

Villa Maria House of Studies – 40 years young!

In the study of biblical times we learn that forty is the number of *fulfillment*. So many events in salvation history have seen a person or a people come to full maturation in forty days or forty years. And so it is with our beloved Motherhouse, Villa Maria House of Studies. Its ground was blessed and broken on March 19, 1964 and in the two and a half years that followed that first thrust of the spade, the spiritual roots that were planted there gave rise to a house that would nurture thousands under its roof.

Early Days

Forty years ago, Villa Maria opened its doors to its first residents, a group of forty newly-professed sisters, under the guidance of Mother Marie Martha and Mother Mary Pasquilina, who would help prepare the house for its official opening. Soon after, the novices left the novitiate in West Chester for their new home in Immaculata. On September 1, 1966, Sister John Bosco cooked her first meal there for the sisters: hot dogs and baked beans. Within a week, Mother Maria Pacis and Mother Grace Madeleine arrived and on September 8, Father

John E. Baney celebrated liturgy in the temporary chapel. A week later, after weeks of rain, ninety “pioneer postulants” arrived, literally “walking the plank” to their new life as sisters! Classes began on September 19 amid ongoing construction. During those early days, Mother Pacis took daily walks,



Father Hugh Nolan, Mother Maria Pacis, Mother Maria Alma breaking ground for the new Motherhouse at Immaculata, March, 1964



John Cardinal Krol dedicating Sacred Heart Chapel at Villa Maria House of Studies

encouraging and inspiring the still-working construction crew in her maternal manner. Mother also affectionately assigned to each postulant and novice the care of a newly-planted tree or pot of flowers. Such was the love and wisdom that conceived and crafted this amazing house.

On March 3, 1967, the sisters found themselves all together celebrating liturgy for the first time in the newly completed chapel – the heart of the house – with Father Leo Adasiewicz, OFM, the Motherhouse chaplain. Finally, the glorious day of dedication arrived. On April 23, 1967 John Cardinal Krol presided over the liturgy that blessed Villa Maria House of Studies, commending not only the building but also the congregation's work to God. That day, the sisters recalled joyfully and gratefully the giving of self by Mother Maria Pacis, Mother Grace Madeleine, Father Leo, Albert F. Dagit, and Frank A. D'Lauro who planned the building so carefully and prayerfully to meet the needs of the IHM Congregation.

The Building

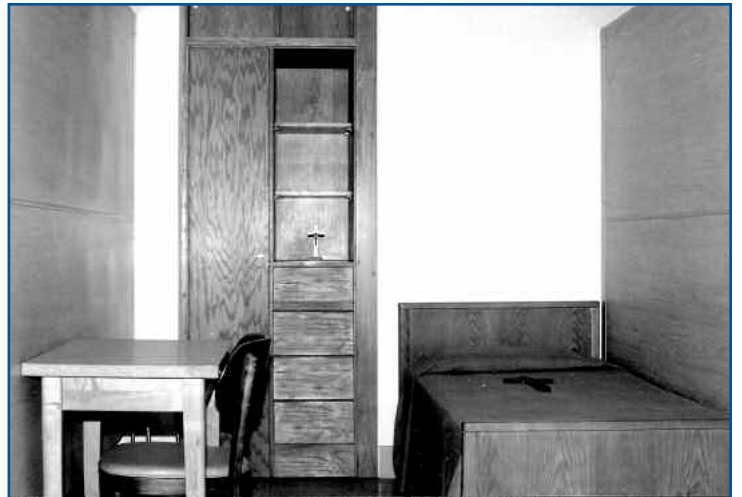
In planning for this home, one unalterable point was established from the very beginning: the chapel would be situated front and center as a reminder that our Eucharistic Lord is the source, center, and vitality of our lives. The chapel was



The magnificent chapel viewed from the west.

structured in cruciform, serving as a continual reminder that we follow a crucified Savior who has redeemed the world.

Because the mid 1960s saw a superabundance of young women answering the call to religious life, the postulate dormitory required about one hundred beds and the novitiate needed two dormitory floors with a hundred beds on each floor. Classrooms, offices, a community room, and an assembly room comprised the first floor of each building. Adjoining a graceful hallway, which connected the generalate in the front of the house to the novitiate, were the dining rooms and kitchens. At the south end of the building lie the gym and swimming pool. Mother Maria Pacis wisely wanted these two areas to be included in the Motherhouse because, with the many young women entering, these formation sisters would need a place to exercise and expend some of their youthful



An original "cube" bedroom for the postulants and novices



A remodeled bedroom providing more space for fewer numbers

energy. What vision she possessed! Today, Villa Maria Academy utilizes the gym and pool for athletic programs for their students.

During its first ten years, the Motherhouse served the community well, witnessing the education of hundreds of sisters, their visits with families and friends, their formation as religious women, their bondedness to one another as sisters, their ever-deepening love of God, their growth together in

work and play, and their profession of vows for life.

Sadly though, history proved fickle and the number of young women following a religious vocation dwindled and the vast spaces of the Motherhouse now became available for other uses. Like “the many” who shared the mountain with the Lord, many people came to share the space and make what was only ours, theirs, too!

Villa Maria Academy Lower School

The first group to carry their schoolbags through these hallowed doors was the faculty, staff, and students of Villa Maria Academy Lower School. On September 5, 1979, after months of emotional and structural preparation, the former postulate building opened its doors to 240 students, their teachers, and the school staff. Sister Margaret Gradl (S. Anne Bernard), the principal, proudly presented the new school to the girls and the teachers; before long, the new geography became familiar territory for all.



Villa Maria Academy Lower School – the former postulate

Old rooms had new looks and new names. The formal community room was now the girls’ library. Several classrooms were converted into a dance studio. The old laundry was converted into a kitchen. The former sewing room, now a chapel, enabled the girls to visit Jesus, conduct prayer services, and celebrate liturgy. Old classrooms were now a science lab, a music center, an art studio, and a technology center. What were once bedrooms now provided lovely classrooms for the girls. The vision of Mother Maria Pacis and Mother Grace Madeleine to spiritually form and holistically educate young women in this building held fast – only now with a younger, more colorful look!

IHM Spirituality Center

After the community’s General Chapter in 1988, the wheels were set in motion for a group of sisters to investigate and discern the “where” and “how” for a House of Prayer or Spirituality Center. Under the direction of Sister Ann Bernadette and Sister Eunice Marie, a group of sisters diligently did their research. An age-old adage suggests to sometimes “look right under your nose” for the answer. In doing so,



IHM Spirituality Center which was part of the former novitiate

the sisters came up with a wonderful solution: the novitiate wing of the Motherhouse. With the number of novices decreasing, ample space became available for half the wing to be donated to a cause, consistent with the purpose of the novitiate in the first place – to prepare hearts and souls to find and reveal the Lord to one another.

Once again, renovations transformed the stoic ambiance of the novitiate classrooms, offices, and bedrooms into the warm, colorful, artistic, soft, and comfortable meeting rooms, dining rooms, bedrooms, reading rooms, staff offices, serving kitchen, and the “crown jewel” of the Spirituality Center, the chapel. With the new Spirituality Center, the IHM community once more responded to meet the spiritual hungers of the sisters as well as the many soul-searching, committee-planning, and prayerful groups who sought a quiet, reverent place to assemble. It was nothing less than a marvel to behold the space, much less the Spirit, that people found as they relaxed, renewed, and reflected within these reconfigured walls of work and worship.

“If these walls could talk,” they would share how many diverse groups became enriched by coming to the Spirituality Center: individual and group retreatants, groups from different cultures, ages, faiths, ministries, types of prayer, seminars, medical teams, religious congregations, global planners, and universities. They follow the Lord’s directive to “Come and See.” On coming, they see what the Lord had prepared for them through their own gifts, the encouragement of a supportive staff, and the beauties of nature.

IHM Heritage Room

The old sewing room, overlooking St. Joseph’s Courtyard, also became available for new occupancy. In the last few decades, the sisters’ habits were commercially made and the spacious sewing room lent itself perfectly to the honor of housing the treasures of our community history. Thus our Archives found a new anchorage. Visiting this repository of historical relics, one’s first response is *awe* — awe in the visual unfolding of a rich religious history before ever a word is



Part of the door, the handle, and the key from the front entrance to the West Chester Motherhouse

read. One immediately senses sacred moments shared by our first sisters.

Glassed cases protect some of the oldest historical treasures of our priest founder, Rev. Louis Gillet, C.S.S.R.: his baptismal certificate, his handwritten account of the foundation of our Congregation, his last letter written in 1892, his crucifix and his relic of St. Alphonsus Liguori, founder of the Redemptorist community and



Habit Development of the IHM Sisters

patron of our community. Two treasures from another Redemptorist with early ties to our community, St. John Neumann, include a relic of his clothing and a chalice which he used.

One can also trace the history of our founding sister, Mother Theresa Maxis. Some early documents and correspondence include the early rule of the Congregation presented to and approved by the bishop of Detroit, and documents from the Young Ladies Academy, St. Mary's in Monroe, Michigan, 1845.

From former

Motherhouses we hold statues, a tabernacle door, and a chapel window, even a street sign from West Chester – *Convent Lane*. Framed pictures of former Mothers General and some of their personal religious items can be seen along the entrance wall. Habited dolls show the changes in garb that the IHM sisters have worn as they have adapted to the environment and the Vatican Council's call to renewal.

Copies of our earliest publications of *Progress in Arithmetic* and *Voyages in English* are also displayed. Nearby are copies of former Rule Books and volumes of Menology, biographical and anecdotal accounts of our deceased sisters.



The South American Room

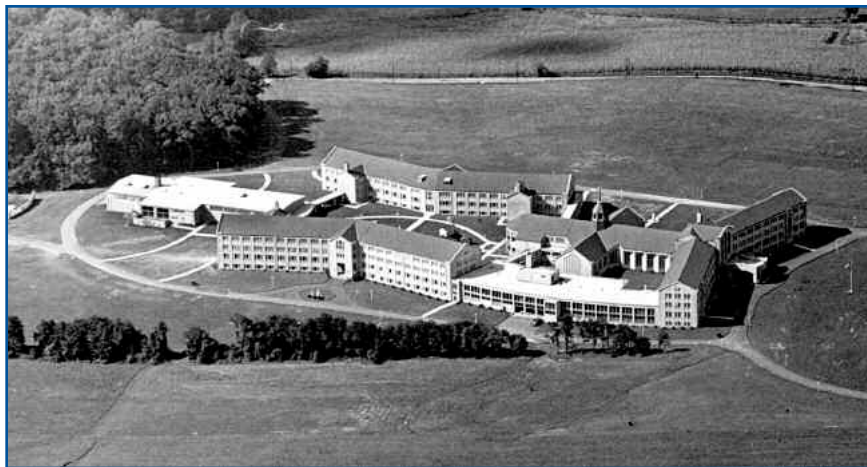
South American Room

Right below the Archives one can find the South American Room. Upon entering this lovely space, one senses that he or she has just soared into the soul of South America. The pictorial history of our missionary service there starts with large framed photographs on the walls. The South American story begins with Mother Cornelia, who in 1922 responded to the call of Cardinal Dougherty to minister to the people in Peru. Subsequent pictures reveal the early sisters' spirit as they pray, play, work, and walk with the children of Peru. Mother Kostka's picture signals another direction of the IHM missionary work — farther south to Chile — in 1940, at the request of the Chilean bishop to staff Catholic schools. The many pictures of the sisters and children witness to the success of the IHM mission to bring Catholic teaching as well as the joy and love of Jesus to the people. The vintage black and whites are interspersed with large, subtle, colorful images of the South American people sketched by Sister Elenore Joseph Ertel. These drawings capture the soul of the people. Throughout the room, glass-encased artifacts, awards, and commendations stir the soul in this museum of memories. On the many bookshelves, volumes and volumes of Peruvian and Chilean leather-covered albums hold the recorded impact and images of our sisters' zeal. Colorful weavings, carvings, and national flags add a third dimension that heightens the feel and flavor of our South American *amigos*.

Sacred Heart Chapel

Lastly, and most significantly, the renovation that most intimately touches the entire community is the reconfiguration of the sanctuary space in Sacred Heart Chapel. The formerly angular design now speaks of circles and curves reflecting the movement of the Spirit among us. The once lengthy altar has been finely chiseled to a more moderate size. Behind the tabernacle, space was made available for choir pews as well as for an organ and piano so that music can better enhance the liturgy. The removal of several pews in the back of chapel allows for a larger gathering space and the prominence of a large holy water font is a vivid reminder of our Baptism. Lighting and auditory enhancements as well as wheelchair accessibility to the sanctuary provide more practical improvements. While structurally somewhat different, this heart of our home remains ever the same – our center of worship.

This mother-of-all-houses has been the home base of the IHM sisters for forty years. In it our General Administration meets and plans, listens and encourages, prays – and prays some more. They also laugh and tease, relax and recreate, walk and watch TV. Our postulants and novices deepen their prayer life, draw closer to God and learn about the IHM family



An aerial view of Villa Maria House of Studies in 1967

they wish to embrace. For all our sisters, it has been a frequent destination for retreats, convocations, educational workshops, lectures, jubilee celebrations, homecoming gatherings, chapter sessions, nights of reconciliation, and friendly visits. It continues to be a place where sisters laugh together, resolve together, mourn together. Yes, it is a special home to the IHM sisters. In the forty years of its development, this “new home” has brought the sisters to a new time of *fulfillment*.