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Immigrant Church to University: Growth of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Eastern Pennsylvania

Marie Hubert Kealy, IHM

Documenting the growth of religious congregations of women in the United States is a study parallel to the growth of the Church on this continent. Just as the swelling numbers of immigrants led to the formation of new dioceses in the nineteenth century, the need for schools, hospitals and other social services led to the arrival of European congregations and to the establishing of American communities of women.

These congregations have been a major force in the teaching apostolate of the Church in the United States, many of them expanding from frontier missions to institutions of higher education.

Celebrating the bicentennial of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia is cause for examining the history of the Church in Pennsylvania and, particularly, the congregations of women religious that have been active contributors to that history.

Among these congregations, founded in the nineteenth century, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM Sisters) have long been associated with the educational apostolate of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, and their history needs to be part of the bicentennial commemoration. Although there were no IHMs in 1808 when the Diocese of Philadelphia was founded, one hundred years later, in the centenary year of the diocese, the sisters broke ground for the institution that would become the first Catholic college for women in the Philadelphia area. The story of this growth offers a reflection on the sisters' response to immigration and the role of individual bishops in determining the development and work of religious congregations.

The IHM story can be framed by the influence of two women, both pioneers. Mother Theresa Maxis was one of the three founding members of the IHM Sisters and a firm supporter of the sisters' move to Pennsylvania. Mother M. Camilla Maloney, one of her successors, expanded the educational outreach of the congregation beyond the parish schools to high school and college. Each was, in her own way, a visionary.

Both were exemplars of the Redemptorist charism that was the gift of the founder, Father Louis Florent Gillet. They represent the title of this piece for their influence sparked the development of the congregation from outreach to an immigrant Church to university opportunities for the People of God.

Today, the work of the IHMs on all levels of education, reflects the same founding charism by which the original members banded together for the purpose of preparing young people for citizenship in two worlds—society and faith. Congregational records describe the purpose of the institution as the training of young people in Catholic schools and the preparation of children and adults for the sacraments. In the tradition of St. Alphonsus Liguori, the spirit of the congregation impels the sisters to incorporate their personal lives and their work into the redeeming mission of Christ. This charism is a reflection of the Redemptorist mission to bring those most in need into contact with the sacramental life of the Church.¹ Thus, education, both in schools and in parish settings, was part of the IHM psyche from the beginning. College education became a natural offspring of the founding grace since preparation of sisters for the ministry of education was an important part of religious formation and apostolic outreach.

As in all histories, there is a story before the story. The Pennsylvania story actually begins in Monroe, Michigan.

In the early nineteenth century, the United States was mission country, and the dioceses carved from the first diocese of Baltimore were welcoming immigrants to towns, villages and frontier outposts. Spurred by the great migration westward via the Erie Canal, Michigan experienced a land boom in the 1830s, and the Church kept pace by extending its mission territory.

The diocese of Detroit, founded in 1833, with a largely French Canadian population and eighteen priests initially encompassed what are now the states of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and parts of the Dakotas. Bishop Peter Paul Lefevere, appointed coadjutor bishop of the diocese in 1841, invited Redemptorist priests, relatively new in the U.S., to give missions in his diocese. Father Louis Florent Gillet and Father Francis Poilache arrived late in 1843 and conducted missions in Grosse Pointe, Detroit, and Monroe. Gillet described the first mission efforts in a letter to his provincial in Belgium, Very Rev. Frederic de Held. He related the enthusiastic reception by the people of Grosse Pointe and his view of the successful outcome of the mission.²

Following their first efforts, the Redemptorists assisted with pastoral duties in Detroit until they opened a mission at Monroe in early spring 1844. A short time prior

1. *Faithful Witness*, Constitutions of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Immaculata, Penn., 2006), 11-15.

2. Gillet to de Held 12 October 1843. *Journal historique et littéraire*, xi (January 1845), 487. Quoted in Sister Rosalita, Kelly, IHM, *No Greater Service: The History of the Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan 1845-1945* (Privately Published, 1945), 25-27.

to their work in Monroe, Bishop Lefevre wrote to Father Alexander Czvitkovicz, their superior in Baltimore, expressing both his satisfaction with the missions and his desire of establishing a permanent house of the order. He noted that “Father Louis speaks to me of Monroe as the most important place after Detroit.”³ Thus, the Redemptorists came to Monroe, and the parish of St. Anthony flourished with French Canadian, German and Irish members. Within a year of the missionaries’ arrival, the Church was enlarged and renamed St. Mary’s. Gillet related the details of the occasion in a letter to the provincial:

The crowd was immense; at seven o’clock in the morning, the procession started from the old house with six volleys of cannon. The Bishop consecrated the Church and the main altar of the Immaculate Conception and blessed the house under the title and protection of St. Joseph.⁴

Part of Father Gillet’s vision for this new foundation was the establishing of a school. He recognized that the future of the Church in the Detroit area would depend on a laity well grounded in the fundamentals of the faith.

Important to an understanding of his plan is the political climate of the years 1840-1860. The time was marked by political nativism and prejudice against Catholic immigrants, especially through efforts to restrict public school teaching to Protestants and to have the King James Version of the Bible read daily in classrooms. As a result, Catholic children in public schools suffered the same discrimination as their elders. The challenge of saving the faith, especially in rural areas, was the ongoing concern of every pioneer bishop and missionary.

Gillet wrote to Europe and to the eastern areas of the U.S. for money and religious teachers. He was unsuccessful on both counts, and his resulting assertion resounds in IHM history: “*Si je ne trouve pas des Religieuses, j’en fabriquerai!*” (“If I cannot find a religious community, I shall organize one!”).⁵

On November 10, 1845, Gillet gathered together, in a log house near St. Mary’s Church in Monroe, the three women who would become the first IHM Sisters. Among these women was Theresa Renauld from Grosse Pointe, whose family had cared for the mission church in the absence of a permanent parish. The others, Mary Maxis and Charlotte Schaaf, had been members of the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, a congregation to which Father Gillet had ministered during his time in that city. The fourth member Mme. Josette Godfroy-Smyth, a widow in whom Father Gillet saw evidence of a true vocation, joined the congregation several months later.

3. Lefevre to Czvitkovicz, 6 March 1844. Quoted in Kelly, 29.

4. Gillet to de Held, 27 January 1846. *Journal historique et littéraire*, xiii (May 1846), 11. Quoted in Kelly, 36.

5. Villa Maria House of Studies Archives (hereafter VMHS), Immaculata, Pennsylvania. Archives of the Reading and West Chester Motherhouses are now housed at this site. Quoted in Ryan, *Sister Maria Alma, IHM, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary 1845-1967* (Lancaster, Penn.: The Dolphin Press, 1967), 30.



Figure 1. Mother M. Theresa Maxis, First Superior of IHM Congregation. Photo courtesy of VMHS Archives.

Settling her estate delayed her entrance, and her dowry was the first major gift mentioned in the early records.⁶

The fledgling community opened a young ladies academy on January 15, 1846 with forty pupils and four boarders, and the establishment prospered.⁷ Mary Maxis (Mother Theresa), by reason of her experience with the Oblate Sisters, was appointed superior by Father Gillet, and the community functioned under the direction of the Redemptorists. The young congregation experienced all the ordinary hardships of beginnings. There were many demands for the sisters; however, Mother Theresa's notes indicate that "for three years no other subjects presented themselves."⁸

There were, in addition, struggles in the leadership of the community. Father Gillet was recalled to Baltimore in 1847, and for a time the building up of the school and convent continued, as he had planned, under the direction of Rev. Egidius Smulders, CSSR.⁹ In fact, the work of Father Smulders and his assistant Rev. Francis

6. Mother Theresa's Notes (hereafter MTN), original in Scranton Motherhouse Archives; photocopies in Villa Maria House of Studies, Immaculata, Pennsylvania. See also VMHS; Kelly, 57-58, and Ryan, *Sisters, Servants*, 38-45.

7. Gillet to de Held 27 January 1846. *Journal historique et littéraire*, xiii, 11. Quoted in Kelly, 69.

8. MTN.

9. From 1847 to 1849, Rev. John N. Neumann, CSSR was vice-regent and superior of all the Redemptorists in the United States. In this role, he was aware of the difficulties in Monroe which centered

Poilyache, CSSR, undoubtedly contributed to the survival of the community.¹⁰ Eventually, new postulants began to arrive, and, by the mid 1850s, the congregation was beginning to grow.

Further difficulties faced the community with the Redemptorists' departure from Monroe in 1854. In spite of their successful missionary activity, the priests experienced difficulty in living community life because of their small numbers. As a result, the American provincial, Very Rev. George Ruland, informed Bishop Lefevre that the fathers would have to withdraw from Detroit and Monroe.¹¹ Their departure was a serious blow to the twelve IHM Sisters. Once again, Mother Theresa Maxis was superior of a struggling community without a spiritual director.¹²

This change in the director of the congregation was one of the contributing causes of its division. Both the instability of having an unfinished rule and the continuing tensions between the sisters and Bishop Lefevre were increased by his appointment of Rev. Edward Joos as director.¹³ Mother Maria Alma records in her biography of Mother Theresa that there was "a growing resentment in their hearts to the Bishop's high-handed imposition of the Rules and regulations of the Congregation of the Mission upon the spiritual principles of St. Alphonsus. . . ." In addition, diocesan financial support was not available in contrast to the aid supplied earlier by the Redemptorist provincial.¹⁴

Father Joos became, in effect, superior as well as spiritual director. In this role, he supervised even the daily work of the sisters. Thus his arrival in 1857 could be said to mark a turning point for both Mother Theresa and the congregation. Other communities had already left the Diocese of Detroit because of Lefevre's policies.¹⁵

There is no specific evidence that Mother Theresa was planning to withdraw the congregation from the diocese of Detroit; however, her response to Father John Vincent O'Reilly's request for sisters for his school in Pennsylvania indicates her

on Father Gillet's leadership style. For one example, the bishop considered him a better missionary than superior. Father Gillet had also traveled outside the diocese without the provincial's permission. Sister Maria Alma Ryan (*Thou, Lord*, 51) also refers to rumors about his personal behavior that were circulating in the mission. After Gillet's three-year term ended, Neumann recalled him to Baltimore. Ultimately, the tensions, and his dissatisfaction with his assignment to a German-speaking parish in New York, resulted in Gillet's requesting a dispensation from his vows. Neumann attempted to delay sending the request in the hope of giving Gillet time to reconsider. Gillet was subsequently dispensed from his vows by Neumann's successor. See Michael J. Curley, CSSR, *Venerable John Neumann CSSR: Fourth Bishop of Philadelphia* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1952), 126.

10. Sister Marie Alma Ryan, IHM, *Thou, Lord, Art My Hope: Mother M. Theresa 1810-1892* (Lancaster, Penn.: The Dolphin Press, 1961), 51-57.

11. Ryan, *Sisters, Servants*, 56.

12. MTN.

13. Kelly, 113.

14. Ryan, *Thou, Lord*, 75.

15. Bishop Lefevre was consecrated coadjutor and administrator of the diocese of Detroit when Bishop Frederic Rese retired to Rome because of illness. Lefevre never became ordinary since he predeceased Rese by two years in 1871. The bishop's unusual position, lacking full administrative power, may account for his hard line on many issues and his apparent lack of understanding of the needs of the religious communities under his jurisdiction. See Ryan, *Thou, Lord*, 74-75.

readiness to move. In 1858, Father O'Reilly asked for sisters to staff his school in Susquehanna from which the Sisters of the Holy Cross had withdrawn.¹⁶ Mother Theresa's reply reads in part: "I cannot help expressing to you my satisfaction that it is among the poor we are called, for it is exactly what we like." She ends the letter: "I will do all in my power to come soon. Please mention in your next, when you want us that I may meet no opposition."¹⁷

In considering the history of the early IHM schools, it must be noted that the Monroe foundation was representative of the interest of the Redemptorist Congregation in education, and Philadelphia benefitted particularly with the arrival of John Nepomucene Neumann, CSSR, as the fourth bishop of the diocese. This saintly prelate made parish schools a special focus of his apostolate.¹⁸

A number of Catholic schools had been operating in the Philadelphia diocese prior to 1850, most of which lay persons staffed. Under the administration of Bishop Neumann both the supervision of schools and the number of schools in the diocese increased. In addition, communities of religious women were invited to undertake the work of the schools. Bishop Francis Kenrick had brought the Sisters of St. Joseph to Philadelphia in 1845, and Bishop Neumann founded the Sisters of St. Francis in 1855 in order to staff schools and health care facilities.¹⁹ In 1858, the latter welcomed the IHM Sisters to the diocese by travelling to St. Joseph's School in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania to greet them. This foundation, along with the Reading mission opened in 1859, formed the nucleus of the two congregations of IHM Sisters that now have motherhouses in Pennsylvania.²⁰

After 1858, the history of the IHM Sisters in the Philadelphia diocese is the story of the development of the eastern part of the state. The mission at Susquehanna flourished, and Mother Theresa Maxis mentioned in one of her letters that an important benefit of a Pennsylvania mission was having the Rule of the Congregation completed under the direction of a Redemptorist bishop.²¹ But, in spite of the success of this first mission, the move eastward carried many trials for the congregation and for the respective dioceses.

Part of the tension was caused by the vague references to jurisdiction in the first draft of the Rule, which placed the congregation "under the authority and protection of the Bishops of the respective dioceses where the houses are established. . . ."²² Thus the sisters in Susquehanna renewed their annual vows in the presence of Father O'Reilly, Bishop Neumann's delegate.

16. Ryan, *Thou, Lord*, 78.

17. Mother Theresa Maxis to Father O'Reilly, 26 July 1858. Copy at VMHS.

18. Curley, 193-195.

19. *Ibid.*, 261.

20. *Ibid.*, 285 ff.

21. *Ibid.*, 385. See also MTN.

22. *Constitutions of the Monroe Community, 1845*. Copy in Monroe Archives; The original was taken to Susquehanna by Mother Theresa in 1859. It was destroyed by fire in 1864. See Ryan, *Sisters, Servants*, 81.

The invitation to accept another mission in Pennsylvania met with the Bishop Lefevere's disapproval in part because he believed negotiations had been going on without his knowledge. It is true that Mother Theresa was strongly in favor of the Reading mission. According to Sister Rosalita Kelly's account, Mother Theresa wrote an apology to the bishop noting that she "feared she had shown too great a desire for his permission to accept the mission."²³

Her personality, however, did not permit her to drop the issue. Her letter continues with all the arguments in favor of Reading and the assertion that even for the good of the community she would not go against the decision of the bishop.²⁴ Bishop Neumann's biographer cites the ordinary's correspondence with the Redemptorist Fathers in Monroe and the IHM Sisters. The bishop clearly states that the sisters would be welcome in the Philadelphia diocese contingent upon Lefevere's permission.²⁵

Another challenge to a second mission was that the entire congregation consisted of only twenty-three sisters, and six were in Susquehanna. Consequently, Father Joos, the acting superior of the Monroe, was also opposed to the plan. His view was that sending six more sisters to Pennsylvania would weaken the work in Michigan.

The resulting confusion and discord led to Lefevere's removing Mother Theresa from the office of superior and to strained relations between the dioceses of Detroit and Philadelphia. Further correspondence between the sisters remaining in Monroe and Mother Theresa, as well as the strength of the two foundations in Pennsylvania, precipitated a crisis, the direct result of which was the separation of east from west in the congregation.

Ultimately, the underlying causes of the separation were both internal and external. The personalities of Lefevere and Mother Theresa Maxis, their individual views on authority, as well their visions for the future of the community, constituted the internal cause. The external cause rested in the vague presentation in canon law of an ordinary's authority over congregations of religious women in his diocese. The IHM Congregation was not alone in experiencing such frustration of jurisdiction in the dioceses of nineteenth-century United States.

In spite of the difficulties surrounding the move to Pennsylvania, the mission at St. Peter's Parish, Reading opened in September 1859 with a select school for girls and a parish school for girls and boys. Within a short time several postulants entered the community at this location, and they were permitted to remain in Reading to assist with teaching.²⁶

The Pennsylvania foundations flourished, but the acceptance of the Reading mission marked the definitive separation of the congregation into two entities. Although Neumann hoped for a complete reunion of the congregation, his sudden death pre-

23. Mother Theresa Maxis to Bishop Lefevere, 11 March 1859. Quoted in Kelly, 134.

24. Ibid.

25. Curley, 389.

26. Scranton Community, A Member of the, *The Sisters of the IHM* (New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1921), 69.

vented him from fulfilling his plan. The two branches, each governed by its own superior, were subject to the diocesan ordinaries of Detroit and Philadelphia.²⁷

At the time of the separation, the Diocese of Philadelphia included Pennsylvania, all of Delaware and southern New Jersey, and the growth of the IHM Sisters moved in many directions from the two centers at Susquehanna and Reading. At first, two novitiates, under the authority of Philadelphia, continued to attract young women, since neither foundation was large enough to house both a school and a formation program. From these two locations, the sisters opened schools in central and eastern Pennsylvania. Later, under Bishop James Wood's jurisdiction, Reading became the motherhouse for all the IHM Sisters in Pennsylvania from 1864 to 1871.²⁸ The community outreach in these years was a response to need and to the invitations of local clergy who were establishing parish schools. Sisters from Susquehanna moved into central and western Pennsylvania, while the sisters from Reading established schools in Philadelphia.

In mid-nineteenth century, an important contribution to growth and change in the Church and the congregation was the discovery of coal in northeastern Pennsylvania. The accompanying need to dig canals and to expand the railroad systems in order to move freight efficiently led to an increase of laboring jobs. These were soon filled by immigrants from Ireland and Germany and, within a few years, from eastern and southern Europe. Parishes were erected to care for Catholic families, and a special challenge was serving the many who did not speak English.

In March 1868, the Philadelphia diocese was partitioned to form new dioceses. The Wilmington diocese was established for Delaware and eastern Maryland. Eighteen counties in south central Pennsylvania formed the Diocese of Harrisburg. Eleven counties in northeastern Pennsylvania became the Diocese of Scranton. When these dioceses were established, the IHM Sisters staffed one school in the Harrisburg diocese, three schools in the Scranton diocese, and three schools, in addition to Reading, in the remaining area of the Philadelphia diocese.²⁹

Bishop William O'Hara, newly appointed ordinary of Scranton, wished to have a foundation of the IHM Sisters under his jurisdiction. Consequently, with Bishop Wood's approval, a motherhouse of the sisters was established at Mount St. Mary, Scranton, and the Philadelphia and Scranton branches of the IHM Sisters became separate congregations in 1871. O'Hara met with the sisters and offered each freedom to choose to which jurisdiction she wished to belong.³⁰

Shortly after this separation, Bishop Wood provided a new motherhouse and novitiate in West Chester, Pennsylvania. During the summer of 1872, the motherhouse, novitiate and academy were transferred from Reading to West Chester. In the same year, the sisters opened a school in St. Agnes Parish, also in West Chester.³¹

27. Ryan, *Sisters, Servants*, 83, 89.

28. *Ibid.*, 104 and Scranton Community, 79.

29. Ryan, 132-145.

30. *Ibid.*, 145.

31. *Annals*, St. Agnes Convent, VMHS.

Traditional history would separate the Scranton and West Chester communities at this point, and members of each congregation might argue in favor of the development of one over the other. The facts suggest another reality because exchanges of personnel between the two foundations continued for several years. As a result, the IHM Sisters' story for the late decades of the nineteenth century must be studied as the parallel growth of two congregations.

Both groups of IHM Sisters worked hard to bring Catholic education to the children of immigrants and to those children forced by economic necessity into the mills and mines of eastern and central Pennsylvania. Three of the early missions founded from West Chester were to coal mining towns in the Harrisburg diocese. The first of these, St. Joseph School in Locust Gap, opened in 1888 with 150 day students, and an equal number in the night school. Both this school and St. Ignatius School, Centralia, which opened in 1899, maintained night schools, well into the twentieth century for the men and boys employed in the mines, breakers, and yards.³² The third mission in the northern part of the Harrisburg diocese was Our Lady of Mount Carmel, established in 1892. The original community of five sisters opened with four classrooms and received 157 students on opening day. This school soon developed a two-year commercial high school in addition to the elementary program.³³ Besides these schools in the lower anthracite region, missions in the northern coals fields were staffed by sisters from Scranton with much the same attention to both day and evening opportunities for education.

The Harrisburg diocese enjoyed the attention of both congregations. The sisters from Scranton took over Saint Joseph School in Danville, from which the Harrisburg Sisters of Mercy had withdrawn in 1903, and their influence in the founding of two communities of women to serve immigrants from Eastern Europe was a significant contribution to education. The first of these communities was founded at the urging of representatives of the Jednota (the Slovak Union of America). Their director, Father. Matthew Jankola of Hazleton, asked Mother Cyril, IHM, to undertake the direction of the first three applicants. She agreed, and the sisters made their novitiate at the IHM Sisters' motherhouse in Scranton. The community, named in honor of Saints Cyril and Methodius, first lived at the Jednota Home near Harrisburg and came under the jurisdiction of Bishop John Shanahan. Later, they built a motherhouse and academy in Danville, and, for a number of years, a sister from Scranton continued as directress of novices.³⁴

Several years after the first Slovak sisters had been welcomed to the diocese, Bishop Shanahan asked Mother Cyril to undertake a similar work for the Lithuanians by giving aspirants, who had begun their formation in Europe, a year of training before they began their work. Father Anthony Staniukynas, pastor of Holy Cross

32. Annals, St. Joseph Convent and St Ignatius Convent, VMHS.

33. Annals, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Convent, VMHS.

34. Scranton Community, 363.

35. Ibid., 364.

parish in Mount Carmel, sponsored the three sisters in the hope of providing religious teachers for his parish.²⁴ Mother Cyril agreed and also collaborated with Bishop Shanahan on the constitutions of the new congregation. Their rule was approved in 1907 and the Sisters of St. Casimir opened their motherhouse and first school at Holy Cross, Mount Carmel.³⁵

Expansion in the Philadelphia area also followed the influx of Catholic immigrants from Europe. The IHM Sisters took over a predominantly Italian mission in 1864, when they replaced the Holy Cross Sisters at St. Paul's School. The next two decades witnessed further growth in the Catholic population of Philadelphia, which resulted in the IHM's staffing St. John School in Manayunk (1863), St. Joachim School in Frankford (1865) and St. Francis Xavier School (1869). All of these missions were established from the Reading motherhouse and remained part of the West Chester congregation after the separation from the Scranton diocese.³⁶

The story of the IHM Sisters, whether from West Chester or Scranton, contains many instances of outreach to groups, such as those already mentioned. Parish and school ministries included classroom teaching, individual tutoring, religious instruction, and sacramental preparation for both children and adults. After the separation from Monroe and the subsequent division of the Pennsylvania missions into two diocesan congregations, the work of the West Chester community expanded significantly.

The sisters served in parishes that are now part of the dioceses of Harrisburg, Allentown, and Philadelphia; however, the IHMs of West Chester, now Immaculata, have been especially associated with the educational apostolate of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Much of this presence can be traced to the influence of Mother Camilla and her vision of Catholic education. From the six schools in Philadelphia staffed by sisters from the Reading motherhouse when the congregation was divided in 1871, the sisters' influence spread in the coal fields, in the city of Philadelphia, and in the surrounding counties. By 1904, the IHM Sisters of West Chester were located in twenty-nine mission houses.³⁷

Mother Camilla Maloney, elected superior general in that year, was born in Susquehanna on November 10, 1852, the seventh anniversary of the foundation. She entered the congregation in Reading in 1870 and was still a novice when the transfer to West Chester occurred in 1872. She served as mistress of novices, assistant to Mother de Chantal, and inspectress of the IHM Sisters' schools. After Mother de Chantal's death in January until her election in April, she assumed responsibility for the entire congregation. Her experience, along with her particular gifts, prepared her for a unique role in the history of the congregation. Her strong insistence on the importance of education probably stems from her years in forming religious teachers, both as an instructor of novices and as supervisor of schools.³⁸ Mother Camilla was both an innovator and a bridge to the foundational roots.

36. Annals, Convents of St. Paul, St. John, Manayunk, St. Joachim, St. Francis Xavier, VMHS.

37. Annals, VMHS. See also Ryan, *Sisters, Servants*, Appendix.

38. Menology, VMHS.



Figure 2. Mother M. Camilla Maloney, Superior General, 1904-1913. Photo courtesy of VMHS Archives.

Just a month after her election, the congregation accepted responsibility for three large schools in the city of Philadelphia: St. Francis de Sales, St. Veronica, and Immaculate Conception, Germantown. The first two had been under the charge of the Sisters of the Holy Cross for several years, and the third mission was requested by the Vincentian Fathers. Each school boasted a large enrollment from the first day. Other opportunities for schools developed from the work of sisters who taught religion classes on Saturdays. One such example is St. Cecilia parish, Coatesville, where a school opened in 1906. In the remaining years of her administration, fourteen schools opened in Philadelphia and the surrounding counties, as well as in the Harrisburg diocese and in northeastern Pennsylvania, now part of the Allentown diocese.³⁹

During her administration, the number of mission houses increased to forty-four. In addition, she welcomed the plan of Msgr. Philip R. McDevitt, later Bishop of Harrisburg, to open a high school for Catholic girls in Philadelphia.⁴⁰ But Mother Camilla's vision of education did not stop at the high school level. She was especially concerned for the professional preparation of the sisters.

39. Convent Annals, VMHS. See also Ryan, *Sisters, Servants*, 229 ff.

40. Ryan, *Sisters, Servants*, 230-237.

To this end, she engaged professors from St. Charles Seminary, West Chester State Normal School, and the University of Pennsylvania and established extension courses at Villa Maria, West Chester. These courses were designed for the sisters; however, as early as 1910, the weekend courses were advertised in the *West Chester Daily Local* and open to members of the local community.⁴¹ Her ultimate plan was actually greater than these efforts. She envisioned providing a college education for women. A similar vision was at work in Scranton, and both congregations opened colleges for women in the early years of the twentieth century. Marywood College, now University, accepted its first students in 1915, when the Villa Maria Academy students were enjoying their first year at the recently completed building in Frazer.

Mother Camilla had a favorite location, and she worked to achieve ownership of the site. Beginning in 1906, she gradually acquired deeds to eight farms (198 acres) on a hill in Chester County. Later administrators would add to this site until the property at Frazer spanned almost 400 acres. Ground breaking for the college, at first named Villa Maria, and later Immaculata, was on November 6, 1908,⁴² but Mother Camilla did not live to see her dream completed. She died in February 1913, almost two years prior to the entrance of the first academy class.

Villa Maria Academy moved from West Chester to Frazer in September 1914, and just six years later, November 12, 1920, the college charter was granted by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The first class of Villa Maria College entered in 1921, and the academy moved to Malvern in 1925. Separation from the secondary school was one of the conditions on which full college accreditation depended.⁴³

Mother Camilla's vision of higher education flourished in spite of the economic uncertainty of the 1920s and 1930s. Young women were trained in the liberal arts and in professional studies. Immaculata College grew and additional residences and academic buildings were added to the central building with the Renaissance dome. About the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the charter, evening classes were begun for adult men and women. In the next decade graduate programs, chiefly in educational specialties, were offered for the first time. Ultimately, the expansion of these programs resulted in Immaculata's achieving university status and the opening of the traditional undergraduate college to resident males.

The college was the fulfillment of Mother Camilla's dream, but it was not the Immaculata congregation's only achievement in education. By the opening of Vatican Council II, the sisters staffed slightly more than 140 elementary schools, in addition to their serving on the staffs of high schools in several dioceses.⁴⁴

The IHM Sisters remained a diocesan congregation until 1955, when pontifical status was granted. Thus, under the long episcopate of Cardinal Dennis Dougherty, most of their new missions were situated in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, which then

41. Copy at VMHS. See also Ryan, *Sisters Servants*, 218.

42. Immaculata University Archives, Immaculata, Pennsylvania.

43. Ibid.

44. Convent Annals, VMHS. See also Ryan, *Sisters, Servants*, Appendix, 453-457.

included the territory of the Allentown diocese. Only several houses in Virginia, Peru and Chile were exceptions to this pattern. After the appointment of Cardinal John F. O'Hara, and subsequent pontifical approbation, new foundations spread to Connecticut, California, and the areas south of Pennsylvania from New Jersey to Florida.⁴⁵

Since Vatican II, the scene has changed, but not the vision. Fewer sisters and new needs have called for a re-thinking of the charism in response to the special needs of this generation.

The story continues. The vision of a Catholic-centered education for women and men, of any age, remains the mission of the IHM Sisters. In a "back to the future" scenario, the modern Church of Philadelphia and the educational outreach of the IHM Sisters focus once again on the needs of immigrants and the unschooled. In many mission houses in the congregation, they meet the daily challenge of instructing immigrants in the fundamentals of English, of preparing men and women for high school equivalency exams, of instructing adults and children in the basics of the faith, and in sacramental programs. University outreach, parish and diocesan programs, and individual generosity come together as the descendants of the pioneers who came to Susquehanna in 1848 continue to respond to the needs of the Church in eastern Pennsylvania.

The visions of Mother Theresa Maxis and Mother Camilla Maloney have come full circle. At the beginning of a new century, a new millennium, the work of religious women in Pennsylvania continues to embrace the un-schooled and the un-churched. This is the new frontier.

45. Ibid.