

Sister Nancy Sylvester grew up with her older sister, aunt and parents in Chicago and belonged to St. Felicitas Parish, where she met the IHMs. Although taught by the Adrian Dominicans in high school, she kept in touch with the IHM Sisters through membership in the St. Felicitas Sodality. She was a pious child who loved God and “wanted to be perfect,” in the way she understood it at the time – by becoming a nun.



Sister Nancy joined the community in 1966 as the changes from Vatican II were taking place. Initially, she was disappointed because she liked traditional religious life. As she began her formation, she was challenged to change in significant ways.

Because of this, during her novitiate, she thought she was losing her faith. She confided in Sister Margaret Brennan, who guided her and helped her discern her calling. Sister Nancy went to St. Louis University to complete her degree, majoring in philosophy and political science, and later completed a master’s degree in human development, concentrating on theology and economics.

She was at St. Louis University during the Vietnam War, the Cambodia invasion and the killings at Kent State. She became a draft counselor, working with conscientious objectors and participated in war protests to get the ROTC off campus. “I experienced how ‘dissent’ was part of being ‘loyal,’” she says. “You don’t have to stay mute and conform in order to be loyal to the institutions and structures that you are a part of.”

She taught social studies and religion at Marian High School and facilitated workshops addressing white privilege. After four years, she taught at Immaculata High School in Detroit where she experienced the connection between racism and sexism. After attending two summer seminars in Washington, D.C., with Network, a national Catholic social justice lobby founded by Catholic sisters, Sister Nancy joined the organization as a researcher. Later, she became a lobbyist and then its executive director, working on national and international issues and speaking on Catholic Social Justice Teaching.

After 15 years at Network, Sister Nancy was elected to the IHM Leadership Council. During her six-year term, she was elected as president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. After her term, she founded the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue, which addresses the transformation of consciousness through contemplation. She is a national and international speaker and a published author.



Sister Nancy has found joy in “becoming who I believe is my best self within the congregation.” She has been anchored by her faith, knowing God will always be changing for her. She is most grateful for her education; “the gift of intellectual curiosity;” and for the love and support of the community. She is very grateful to the community for allowing her mother to live at the Motherhouse for 10 years and for her sister to spend her last days here as well.