



# IHM Sisters – *On Mission*

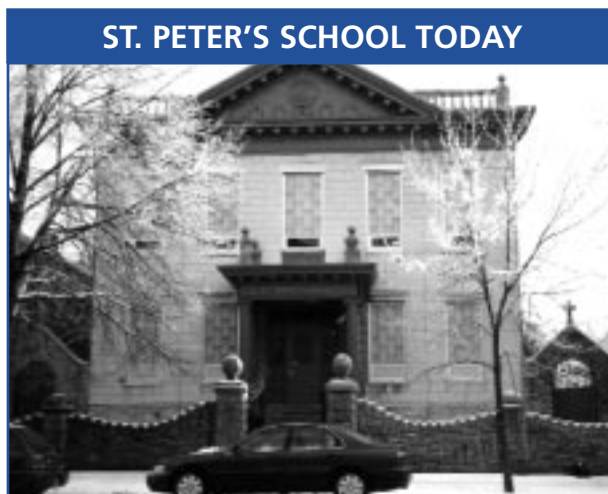
Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary

## St. Peter School, Reading, PA –

*Serving the people of God in three centuries!!!*

The IHM congregation was founded in Monroe, Michigan in 1845. Thirteen years later it was ready to branch out. The first IHM mission in Pennsylvania, St. Joseph School, was established in August, 1858 in Choconut Township, Susquehanna County. That year, five IHM sisters replaced the Sisters of the Holy Cross who had originally staffed the school. Known as St. Joseph Academy, the school quickly earned a reputation of excellence.

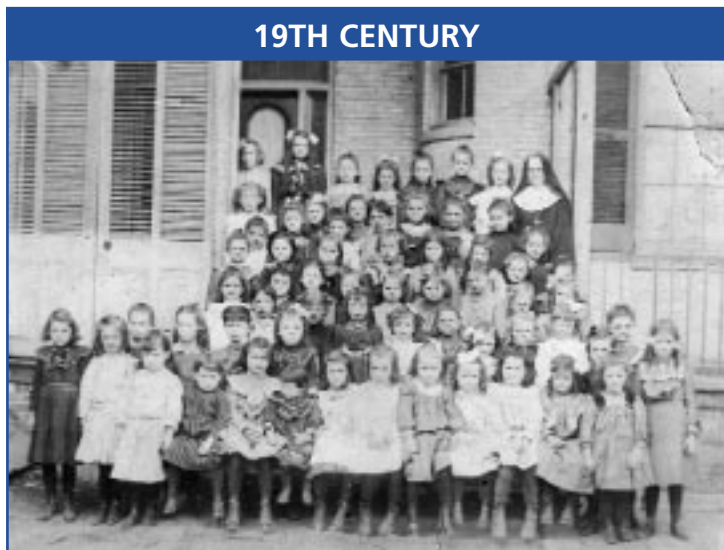
The following year, in March of 1859, Bishop Neumann of Philadelphia requested sisters for a school in Reading, Pennsylvania. St. Peter Parish, serving the German immigrant Catholics of the area, had purchased a large building on South Fifth Street and the parish community was anxious to have a school.



**ST. PETER'S SCHOOL TODAY**

*St. Peter's School as it stands today – beautiful in every season even with a slight dusting of snow.*

The Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters arrived in July, 1859 and on September 2nd, 1859 Bishop John Neumann (now St. John Neumann) celebrated the first Mass in the chapel and blessed the building on Fifth St. that was to house the first convent, novitiate, boarding school and academy. On September 5th, a “select school” for girls opened in that building and on September 12th, a Girls’ Parochial School began at 5th and Spruce Streets. Additionally, a parish school for boys opened in the basement of the church at St. Peter’s.



**19TH CENTURY**

*St. Peter School Students*



**20TH CENTURY**

*St. Peter School Faculty – 100th anniversary of the school*

Classrooms in the three schools filled steadily and, a decade later, each school needed more classrooms. Therefore, in 1872, the Motherhouse, the Novitiate and the Academy of the Immaculate Heart (later known as Villa Maria Academy) moved to West Chester, PA. As the three branches of the

IHM's grew, the eastern branch became known as the West Chester IHM's.

By the beginning of the 20th century in Reading, there was an urgent need for a Catholic secondary school. In order to meet the advanced academic needs of the Reading high school-age population, St. Peter High School was founded in 1911 and in 1914, a two-year commercial course began at the new Reading Catholic High School. By 1930, the Pennsylvania Department of the Commonwealth accredited Reading Catholic High School as a first-class high school.

The 1940's saw the migration of Latino peoples into the Reading area; the 50's and 60's saw a significant increase in enrollment of Hispanics at St. Peter School. Increased enrollment in both grade school and high school created the need for additional classroom space. Therefore, the Allentown Diocese (established in 1961 from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia) embarked upon a major building campaign. In 1964 Holy Name High School replaced Reading Catholic High School. The final graduation class from Reading Catholic High School was on June 4, 1964. St. Peter School continues to serve the needs of students



*Chris Leguizamon and Erika Nieves, seventh grade students at St. Peter's, lead the advent wreath ceremony for their classmates under the approving gaze of S. Mary Winifred*

## 21ST CENTURY



*St. Peter School Students*

from kindergarten through grade eight.

The present student body, as of September 2003, at St. Peter School represents children from five continents and 26 countries. Continuing in its original tradition, the parish serves an immigrant population, presently ministering to the Mexican, Puerto Rican, Columbian and Dominican Republic peoples.

As the first motherhouse, novitiate and school, the West Chester IHM's affectionately refer to St. Peter's as "the cradle of the community." In addition to the school and convent, the community has 15 of its pioneer IHM sisters buried in St. Peter Cemetery high on a hill overlooking the city of Reading.

Many saintly sisters who have gone before us watered the IHM Alphonsian roots. IHM community history recalls that it was the invitation of another saint (John Neumann) that established the Reading foundation. Later, as the motherhouse relocated, the new branch became known as the West Chester and now the Immaculata IHM's. Regarding each sisters' assigned mission, they are all "Faithful Witnesses" to the people of God and daughters of the church dedicated to Mary.

## A Tribute to *Mother Marie Genevieve Lawler, IHM*

Mother Marie Genevieve Lawler, the former Genevieve Lucille Lawler, was born in Atlanta, Georgia on September 29, 1920. The first child of a family of five, she spent her early life in Buford, Georgia, where she attended public elementary and secondary schools. On the recommendation of the Bishop of Atlanta, Bishop Gerald O'Hara, Genevieve Lawler came north to study at Immaculata College. Majoring in business and economics, she received a Bachelor of Science degree from Immaculata College.



*Mother Marie Genevieve Lawler  
1920 – 2003*

Following her graduation from Immaculata in 1941, Genevieve joined the faculty of Immaculata's Business and Economics Department. In 1943, while still teaching at Immaculata, she began part-time graduate studies at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, where she was invited to teach accounting courses. She received her MBA in 1945 and was the first woman to be named to the Honor Society of the Wharton School of Finance and one of the first women to be invited to teach there.

In September, 1945, Genevieve Lawler entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and she

continued to teach at Immaculata College both as a postulant and novice. Following her profession as Sister Marie Genevieve, she returned to the college's full-time faculty, where she taught until 1957 when she was elected treasurer of her religious congregation.

In June of 1981, Sister was elected the thirteenth Mother General of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart and in 1987, Mother Genevieve was re-elected to a second term. During her tenure as Mother General, the IHM Spirituality Center opened at Villa Maria House of Studies. The Camilla Hall Nursing Staff moved into their newly-built home, Pacis Hall. IHM literacy centers for immigrants opened in both North and West Philadelphia and Immaculata erected its new Gabriele Library.

In May, 1996, along with the Honorable Walter H. Annenberg, Immaculata awarded Mother the Immaculata Medal, its highest award, for her contribution to Catholic education and in recognition of her unfailing loyalty and commitment to higher education, especially to the college she loved throughout her whole life – as a student, an alumna, a faculty member and a trustee.

At the completion of her second term as Mother General, Mother Marie Genevieve assumed the position of superior at Camilla Hall, the retirement home for the aged and infirm sisters. Mother continued to serve the sisters in Camilla as councilor and confidante.

Always a gracious lady, Mother was known by all for her instinctive courtesy, her spontaneous hospitality, her warmth and genuine joy in welcoming everyone in whatever place she called home. A kind word, a sincere smile and a subtle sense of humor –these were some of her gifts that she shared so amply with each person. The promise she exhibited as a young woman was borne out by a life of selfless servant leadership. Her gentle, loving spirit is a loss to the IHM community who loved and admired her.

## *Spotlight On*

### **Sister Miriam Irene Keenan – *accepting joyfully whatever God wills***

Lillian Keenan was born on November 20, 1932 into a loving family of five girls and one boy. As a daughter of John and Mary (Antonelli) Keenan, Lillian credits her Irish-Italian heritage for her love of life, wit and courage. Lillian and her siblings spent many hours at Vare playground in South Philadelphia where they learned to sing and dance.

Growing up in St. Gabriel Parish where the priests and

sisters were her extended family, Lillian learned to love the church and the IHM sisters. Her earliest memory of the IHM's included the weekly Holy Hour on Sundays and helping the sisters in the convent.



*Sister Miriam Irene Keenan is an  
inspiration to all she meets as she walks  
by faith, prays for hope and lives in love.*

After grade school, Lillian attended West Catholic High School where she met Sister Miriam Rose who inspired her to follow a call to religious life. Lillian entered the postulate at Villa Maria, West Chester in September, 1951. Although she admits her mother wasn't 100% behind her decision to enter the convent, she is quick to add that visiting days helped to win over her mother.

After the postulate and novitiate, Lillian, now Sister Miriam Irene, began her teaching career, educating students at St. Anthony, Gesu and St. Francis Xavier Schools in Philadelphia. These years prepared her for nine years in Peru where she taught the boys in Escuela Inmaculado Corazon. Besides Peru, Sister also spent three years at Villa Maria, Santiago, Chile.

On returning to the States with fluent knowledge of Spanish, Sister was assigned to Holy Name High School in Reading followed by assignments at Cardinal O'Hara and Archbishop Prendergast High Schools in the Philadelphia Archdiocese. After completing additional studies at St. Charles Seminary, Sister Irene was assigned to West Catholic High School to teach theology. Thrilled to be back at her Alma Mater, she admits that teaching at West Catholic is an experience she cherishes. The slogan "West is Best" rang true for her.

After a short stay, Sister Irene suffered a stroke in 1997 and was not able to return to her beloved West. She was assigned to Camilla Hall where she was surrounded by love, care and lots of therapy! Learning to walk and talk and function with one hand has been her greatest challenge. Since her stroke, Sister Irene has acquired a great devotion to the Little Flower. Through St. Therese's intercession, Sister Irene was able to be one of the pioneers in the community's "Assisted Living" convent at St. Theresa's Parish in Hellertown, PA. Sister Irene worked in the parish's RCIA program, the Pre-Jordan Prep classes, Shared Prayer groups and tutoring classes.

Sister is presently stationed in Camilla Hall but no one is surprised when she turns up for every community meeting. Sister Irene says that "Camilla is where the Lord wants me to be now. After only five months, I find myself at peace and happy to be a part of the Camilla community."

### **Sister Carmen Teresa Fernandez – *helping others to discover God's Will***

Sister Carmen Teresa is the oldest of three children of Felipe and Margarita (Anaya) Fernandez. Her parents emigrated from Cuba to the United States after the Communist takeover. Grateful to be in America, they have taken great care and much effort to pass onto their children, Carmen, Gigi and Felipe, their Cuban heritage.

Raised in Miami, Carmen attended public school and then CCD classes at St. Catherine School, Epiphany School and Lourdes Academy. After one year of college, at



*Sister Carmen Teresa Fernandez, Vocation Directress, encourages young women to know the IHM Sisters by word, example and her warm, inviting smile.*

Immaculata, Carmen entered the convent in 1986. After the postulate, she received the habit and her religious name, Sister Carmen Teresa. Her assignments have included Annunciation, Bellmawr, NJ, SS. Clement-Iraneus, Philadelphia and Villa Maria Academy Lower School, Immaculata. Sister Carmen's eyes still dance when she talks about her beloved second graders. She loves teaching and she loved the "little ones" entrusted to her care.

Since 2001, Sister has been the Vocation Directress for the IHM community. While she misses teaching, Sister Carmen is very happy working with young women who are contemplating religious life. She counts it a privilege to walk with them as they discern God's call. She meets with candidates discerning a religious vocation and young women preparing for entrance into the IHM community. To encourage vocations, Sister Carmen coordinates events for interested young women; such as: Camilla Hall service, Sisters' Nights, Shadow-a-Sister and "Come and Live" experiences. Through these programs, women get to meet more sisters and witness their life first hand. Sister Carmen also responds to requests for information about the congregation and the Formation Program.

Of her present ministry, Sister Carmen says, "Without a doubt the most rewarding element of vocation ministry is experiencing hope for the future of the congregation through my interaction and conversations with these faith-filled young women." She firmly believes what one of her candidates said, "God does not call the qualified but He qualifies the called." Sister Carmen Teresa Fernandez has all the qualifications for attracting young women to *come* and *see* the IHM's!