

# *A Brief History*

of the  
Sisters, Servants of the  
Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM)



Barbara G. Stanbridge, IHM

IHM *Monograph Series*

Icons: Theresa Maxis, The Holder of the Fire and Louis Gillet, Who is Like Fire  
Nancy Lee Smith, IHM, iconographer

©2006, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary  
Monroe, Michigan

# Introduction

**S**tories are key ways to keep alive a people, a vision, a dream. We tell stories to help people know who we are; where we came from; and where we are going. There are individual stories and group stories. When a community tells its story, it is never singular; rather each storyteller relates the facts from her/his perspective. Each of the particular insights helps us to understand the whole.

Storytelling is what these essays you will be reading are all about. They tell the story of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) of Monroe, Michigan, and the values we have tried to integrate into our sponsored educational institutions. We are telling the story primarily to you, the board members, administrators, faculty and staff of these institutions, so that you will get to know us better and join us in keeping our vision alive.

Over the last decade, the IHM Mission Integration Sponsorship Committee (MISC) has continually asked itself how we can make the IHM values come alive in our institutions now that there are fewer IHM Sisters. In the past, parents and students attending IHM schools could easily say, “it is an IHM school” and have a sense of what that meant. As times changed and fewer IHM Sisters were visibly present in these schools, we found ourselves needing to be clear about what makes this school an IHM school.

We formulated seven educational belief statements that seemed to capture this spirit; they follow this introduction. But statements that exist only on a page don’t come alive. They need a story to give them flesh, to make connections and to convey the energy necessary to keep living them into the future.

---

“We are telling the story  
primarily to you ...”

---

To try to bring these beliefs to life, the MISC invited some IHM Sisters to be part of a collaborative effort to write about key belief statements. We wanted the narrative to be historical and interpreted through each author’s unique lens. As a writing group, we reviewed each other’s essays multiple times, checking for historical accuracy and making sure the interpretation offered would resonate with the congregation.

We are pleased to offer these essays as a significant resource for you as you assume greater responsibility in living out the IHM vision in your institution. Although each essay is published separately, we hope you will find them interesting enough to read many, if not most, of them. Each essay tells its own story but all the essays tell a much fuller story of how IHM evolved and how it has and is affecting all of you in our sponsored schools.

We look forward to talking about the essays with you and would suggest planning time on various meeting agendas to reflect together on the story and how it impacts you and the future of your school. These essays are an inaugural step in our committee’s dream of having all current and future stakeholders in IHM institutions be so steeped in the IHM vision and so energized in living it out that the story of what makes an IHM school IHM continues well into the future.

*Nancy Sylvester, IHM  
Chair of the Mission Integration  
Sponsorship Committee*

# Core Educational Beliefs

---

Inspired by our founders, Theresa Maxis Duchemin and Louis Florent Gillet, the Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) have served the people of God in education since 1845.

The mission of the IHM-sponsored educational institutions includes personal and social transformation, which bear witness to the liberating mission of Jesus.

We believe our sponsored institutions are partners in mission by fostering excellence in education and by living into the following deeply held beliefs:

- a commitment to the **liberating mission of Jesus** with special focus on those who are poor, abandoned or oppressed;
- the **development of a Christian community** that witnesses to a profound respect for each human being and an acceptance of all persons;
- challenging students to make **decisions in the light of Gospel values** and global realities;
- encouraging students to **act on behalf of justice**;
- a commitment to eradicate the causes of oppression and injustice through a **feminist perspective** that empowers all;
- **ecological consciousness** that challenges all to recognize the interconnectedness and interdependence of all Creation and nurtures relationships that protect our common home; and
- a **holistic educational process** that fosters self-motivation, flexibility and openness to change.



# *A Brief History*

## of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) Monroe, Michigan

The intention of this history is to inspire our partners in ministry who are entrusted to guide an IHM-related institution or ministry by discernible IHM values. In addition, it is hoped that these pages will invigorate all who respond to the call to serve by understanding who IHMs are and how IHMs have evolved historically.

The IHM story begins with three women living in community in a log cabin on the Michigan frontier. The community evolves to more than 1,600 Monroe members (at its peak), to slightly less than 325 at this writing. Two other branches of IHMs in Pennsylvania, and the early relationship of the foundress with the Oblates Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, are also vital chapters in the same IHM story.

This brief history introduces some of the main characters who, at various stages of the community's life, shaped its response to the needs of the world. You are invited to reflect on how the community was in turn shaped by its response to the needs of the times and how your service will shape you.

---

---

### **Luke 4:16-21**

<sup>16</sup> Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

- <sup>18</sup> *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me.  
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,  
to proclaim release to the prisoners  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to liberate the oppressed,*
- <sup>19</sup> *and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* <sup>[a]</sup>  
(Common English Bible translation)
- 
-

---

## FRONTIER BEGINNINGS

---

In 1845, Fr. Louis Florent Gillet, CSsR, a priest of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (commonly known as “Redemptorists”) and Mother Theresa Maxis Duchemin, an early member of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first religious community for women of color in the United States, responded to the needs of French-speaking Catholics in Monroe, Michigan.

Theresa was of Haitian and English descent. Her mother, a Haitian refugee, was a ward of the Duchemin family, who were themselves well-off Haitian refugees in Baltimore. Her father was an English military officer and cousin of the Howards, a prestigious Baltimore family, and friend of the Duchemins. Her mother was apparently given to service the Englishman’s *needs* while he was visiting the Howards. It is reported that Maxis only saw her father once – at a distance. These events took place in the context of pre-Civil War America with its existing sexual mores and racial attitudes.

---

*“Being the only one familiar with three languages, I was more often on horseback than at home, always on the road.”*

*Louis Florent Gillet, CSsR*

---

Gillet, a French-speaking Belgian Redemptorist, was one of many missionary priests who wore themselves out meeting the needs of immigrant frontier communities.



Gillet not only served as pastor in Monroe, but rode on horseback from one community of mostly French-speaking Catholics to others composed of mostly Irish. He served nine outlying mission stations in a 60-mile radius of Monroe, as far north as Mt. Clemens and as far west as Hillsdale.

It was while conducting a retreat in Baltimore that Gillet first met Maxis, a well-educated woman fluent in English and French, and general superior at a time when the Oblate community seemed in danger of dissolving. Impressed with her skills and abilities, Gillet invited this light skinned, blue-eyed Oblate to come to Michigan to establish a community of sisters and a school for girls to serve the Monroe area French-speaking parishioners.

Uncertain as to whether the Oblate community would survive, Maxis, who had become an educator of the poor in Baltimore with the help of Mother Mary Lange, the foundress of the Oblates, was attracted to the spirit of the Redemptorists and the prospect of a more stable religious life. She accepted the invitation. With Ann Shaaff, also an Oblate, and Theresa Renauld from Grosse Pointe, Mich., the community was established at a ceremony conducted by Gillet on Nov. 10, 1845 – a date IHMs celebrate as Founders' Day.

These young frontier missionaries were inflamed with love for the poor and uneducated. A testament to their zeal and skill was the opening of a school that would become the first St. Mary's Young Ladies Academy in January 1846, only two short months after the community's founding. Gillet also enlarged St. Mary's parish church and built a three-story residence attached to the church for his Redemptorist community.

Despite the promising start, the community was soon plagued with misunderstandings from their religious superiors and bishops, and both founders lived as exiles for a significant portion of their lives. Gillet ended his days as a Cistercian monk at Hautecombe Abbey, a monastery located in the French Alps. Maxis came home to the IHM Sisters in Pennsylvania after being banned from the Monroe community and having lived 17 years with the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa (Grey Nuns) in Ottawa, Canada.

Both founders were imbued with the spirit of the founder of the Redemptorists, St. Alphonsus Liguori, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian

moral theologian known for his work with the poor and abandoned of Naples. Alphonsus in turn had a great devotion to St. Teresa of Avila, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish contemplative Carmelite and reformer of her order. Both Teresa and Alphonsus ran counter to the teachings of the official Church in their day and suffered greatly, as did many of their contemporaries. The spirit of Alphonsus in his zeal for the poor and abandoned, and Teresa of Avila's spirit of contemplative prayer, have permeated the IHM congregation from its earliest days.

The initial need Gillet had called Maxis to meet was the education of girls in the French community of Monroe, Mich. To that end, St. Mary Academy was founded, and missioning to several other parish schools in and around Monroe followed. As vocations to the young community increased, the sisters took on parish schools in Detroit, the fifth of which was Most Holy Trinity in 1867, where IHMs ministered until 2012. In 1882, two years after the Redemptorists founded Most Holy Redeemer Parish, IHMs were invited by the pastor, Rev. Egidius Smulders, CSSR, to begin a parish school, where an IHM presence still continues.



---

## EARLY TENSIONS

---

In 1857, because of Maxis's multiple differences with Bishop Lefevere of Detroit – and (as surviving documents suggest) an underlying racism on his part – and because of the departure of the Redemptorists from Monroe in 1855, Lefevere appointed Fr. Edward Joos, a newly ordained young immigrant cleric from Belgium, as the director-superior of the community. This appointment increased tensions, as Maxis was known as the religious superior of the community. In a series of missteps that had many unintended consequences for the community and for Mother Theresa herself, Maxis was sent East and Fr. Joos reigned as superior of the Monroe community – a position he held for more than 40 years. During this time, sisters were elected to leadership positions with the title of Mother, but Joos held the title of director and functioned as superior general.

A year later, Maxis was invited by Fr. John Vincent O'Reilly to staff St. Joseph Academy in Susquehanna, Pa., at the behest of John Neumann, CSsR, the bishop of Philadelphia. Maxis was eager to have the support of another Redemptorist in completing the community's

Rule, which was based on the Redemptorist Rule. The first mission went well. But when a request to take on a second mission came, many difficulties developed with the bishop of Detroit and the bishops in the East as she pursued the possibility. Some of the difficulty derived from the position of clerics vis-a-vis women religious at the time and the underlying racism of two of the bishops involved who knew of Maxis' origins. These difficulties and abuses of power led to her exile and the development of three separate IHM communities: one in Michigan and two in Pennsylvania. All three communities exist today and claim their common heritage from the Oblates and Redemptorists.

Joos' tenure was marked by a strong current of Jansenism, which seems to have been introduced and maintained by him and fostered by Mother Mary Joseph Walker who succeeded Mother Theresa. This 17<sup>th</sup>-century cross-current in Catholicism served to keep adherents guilty, legalistic and scrupulous, thereby assuring compliance with rules the hierarchy promulgated. Given the disruptions with the two founders, the hierarchs were pleased with Joos' tenure.



---

A more positive contribution of Joos' tenure was his fostering of the St. André method, a highly respected French/Belgian method of education. The St. André method had been brought to Monroe by another Belgian, Sister Theresa Persyn, who transferred from the Sisters of Charity to the Monroe IHMs in 1862. This philosophy and method of education, based on the belief in the dignity of each student as a child of God, meant the whole person was to be educated, with a focus on reasoning rather than rote learning. The student was taught to think and reason and to appreciate science, arts, mathematics, history and literature. This philosophy became a hallmark of IHMs as educators. Regardless of the prescribed curriculum, IHMs fostered learning beyond the text, the catechism or the state/Church-established curricula.

The shift in leadership created significant tension within the very fabric of the community. Its two zealous and strong-willed founders – Gillet and Maxis – were replaced by two perfectionistic types – Fr. Edward Joos and Mother Mary Joseph Walker – who became better known than

the founders because of the suppression of contact with the original founders. Over time, this tension became part of the community DNA. There was on the one hand a deep desire and drive to attend to the poor and most abandoned in society and on the other, a need to conform and not “rock the boat.”

The memory of Theresa Maxis was all but erased during this period. Theresa was reintroduced to the community through IHM Sister Rosalita Kelly's *No Greater Service*, published for the community's centennial, and was claimed as co-founder in 2000 after extensive research with the two Pennsylvania IHM communities and the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to a close and the 20<sup>th</sup> century dawned, IHMs were established as respected and sought-after educators with a steady flow of new members. In 1900, there were 229 sisters teaching in 34 schools in the Monroe and Detroit areas and outstate.

---

## A NEW CENTURY

---

Joos died in May 1901, leaving the community stable and, for the most part, unaware of its tumultuous early years. Mother Mechtildis McGrail, elected the previous summer, assured the sisters that the congregation was the work of God, not of man, and that God would see it through. She became the first IHM Sister to exercise the full authority of the office and served as general superior until 1918.

By the 1920s, IHMs staffed and administered more schools in Detroit than any other religious community. They also began to staff several high schools at a time when movement toward universal high school education was just beginning. During this period, St. Mary College, an outgrowth of St. Mary Academy in Monroe, changed its name to Marygrove, moved to Detroit at the request of Bishop Michael Gallagher and became the first women's college in Michigan.

The congregation itself and the number of schools IHMs staffed continued to grow. Sisters were invited to staff schools in other parts of the country, first in Ohio and later in Illinois and Wisconsin.

During this time of apostolic growth, the community seemed far removed from the log cabin of its beginnings. It had built a substantial Motherhouse in Monroe where novices prepared for religious life; health care needs of the elderly and infirm were met; and congregational life was administered. IHM was gifted with several able leaders at a time when women were not self-determining in the larger society. These women were able to chart the community's path and, because a male cleric was no longer the superior of the community, the general superior had considerable authority to focus resources for mission.

Because of the IHM love for education from the earliest days of the congregation, IHMs prepared themselves to teach well and had formal degrees long before they were required of teachers. In Michigan, IHMs risked the censure of the bishop by sending sisters to the University of Michigan when it was forbidden for women religious to be educated in secular institutions. The IHM superior, with the support of a couple of understanding priests, creatively escaped censure by sending women who were beginning their preparation for religious life (postulants) and thus not yet officially members of the congregation.

---

## MOTHER DOMITILLA: 1918-1930

---

Into this milieu came Mother Domitilla Donohue – one of the leaders who had more than the usual influence on the community and the development of its spirit of zeal. The name is ironically appropriate, as Domitilla was a force to be reckoned with. Responding to the invitation of Bishop Michael Gallagher, she moved the college from Monroe to Detroit and insisted that the architects create a campus to rival Eastern schools. In her eagerness to develop a first-class institution of learning, she denied in a letter to a researching historian that Theresa Maxis, a woman of color, was the IHM Theresa Maxis. Donohue feared such a disclosure would dissuade parents from sending their white daughters to the new Detroit college. And at the same time, in anticipation of the role for women who would be educated at Marygrove, one of the two major buildings on campus was named, not in honor of a Catholic saint as would have been more customary, but in honor of a laywoman – Madame Marie Therese Cadillac, wife of Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, the French founder of Detroit.

Domitilla Donohue was an 1882 graduate of St. Mary Academy and, like many others, the daughter of Irish immigrants. She led the congregation from 1918 to 1930, overseeing the move of Marygrove College to Detroit;



seeing the congregation through the fire that destroyed St. Mary Academy and the economic crash that left most of the country in dire straits; while also standing in solidarity with other Church leaders and the laity against the influence of the Ku Klux Klan and other anti-Catholic movements. In the midst of this turbulence, Donohue continued the practice of her predecessor by sending postulants to get their degrees at the University of Michigan, adding Catholic institutions when they became open to sisters. Catholic University was first; Notre Dame, Fordham and others followed.

---

---

This was at a time when sisters were only paid a meager annual salary for their labors; living out the example of Acts 4:32 to “hold all things in common,” IHMs were able to continue and grow the great work of Catholic education.

The time preceding and following World War I was marked with significant anti-Catholic turmoil, including a movement in Michigan to eliminate all but public schools. Anti-Catholic agitation was so great at one time there was fear of arson at the two IHM boarding schools in Monroe. When women won the right to vote in 1920, the IHM Sisters registered, voted, believed and taught that active involvement in the political process was not only a right, but a duty.

IHM statistics for this time show in 1919 that IHMs staffed 41 parochial schools and two boarding schools in Michigan with 400 sisters assisted by lay teachers, and that they taught more than 21,000 children. In 1930, the count was 60 parochial schools, two boarding schools, 32,000 students, 600 sisters and 130 lay teachers. The boarding schools were both in Monroe; St. Mary Academy, which was destroyed by fire in 1929 and later rebuilt during Mother Ruth’s era, and Hall of the Divine Child for boys (1915-1980).

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, IHMs were asked to staff schools for parishes of the rising middle class. While the diversity of schools served continued to grow, IHMs maintained their commitment to a philosophy of teaching the whole person, and they maintained the same standards in schools for the working class that were held for the middle class.

The sisters supported their own education, obtaining bachelor’s and master’s degrees by living frugally and holding all in common. In the cities close to Detroit and Monroe, the community was fed by a system of rotating deliveries to each parish convent from six farms the sisters owned in Monroe. Local leaders (referred to as “house superiors”) were appointed by the mother general and ensured that both the spirit and discipline of the community were maintained in each house. These were days when religious life operated like the military, and a “good sister” went where she was sent and did what she was told. She believed the good of the whole was served by the decisions of the mother general, who took into account the needs of various local parish missions.



The community carried on its mission of excellence in education and strict observance of religious life without remarkable shifts until Teresa McGivney became the general superior in the 1940s. Although the community had been founded by a Belgian missionary, Fr. Gillet, and it had always contributed financially to missionary efforts, it had never missioned a sister farther away from Monroe than Miami, Fla., until 1947, when McGivney was asked for sisters to come to Puerto Rico. Her decision to honor that request was an act that set the community on a more adventurous course than had any prior event in its history.

Against the wishes of her council and the strong objections of her predecessor, McGivney asked for volunteers. Many sisters stepped forward to volunteer, and the following year, four sisters embarked on the Puerto Rico mission. This Teresa, reflecting the spirit of the founders, willing to risk what *was* for what *was needed*, encouraged the congregation to serve the poor and abandoned in a more radical way – one demanding that sisters leave their American culture and enter into the culture of the other. This too was not without struggle. It should be noted that this initiative was followed by later missions in Uganda, Kenya, East Africa, South Africa, West Africa, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Grenada, Chile, Nicaragua, Brazil, Honduras and Mexico.

Shortly after this invitation, sisters were met with another change that would have far-reaching impact. Sister Mary Emil Penet was a pre-eminent educator and daughter of St. Alphonsus – someone who, it is said, taught future teachers how to teach math using principles of social justice. In her work with the National Catholic Education Association, Penet realized that all sisters needed to be better prepared for teaching. She was instrumental in establishing the Sister Formation Conference. This initiative encouraged all communities to prepare their sisters with a bachelor's degree before beginning their teaching careers/professional work. IHMs were quick to take up this practice in the mid-1950s, much to the consternation of parish pastors who were waiting for sisters to take charge of the classrooms of the post-war generation. Up until this juncture, many IHMs went into teaching after a year or two of college and finished their degrees over many years of summer school. Now sisters would begin their work with a bachelor's degree in hand and work on their master's degrees during the summer months.

The continuing emphasis on well-prepared sisters in the classroom led the community to send more sisters for advanced degrees. This deepened their involvement in the burgeoning liturgical renewal, Catholic Scripture studies (a vibrant field following the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1949) and the theology of postwar European schools with theologians such as Karl Rahner and Yves Congar. IHM

Sisters in Monroe frequently had guest lectures and summer courses with significant Catholic scholars; they were eager and open to learning more than was offered by Bishop Fulton Sheen on national TV, the Baltimore Catechism and their Church history books.

---

## MOVING INTO



THE  
'60s

---

*M*other Anna Marie Grix, successor to McGivney, began her term of office in 1954. Grix was a well-loved, gifted educator and musician. At Immaculata High School, located at the southeast corner of the Marygrove campus, she was known for creating a warm family community as well as strict observance. During her time in office, she opened two additional all-girls high schools – one in suburban Detroit: Marian High School, in 1959 at the request of the pastors in Birmingham, Mich., and a second in suburban Chicago: Immaculate Heart of Mary High School, in 1960. These schools were opened over the objections of some in the IHM community who felt the community’s resources would be better-utilized in cities such as Detroit, Flint, Mich., and Akron, Ohio, where the number of post-war poor was increasing with the influx of African-Americans to northern cities in search of solid factory jobs. Grix

responded that having financial means did not negate people’s spiritual needs. It was thought at the time that young women from the schools of more affluent suburbs would be future students for Marygrove and partners with the sisters in ministry.

It was not surprising that Grix opened these schools for young women. Indeed, she was following in the footsteps of the IHM founding and her own experience. What was surprising was her response to the cries of the poor. Two burgeoning Catholic movements – the Cursillo and Better World movements – added impetus to the sisters’ ever-enlarging world view. The Cursillo was a worldwide lay movement that started in Spain in the form of an intensely emotional retreat experience to bring participants in touch with the core of the Gospel message of Jesus. The Better World Movement engaged the laity in social change at a systemic level. Grix appreciated

both and personally attended a Cursillo. In response to the call from Pope John XXIII for congregations to send members to Latin America, Grix responded by sending four IHMs to the mission of the Archdiocese of Detroit in Recife, Brazil, one of the poorest areas in Latin America. IHMs ministered there for more than 40 years. This situation was unique in that it was not a school ministry, but one of co-ministering with priests to communities and people in need in a developing country. Grix also invited priests serving Detroit's poorest parishes to preach the sisters' annual eight-day retreat in 1964, calling each IHM to hear the cries of the poor before the national War on Poverty was launched.

The sister formation college on the Monroe campus added to the momentum as the young sisters preparing to teach were reading Ivan Illich's *Missionary Poverty*, John Griffin's *Black Like Me* and Michael Harrington's *The Other America*. These were times greatly influenced by President Kennedy's challenge: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country;" his pledge to put a man on the moon; and his creation of the Peace Corps to send young Americans for service to the world beyond U.S. borders.

As the lazy 1950s turned into the revolutionary 1960s, IHMs – already prepared by the energy of liturgical renewal, new Scripture studies and theological learning – were ready for Pope John XXIII's *Aggiornamento*, which was to the Catholic Church what Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* was for the USSR.

---

“These were times  
**greatly influenced by**  
President Kennedy’s challenge:  
‘Ask not what your country  
can do for you;  
ask **what you can do**  
for your country . . .’”

---

It was also during this time that two IHM Sisters, Johnice (Helen) Cohan and Elizabeth (Isabel) Fowkes, founded the Pius XII Religious Education Center affiliated with Lumen Vitae, an International Centre of Studies in Religious Education in Brussels, Belgium. The sisters and the center were pioneers in creating textbooks and catechetical materials reflective of the emerging theology and applications to teaching of noted child psychologists Jean Piaget and Josef Jungman. The Pius XII Center engaged scholars from Europe and the United States for a graduate program in religious studies to fill the growing need for educators grounded in the thinking of the profoundly transformative Church event that became known as Vatican II.

---

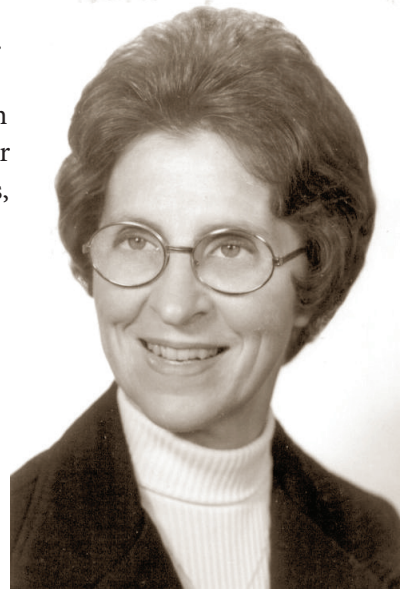
## THE IHM REFOUNDING ERA

---

In retrospect, it could be said the community was re-founded under Joos and then again in the time of Mechtildis McGrail. The next time the community would face re-founding came immediately preceding, during and following the Second Vatican Council, which took place from 1962 to 1965. Because each sister was well-educated and a number of sisters had advanced degrees, IHMs were uniquely positioned to live fully into and out of the documents and decrees of Vatican II.

Vatican II was a unique event in the life of the Church that, coming in the 1960s, called everything into question as sisters reconsidered their original charism and mission. As a result, many traditional and monastic trappings that were once considered sacrosanct were now discarded; e.g., habits, customs, schedules, styles of prayer and – perhaps most important – ministries. The Second Vatican Council coincided with much civil unrest in the U.S. over the war in Vietnam, the civil rights struggle, the second wave of feminism in U. S. history and the demise of the parish school due to white flight from the big cities. An added factor locally was the passage of Proposal C in Michigan, which amended the state constitution and removed even indirect aid to private schools.

At this time, the community once again had many gifted sisters. One in particular was a younger member of the community and first IHM theologian, Margaret Brennan. Known at that time as Sister Benedicta, Brennan worked with the young sisters in formation, shaping their spirituality with a liturgical and Scriptural basis that replaced the remnants of a devotional pietistic framework left from the Joos era. She also worked on the “Rule Committee” for revision of the IHM Constitutions, the document that governed all aspects of how IHM life was lived and how authority was exercised. Subsequently, as it became clear that the community needed to actively move into the Vatican II renewal, Brennan was elected as superior general in 1966 and left office as president in 1976. At that time, the IHMs entered the period of re-founding, thereby becoming the IHM community we know today.





---

IHMs came to this moment of refounding with a rich tapestry woven from the hands of many women of preceding decades – women who were visionaries, builders and always educators. From the 1960s through the 1990s, the community continued to establish its refoundation. Much like its first founding, this process was not without tension, stress and significant cost. In 1964, the community numbered more than 1,600 sisters, and by the 1990s, that number was halved. This was due to departures of many who had entered religious life before Vatican II and found, for a variety of reasons, that they no longer felt called to religious life. Also, because of the Council's affirmation of the "*universal call to holiness*," whereby religious life was no longer seen as a pre-eminent call of the baptized, this meant some who might have felt called previously now saw their vocation as laity. Added to this was the impact of the second wave of feminism, which was successful in opening up new opportunities for women's equality and personal growth and the decline of large Catholic families.

The times called for IHMs to act on their beliefs. This call was apparent in many developments, one of which was the decision led by Sister Jane Mary Howard, interim

president of Marygrove (1968-1970) to actively recruit and award scholarships to African-American girls to attend Marygrove College. This at the same college that in a previous era, Mother Domitilla had been fearful of even admitting that the community's foundress was of Haitian descent.

Also during this time, IHMs created a process for women and men who wished to be in relationship with the ministry, community and spirituality of the congregation to become what is known today as IHM Associates. This relationship has attracted former vowed members, ministry partners and others in the spirit of Teresa of Avila and Alphonsus Liguori to walk in the footsteps of Maxis and Gillet and live into the words of Luke 4.

IHMs – in many ways caught up in the ferment of the times – were asking themselves what it meant to be "in the spirit of the founders;" to be with the poor and abandoned; and to stand with those marginalized and experiencing discrimination. Perhaps no incident highlighted this more than IHMs' very public withdrawal from a parish school on the east side of Detroit where they had served since its opening in 1946.

St. Raymond was founded to serve the needs of the post-war population. The parish, on the outskirts of the city, served many first-generation Americans who were no longer renters but now first-time homeowners. By the 1960s, the population had shifted to include many police and fire fighters, who were required by law to live in the city. The parish had sent 10 young women to the IHM community and its school was where many young sisters began their teaching ministries.

Despite these noteworthy contributions, the parish council voted in 1971 not to admit African-American students to the school, rejecting the voice and opinion of the sisters missioned to the school. The sisters withdrew and did so publicly before cameras on national

TV. It was an incident that exemplified the growing issues of race division in America's urban centers. The action also highlighted the issue of local self-determination on the part of the sisters in relation to the parish council and the archdiocese. It was a time when the Gospel imperative of Luke 4, so central to IHM Sisters, seemed foreign to those who were fearful and threatened.

The question of whether the IHM Sisters had taken the right action was debated for some time. But the witness of their courage the night of the open meeting would not be forgotten by any who attended. Though it was not Selma or Montgomery, it was a powerful witness for the dignity of all.

---

## A NEW AGE EMERGING

---

*A*s a result of the significant changes in the Vatican II Church, in American life and in understanding the psychology of human development, the IHM community, over time, evolved in its leadership structure from a hierarchical model to a collegial team model and learned new skills for deep listening, group consensus-building and communal discernment. This shift was perhaps never so evident as in the process used to move the community from an intellectual commitment to sustainability to the green renovation of the 1932 Motherhouse in the late 1990s.

This building, considered home for the sisters, is the center of IHM communal life and the symbolic core of right relationship. A plaque in the front foyer, dating back to the time of its construction during the Great Depression in the administration of Mother Ruth Hankerd (1930-1942) quotes Mother Ruth:

---

**“Home is where each lives for the other and all live for God.”**

---



This home that could have been torn down or sold was instead renovated using the best principles of sustainable ecological design: geothermal, graywater systems, recycling, reusing and redesigning many materials from the old for the new. The sense of right relationship expanded from the sisters with each other to the needs of the poor, to the whole Earth community. This effort, which has won the IHM Sisters many national awards, caused them to sacrifice on many fronts and witness to the needs of the planet over the values of a consumer throw-away society. It is a living testament to the sisters' commitment to the Earth Charter (2004) to continue using the building to educate all who visit to care for the sustainability of the planet.

The decision to “go green” was made by a process that involved all levels of the community in the research, planning and decision-making. For better or worse, no longer do the few in leadership make the decisions. Instead, full participation in all phases of community life is the norm. Every six years, the community elects a team of IHM women to listen to and facilitate the community's ongoing discernment of direction.

---

## IHM IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

---

The turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century found IHMs ministering on several continents with the fire of Louis Gillet and Theresa Maxis' love for the poor and marginalized. Whether on the college campus, in parishes or retreat ministries, in K-12 classrooms or in organizations of social service and action, IHMs are essentially educators. The threads of Alphonsus Ligouri, who saw poverty as a moral issue long before the concept of "social justice" was articulated by Pope Leo XIII, and Teresa of Avila, the great contemplative and religious reformer, have been woven into a fine tapestry of service, social justice and spirituality.

IHMs continue to sponsor Marygrove College and Marian High School grounded in the following stated beliefs:

---

*The mission of the IHM sponsored educational institutions includes personal and social transformation, which witnesses to the liberating mission of Jesus.*

*We believe our sponsored institutions are partners in mission by fostering excellence in education and by living into the following deeply held beliefs:*

*a commitment to the **liberating mission of Jesus** with special focus on those who are poor, abandoned, or oppressed.*

*the **development of a Christian community** which witnesses to a profound respect for each human being and an acceptance of all persons.*

*challenging students to make **decisions in the light of Gospel values** and global realities.*

*encouraging students to **act on behalf of justice**.*

*a commitment to eradicate the causes of oppression and injustice through a **feminist perspective** that empowers all.*

***ecological consciousness** that fosters an interdependence of all nature, nurturing relationships that will enhance the well being of the earth and all persons.*

*a **holistic educational process**, which fosters self-motivation, flexibility and openness to change.*

---



These same beliefs are evident in the IHM partnership with the Basilian Fathers in co-sponsoring Detroit Cristo Rey High School, a legacy project and testament to all the IHMs who labored in the city of Detroit and in formal education. Detroit Cristo Rey is in a national network of schools for those who are under-resourced and unable to finance a college preparatory education.

This IHM sponsorship was undertaken with the knowledge that there were no longer any Catholic co-ed high schools in Detroit and the public school system is ranked among the lowest in the country. IHMs believed that Cristo Rey youth, primarily African-American and Hispanic, with potential for college could be given an opportunity through a Basilian and IHM leadership, partnership with a dedicated lay staff and commitment of an involved business community.

---

*"I desire to be **everywhere** when I see so many needs." ~ Louis Florent Gillet, CSsR*

---



Deep Faith. Courageous Spirit. Action for Justice.

*Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the congregational title, was chosen in the mid-1800s at a time when the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was being considered and declared in 1854, and when the role of women in Church and society was defined as service.*

*Today, IHMs live their call as a community of sisterhood in the heart of Mary, who witnessed to the Christ presence by supporting women, pondering in her heart and attending to the needs of the people. We go forward, with our partners in ministry – the fire of Theresa Maxis, a woman of color, and Louis Florent Gillet, a zealous immigrant missionary – taking our place in the ever-evolving universe.*

For more in-depth exploration of the movements referred to in this writing, please refer to the other monographs in this series.

1. Ecological Consciousness: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Imperative

2. Entrusted: The IHM Tradition In Education

3. Sponsorship As a Bridge

### *References*

① *No Greater Service*, Rosalita Kelley, IHM: An in-depth historical account of the first 100 years of the Monroe IHM community.

② *Building Sisterhood, A Feminist History of the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*: Essays on many important women and movements in the IHM community by members of the community.

③ *A Compelling Vision, History of the IHM Overseas Missions*, Mary Jo Maher, IHM: An historical view of the locations and women who served in the overseas missions.

④ *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860*, Diane Battes Morrow: A revelatory history of the first congregation for women of color from which Theresa Maxis Duchemin came.

⑤ *For Faith and Fortune: The Education of Catholic Immigrants in Detroit, 1805-1925*, JoEllen Vinyard: An account of Catholic education in Detroit at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century showing the influence of the IHMs at that time, including information on the anti-Catholic sentiment of the 1920s.

⑥ *I Desire to Be Everywhere*, Gilbert Ahr Enderle, CSsR: A compelling biography of Louis Florent Gillet, which explores his years as a Redemptorist on the frontier and his many difficulties with his superiors – written and researched by a brother Redemptorist.

⑦ *IHM Archives staff*, who graciously fact-checked and verified dates for this writing. Many of the original documents of these historic years are available for further reading.

⑧ *Photos*: page 5, St. Mary Academy, circa 1910; page 17, 1994 IHM Leadership Council.

---

*Barbara G. Stanbridge, IHM*

**Barbara G. Stanbridge, IHM**, serves as the IHM Mission Integration coordinator, facilitates other religious communities in responding to the signs of the times and was instrumental in the founding of Detroit Cristo Rey High School. A graduate of Marygrove College, she holds master's degrees in religious education and human resource development; did post-graduate work in Gestalt Theory and Systems Development at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland; and doctoral studies at the University of Michigan in group studies and leadership.

---



**Deep Faith. Courageous Spirit. Action for Justice.**

610 West Elm Ave. • Monroe, MI 48162 - 7909  
[ihmsisters.org](http://ihmsisters.org)

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SISTERS, SERVANTS OF  
THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY (IHM)

*IHM Monograph Series*

© 2016

Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary  
Monroe, Michigan