

IHM nuns groundbreakers from the start

176 years of progressive heritage to be honored

Patricia Montemurri Special to Detroit Free Press
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At its founding, the oldest congregation of Catholic nuns in Michigan was burdened by a secret.

The subterfuge began in 1845, when a missionary priest needed a nun to teach French-Canadian settlers around Monroe, in the fledgling state of Michigan. He found her in Baltimore. Sister Theresa Maxis Duchemin was highly educated and spoke flawless French.

She was also multiracial, descended from Africans enslaved in Haiti, and an original member of the first U.S. Catholic congregation of nuns for women of color, the

Oblate Sisters of Providence. When she arrived in Monroe in fall 1845, Sister Theresa, with blue eyes and a light complexion, passed for white.

The congregation she co-founded — the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) — grew to 1,600 members and, wearing their distinctive royal blue habits, staffed more than 100 schools throughout Detroit, Michigan and other states during the last century. For much of their history, the IHMs obscured the heritage of their foundress, who was scorned by Catholic officials of her day. Detroit Bishop Peter Paul Lefevere in 1859 wrote that Sister Theresa displayed “all the softness, slyness and low cunning of a mulatto.”

Her origins are no secret today. Over the last 50 years, the IHMs have fully explored, embraced and championed their foundress and her pioneering efforts. And the IHMs have distinguished themselves as trailblazers in multiple fields, and as voices for progressive causes. That heritage will be honored Sept. 12, at a celebration in Monroe to mark the IHM’s 176th anniversary. The pandemic prohibited



Immaculate Heart of Mary nuns with the motherhouse in Monroe in the background.

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festivities for the 175th last year.

From their earliest days, the IHMs championed the education of women. They founded several all-girls schools in Michigan and Illinois, including Bloomfield Hills Marian High and Detroit’s now-closed Immaculata High, as well as Marygrove College, which operated from 1927 to 2019. They were the predominant teaching congregation in metro Detroit, educating generations of students at Holy Redeemer, St. Mary of Redford, Gesu, St. Raymond, Dearborn Sacred Heart and Our Lady Star of the Sea, among many other schools.

The IHMs receive credit for helping engineer a national movement to ensure Catholic sisters received a proper education before they taught others. Sister Mary Emil Penet, Marygrove’s president from 1961 to 1968, helped establish the Sister Formation Conference so nuns earned college degrees before being put to work in post-World War II classrooms bulging with baby boomer Catholics. The sisters’ efforts were met with resistance from Catholic bishops. If the sisters were away studying at college, parish schools would have to hire more lay teachers. In the early 1950s, for example,

the Detroit archdiocese paid only \$40 a month to a teaching sister.

When Sister Mary Emil addressed the 1952 National Catholic Education Association about this cause, “the sisters in attendance gave her a standing ovation; the superintendents were upset and stayed in their seats,” according to IHM accounts. But for the teaching skills of Catholic sisters such as the IHMs, “it is doubtful that the system of Catholic schools, unparalleled in other countries, would have flourished as it did.”

A history as groundbreakers

In 1934, Sister Ambrosia Fitzgerald became the fourth woman to earn a Ph.D. in physics from the University of Michigan. During World War II, while she was teaching at Marygrove and Monroe’s St. Mary Academy, the U.S. government recruited her to secretly travel to Chicago to work on the Manhattan Project, which led to the development of the atomic bomb.

The IHMs’ business manager in 1934, Sister Miriam Raymo, devised a strategy to help a Monroe bank avert collapse during the Great Depression. Sister Miriam and several other IHMs stood in long lines at the bank “to deposit a quarter at a time and then go back to the end of the line and to talk to as many people as possible, trying to build confidence that the bank would not fail,” notes an IHM story.

The bank was saved. Sister Miriam’s family once operated a Detroit hardware store often visited by Henry Ford. That connection led Ford, raised Episcopalian, to donate a new automobile every year to the IHM Motherhouse. The 5f-millionth V-8 Model Ford was delivered to Monroe as a special gift on Aug. 17, 1939.

Sister Catherine Frances Mallon, aka Sister Helen Marion, at Monroe’s St. Mary Academy, struggled with breast cancer for eight years. She gave permission for her malignant breast tumors to be used for research at the Michigan

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Cancer Foundation, now known as Detroit's Karmanos Cancer Center. Never before had scientists cultured and replicated breast cancer cells for study. But in March 1971, several months after her death, Sister Catherine's cells began to replicate at an exponential rate. Her doctors theorized that Sister's life of prayer contributed to what they dubbed her "immortal" cell line. The line led to breakthroughs in treatments and is the most studied breast cancer line in the world.

After Catholic Church reforms in the 1960s and as the Catholic school population declined, many IHMs became involved in ministries beyond the classroom. They've worked running parishes and nonprofit organizations, as spiritual counselors and world-renowned theologians, and as activists at the U.S. border, helping migrants and asylum seekers from Lat-

in America. The IHMs' current president, Sister Mary Jane Herb, a onetime Marian High principal, just became president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an organization representing the majority of Catholic sisters in the U.S.

Sister Sharon Holland, who taught music at Wayne St. Mary as Sister Marie Russell, became a church canon lawyer and was one of the highest-ranking women to work at the Vatican. As president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 2014-15, she negotiated the end of long-running investigations of American sisters and their organizations that were initiated because some Catholic bishops believed the sisters were too progressive in their pursuit of social justice causes.

The IHMs also helped shape Monroe. From 1920 to 1976, the sisters ran 1,100 acres of Monroe County farmland as St. Mary Farm, and they often worked as farmhands when they weren't teaching. Their massive Monroe Motherhouse complex along Elm Street, just west of downtown is on the National Register of His-

toric Places. A section has been converted into a senior living complex for the public, with stylish units starting in the mid-\$80,000s. There are about 240 remaining IHM sisters, and but few still teaching in schools and colleges.

The Sept. 12 celebration will begin at 3 p.m. at St. Mary's Park in downtown Monroe, alongside the River Raisin, where Sister Theresa Maxis Duchemin established the congregation on Nov. 10, 1845, in a log cabin. The Detroit Youth Choir, sponsored by Monroe-based La-Z-Boy, will perform in the bandshell.

Patricia Montemurri is a retired Detroit Free Press journalist. She is the author of four photo-rich books involving Detroit Catholic history: "Detroit Gesu Catholic Church and School," "Blessed Solanus Casey" and "Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters of Michigan" and the newly released "Mercy High School of Michigan." She will be autographing her IHM book at the Sept. 12 event. She can be reached at pmontemurribooks@gmail.com.



Sister Theresa Maxis, Immaculate Heart of Mary foundress. PROVIDED BY SSIHM ARCHIVE