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A collection of recent discoveries and activities in the IHM Archives



## *Surprise request brings with it a surprise gift*

The Archives recently received an inquiry from Ludwine Persyn in Wingene, Belgium. He knew a Sister Theresia Persyn had left Belgium to do mission work among Native Americans in the U.S. and had become an IHM. Did we have any information about her, he asked.

Indeed, we do. Theresia Persyn was born Sept. 2, 1817 – 200 years ago – in Thielt, Belgium. Her father, Charles, was a farmer. Theresia felt called to religious life and entered the convent in Wingene on June 26, 1838. She was professed a Sister of Charity on Feb. 11, 1839, when their membership was still in the single digits.

Sister Theresia spent 25 years there. Her requests to go to America were repeatedly denied. Finally, she was allowed to write to another Belgium native, Bishop

Peter Paul Lefevere, in Detroit, which she did on June 14, 1861. He sent her letter on to Father Edward Joos, who wrote back to Sister Theresia listing all the reasons NOT to come, saying he wasn't sure his tiny congregation would even survive the war. Besides, he added, he could use a Belgian religious only if she were "well-versed in French or in English or could teach lace-making." Father Joos relented the following year and she arrived in Monroe on Nov. 25, 1862, at the age of 45. With the community number 17, she was soon appointed Mistress of Novices and she went on to hold every position except Mother Superior.

During the year she waited in Belgium, she attended St. Andre Normal School in Bruges and studied the most up-to-date methods of



teaching. She brought her notebooks to Monroe. They were translated into English and the IHM sisters used the St. Andre system for 60 years.

They celebrated her Golden Jubilee on Feb. 11, 1889. Her long years with the IHM paralleled Father Joos himself.

The Motherhouse Chronicles tell us that "On Tuesday, May 21 (1901), Sister was able to go to the Chapel; there viewing the remains of our dear Rev. Father (Joos), she seemed to chide him for going to Heaven before her. Apparently he heeded her rebuke." She died the

next morning.

After we related all this in an e-mail to modern-day Ludwine Persyn, we added, "Sadly, we have no photo of Sister Theresa." His return e-mail was a stunner. "And now a surprise," he wrote. "We have two old paintings of sisters." They had just discovered one was marked with the name of Theresia Persyn. (See above.)

"Now I have a clearer picture of who she was and why she didn't stay here, in the convent of Wingene," he added. "I think it was too small for all her dreams."

*Final note: As an Academy student from 1896 to 1900, Mary McGivney worked in the mission room with Theresa Persyn. Theresa died on May 22, 1901, and Mary McGivney entered the novitiate that December, eventually taking the name Teresa after her mentor.*

# The great chase: IHMs and their Ph.Ds.

By Jennifer Meacham,  
IHM Archivist

It all started with the discovery that among the multiple boxes of Margaret Brennan's documents and publications in the IHM Archives, we could not locate a copy of her dissertation.

Margaret received her Ph.D. from Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, in 1953 – the first IHM to earn a doctorate in theology and one of the first women to ever do so. I emailed the school's archives in early January and shortly thereafter received a reply and a scanned copy of "The Immaculate Heart of Mary is the Seat of Wisdom by which All Men are Led to Knowledge of the Truth."

Mission accomplished. Or was it? This endeavor raised an obvious and nagging question: What other dissertations are missing from our collection? I had to know – and then I had to find them!

So, using an index created by Diann Cousino of all theses and dissertations housed in the Archives and some

## For the Record:

- IHM-earned master's degrees: 517
- IHM-earned doctorates: 82
- First Ph.D. earned by an IHM: Sister Mary McGrath, 1923, Catholic University (pictured below, left)
- Most recent Ph.D. earned by an IHM: Sister Lisandra Pedraza, 2006, Ohio State University (pictured below, right)
- Most distant study site: Sister Judith Coyle, 2004, University of South Africa
- Most tongue-twisting English title on an IHM dissertation: "The Relative Proportions of Stereoisomeric Oximes Formed in the Oximation of Unsymmetrical Ketones," Sister Xaveria Barton, 1938, University of Michigan



investigative work by Deb Saul of all the doctorate degrees earned by IHMs over the years, I compared what we could have with what we actually had.



Wow. All our data (assembled from various archival records) led us to a sum of 22 dissertations by IHM Sisters that we did not have, which felt like a real gap

in our collection.

We chose to focus primarily on those of deceased sisters and any others that might be easily accessible. I reached out to a former colleague from my days as a college librarian and was able to acquire electronic copies of seven dissertations available to researchers through a service called ProQuest. I then obtained scanned copies of four others from very accommodating library staff members at Saint Louis University, Fordham, and Penn, and purchased a hard copy of yet another from a used book website called Alibris. Money well spent.

This brought the number down to a modest total of just 10 dissertations, all written by living sisters, that are not yet in the IHM Archives.

Considering the large number of doctorates earned by IHM scholars – among them doctors of philosophy, education, ministry, divinity, sacred theology, and juris doctorates – that's not bad. Of course we would welcome, with relief and satisfaction, the final 10 to make our collection complete.

## When Henry Ford came to dance at the Academy

Students at St. Mary Academy on April 11, 1929, were dressed up and demonstrating the “old-time dances” for two very special guests, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford. The famous automaker had accepted the Academy students’ invitation to attend “an exhibition of old fashioned dancing.”

It seems the students had touched on a favorite pastime of the couple from Dearborn. Mr. Ford did not like the crazy dances of the 1920s, believing the country dances of the previous generation were better

suited to proper social training. He found a dancing instructor in New Hampshire who shared his beliefs. Benjamin B. Lovett thought he'd be in Michigan a month. He stayed 20 years. Ford established dancing schools for everyone, children to Ford execs.

Besides watching the Academy students perform waltzes, minuets, a quadrille, a traditional Virginia reel, square dancing and something called the badger gavotte, an old French dance, the Fords joined in for almost an hour. “More than one



youngster will be able to tell her grandchildren,” *The Evening News* reported, “that once upon a time

she danced with the richest man in all the world and the greatest industrial genius, perhaps of all time.”

## How curiosities from around the world ended up in Academy museum

Catherine Biry was born in Switzerland and joined the IHM novitiate in 1859. She became the chief architect of the early St. Mary’s Academy Museum. She began her religious vocation teaching, but before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century she began collecting items from around the world that were housed on the top floor of the first Academy on the banks of the River Raisin. Sister Catherine corresponded with professionals in many scientific fields at the Smithsonian Institution and the University of Michigan. One remarkable contact – Father William Reaney, U.S. Navy Chaplain – was stationed on Admiral Dewey’s flagship and sent around the world by President Theodore Roosevelt. He sent her objects of interest from

each port of call, finally writing to her, “You have something from each of the seven seas.”

When she died on Sept. 29, 1924, she was 80, the oldest member of the IHM community at that time.



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*Since 2000, all IHM sisters have been encouraged to submit individual chronicles to the IHM Archives. These records about your own life and ministry over the course of a year or more add breadth and depth to the documented history of the IHM Sisters. Your contribution will enrich the future record of the IHM, so please be sure your life's story is included in the community's story.*

### *Discipline and precision launched the littlest students to top honors*

Mother's Day was an exciting time at the IHM's Hall of the Divine Child. A field day was held every Mother's Day when the boys went through a series of drills judged by officers of the US Army. May 8, 1954, was a memorable day for Co. D, the first and second graders. Sister Joyce (Rose Anthony) Duroske had been working with the little ones, emphasizing precision and discipline. She tried to convince them they could do even better than the older boys. She remembers, "It rained the night before and there were puddles of water everywhere. I told them if they saw a puddle to march right through it. They were a little apprehensive, since they were proud of how shiny their shoes



were." The older boys weaved around the standing water, but Co. D., recalls Sister Joyce, "did their drills and marched on – right through the puddles! They marched in a very straight line. The parents watching went

crazy!" Co. D took the Conduct Award, a Platoon Award and the coveted Mother Day Trophy, the first time in the history of the school the littlest guys took the top honor.