Mother Mechtildis became the first IHM with “full powers of office” when Rev. Edward Joos died in May 1901. The strict observance of the rule was a guiding principle for her. During her years, the congregation grew. There were two major building projects — the second St. Mary Academy and the Hall of the Divine Child; and, there were increases in both members (399) and students enrolled in IHM schools (20,000). The community was still relatively small and there seemed no need for circular letters. Personal letters addressed to individuals were sufficient. Archives has only six letters written by Mechtildis.

During Mother Domitilla’s time there were formal communications, although they were sparse. Knowing that her number in community was 188, it is understandable that there was not a great need. Nevertheless, as the numbers of members and missions were increasing, she constantly strove to strengthen the bonds between sisters on missions and at the Motherhouse. Circular letters to the community were one way of doing that. All matters, spiritual and temporal, of interest to the whole body were included. Her first letter to the congregation, Oct. 13, 1920, announced news of the final approval of the Constitutions. Those that followed often focused on the challenges of fundraising associated with the construction of Marygrove College, word of someone seriously ill and on the need for new members. Others petitioned for devotion to St. Joseph, new courage for the coming year and prayer and sacrifice that would result in new members. She also asked for prayer that the congregation would keep its spirit intact. Perhaps most remembered, though, is the letter about the tragic fire that destroyed the Academy in June 1929 and her plea for hope in the midst of disaster.

Mother Ruth’s letters began with the account of Domitilla’s death and funeral. Others concerned the need for new members, the building projects on the Monroe campus and the debt that had to be paid off. The backdrop of the Great Depression and the onset of World War II explains the weight of what Ruth was trying to do. Domitilla’s efforts to strengthen bonds among members remained a priority for Ruth. Often focusing on efforts to renew the family spirit in the congregation, she encouraged local superiors to make their convents “homes” and always spoke of the Motherhouse in Monroe as “home.” Her letters included glimpses of the lives of sisters at home, particularly those in the infirmary.

Mother Teresa’s time in office included most of World War II and its aftermath and an increasing global consciousness and vision. Her letters often spoke of distant missions and travel to places such as Rome, Alabama, New Mexico, Florida and Puerto Rico. The warmth and concern reflected in them spoke of personal holiness and an innate kindness. They were characterized by a message of charity to all, the importance of a life of prayer and the need for vocations. The Christmas letter of 1943, for example, encouraged the spiritual growth of the sisters and spoke of the way it affected the children they taught and the children’s families.

Well-remembered is her promotion of praying the family rosary.

These paper letters were like a congregational glue connecting the members.
Joos Family Monroe Connections

Most IHMs know something of Msgr. Edward Joos’ story, at least from the time of his arrival in Monroe. He had left Belgium in 1856 for Detroit, where Bishop Lefevere assigned him to Ste. Anne. A year later, he was sent to serve as pastor of St. Mary Monroe and superior and director of the IHM Sisters, who had been founded 12 years earlier. This directorship became his life work until his death in 1901.

What many may not know is how Msgr. Joos influenced three family members to become participants in the IHM story. He brought his niece, Mary Vanderheyden, from Belgium in 1877 at the age of 22 to enter the IHM community. She took the name Sister Blanche. Already trained in art, she was assigned to St. Mary Academy to teach it as well as French and Spanish. Teaching there was her sole ministry for 50 years. She entered the infirmary in 1935 and died in 1938.

His nephew, Joseph Joos, who was born in Belgium in 1867, came to North America where he studied at Assumption College, Canada and then St. Mary Seminary, Cincinnati. He completed his education at the American College in Rome where he was ordained in 1891. His first assignment was to Dowagiac, Mich. where he built Holy Maternity church. In 1899, he was assigned to St. Mary Monroe near his uncle. Here he built the Romanesque sanctuary on the north end of the church and constructed the four room brick school known then as Sacred Heart Institute and today as St. Mary. He was a zealous and energetic pastor. He contracted tuberculosis and died in 1913 while visiting Belgium.

In 1891, when he was 12, Jules Joseph Siffer came to Monroe from Belgium to join his great uncle Rev. Edward Joos. He learned English, studied briefly for the priesthood and then decided to study medicine. He graduated from Detroit College of Medicine in 1901. He practiced in Monroe where he was one of the founders of Mercy Hospital. He also served as physician for the IHMs and their students at St. Mary Academy and Hall of the Divine Child. His one trip back to Europe was to accompany his cousin Rev. Joseph Joos who was seriously ill and on his final journey to his homeland. It fell to Siffer to bring Joseph’s body back for burial. Dr. Siffer died in 1945.

Joos and his three relatives made significant contributions to the Monroe area: Mary as an Academy teacher, Joseph as pastor of St. Mary parish, Jules Joseph Siffer as a physician and a founder of Mercy Hospital, and Edward himself as director of the IHM congregation.

Different Ideas of Fun

Mother Ruth Hankerd was the general superior of the congregation from 1930-1942, and she was a member of the general council for another 12 years. She was accustomed to “being in charge” and having her directives carried out immediately. As well-known as she was to the professed sisters, the novices really didn’t know her. Therein lies the tale.

Ruth had spent the last years of her life in a room on the main floor of the Motherhouse infirmary from which she could see what was going on. At the time of this story, Liguori Hall was being built as a wing-addition to the Motherhouse. It was to serve as a residence for retired sisters. A four-story-high scaffolding surrounded the wing. She had a wonderful view of the construction and often watched its progress.

According to Sister Margaret (Benedicta) Brennan, the director of novices at the time, it was a Sunday afternoon and the novices were outside having a good time. Of course their idea of recreating did not always correspond to Margaret’s or Ruth’s. As the story goes, a group of novices was having great fun climbing fairly high up on the scaffolding when Ruth saw them from her window. She rapped loudly to get their attention and wagged her finger at them. They noticed her and waved back, smiling all the time, but not halting their climb.

It wasn’t long before the phone in the novitiate rang. It was Ruth for Margaret Brennan. “Do you know what your novices are doing?” And, she proceeded to describe the whole activity. After dinner that evening when Margaret met with the novices in the refectory, she began by referring to a film produced by missionaries that they had seen several days earlier. In it, young native children were climbing up palm trees. “This may have been fun and funny for them; but it was not fun and funny when some of you climbed up the scaffolding around Liguori Hall this afternoon. Neither was it funny when you laughed, waved and continued climbing when a senior sister knocked on her window to get your attention and wagged her finger at you. And, it definitely was not funny when that sister, who is Mother Ruth, called me.”

Sister Colleen Sheridan, who was one of the climbers, still laughs when she recalls how much fun they had.