfroy-Smyth, Gertrude Gerretsen and Frances Renauld—Theresa’s older sister who had followed her to IHM in 1852; but they had to hide their identities and former positions from the sisters who had entered after they left Monroe. Lefevere approved the return of Celestine on condition of silence, but not that of Theresa who returned to Ottawa for another 16 years.

As another now had the name of Celestine, Theresa was called Xavier. Although her original rank was three, she was assigned the 69th place in rank or order of entry—that of the youngest professed member. She had been professed 21 years.

It may surprise readers that Xavier was rarely asked about the past, but with silence imposed on the seniors and ignorance the inheritance of the juniors, those entering after 1860 generally knew nothing of the separation.

An exception to the practice of not referring to the separation occurred when the Fr. Egidius Smulders, CSSR, who had established Holy Redeemer parish in Detroit in 1880, visited Monroe. He always asked for Sister Celestine and the junior sisters asked why because they knew her as Xavier. The seniors responded wisely, “He always calls her Celestine.” Here the matter ended.

In July 1886 two IHMs from Scranton were permitted to visit Monroe. It was only then that more than half the Community learned the story of the Susquehanna mission and Celestine heard what had been accomplished by the sisters in Pennsylvania during the 17 years since she had returned to Monroe. She died April 13, 1897.
In Sister Rose Estelle Kissane’s report on her experiences as Motherhouse administrator at the Motherhouse Assembly of 1981, she included some personal reflections. Among them was mention of several people, not IHMs, who lived at the Motherhouse. Readers may find this story of interest.

Mother Teresa McMenemey

This next event was as beautiful as it was sad. In early summer of 1975, I received a most unusual phone call, a request to accept a Mother Teresa McMenemey into our infirmary. She was 81 years old, sick in body, confused in mind. She was a victim of circumstances. She had been a Carmelite Sister for nineteen years until a visiting bishop invited her to found a religious community in North Carolina, a part of the country sadly in need of evangelizing. Because in her youth Sister had always wanted to be a missionary, she accepted the invitation and founded the community known as The Society of Christ the King. The community prospered until in the first heat of the Civil Rights Movement when the Sisters worked tirelessly for Negro rights, they lost the support of many Southerners and suffered dire consequences from bigots. By the time Mother Teresa came to us, the community had ceased to exist; only a few sisters were loyal to her. Thirty phone calls to many communities had been made before we received ours. It was our privilege to care for Mother Teresa during the last days of her life. After a little more than a month in the infirmary, she was taken to Memorial Hospital where she died on August 20, 1975. Mother Teresa’s short and sad stay in our infirmary reminds us of another Mother Theresa who rests today in the Immaculata cemetery, destined never to return to her beloved home in Monroe. We feel fortunate indeed in being privileged to give a home to the modern Mother Teresa who came knocking on our doors.

IHMs Welcome Mother Teresa McMenemey

When the body of Fr. Louis Gillet was transferred from France to Monroe in 1929, some artifacts from his grave at Hautecombe were sent along with his remains: a small crucifix, some wooden rosary beads and several medals. Over time, these relics had become corroded and disfigured. Earlier this year they were cleaned and restored as much as possible by Carol Forsythe, a professional conservator. The medals include images of Popes Leo XIII and Pius IX; St. Michael de Sanctis and St. Jerome Emiliani; St. Joseph and the Child Jesus; Mary of the Immaculate Conception; and the Sacred Heart.

A Founders’ Day display near the Maxis Community Room in the Motherhouse featured the artifacts and the story of Fr. Gillet’s return to Monroe.