

# I.H.M. Sisters and New Jersey – *Working Together*

Our IHM missions in New Jersey are unique in many ways, but their beginnings and, in some cases, endings set them apart from those schools in Pennsylvania and other states. In New Jersey, the community has two distinct eras of openings and closings, separated by a gap of more than twenty-five years as well as a change of venue from northern to southern New Jersey.

In January 1921, the IHM sisters were asked to staff two schools in New Jersey, one in Pennsgrove and one in Bound Brook, both in the Trenton Diocese. Blessed Sacrament School in Trenton soon followed in December 1921. The



*An early picture of Incarnation School in Trenton, NJ*

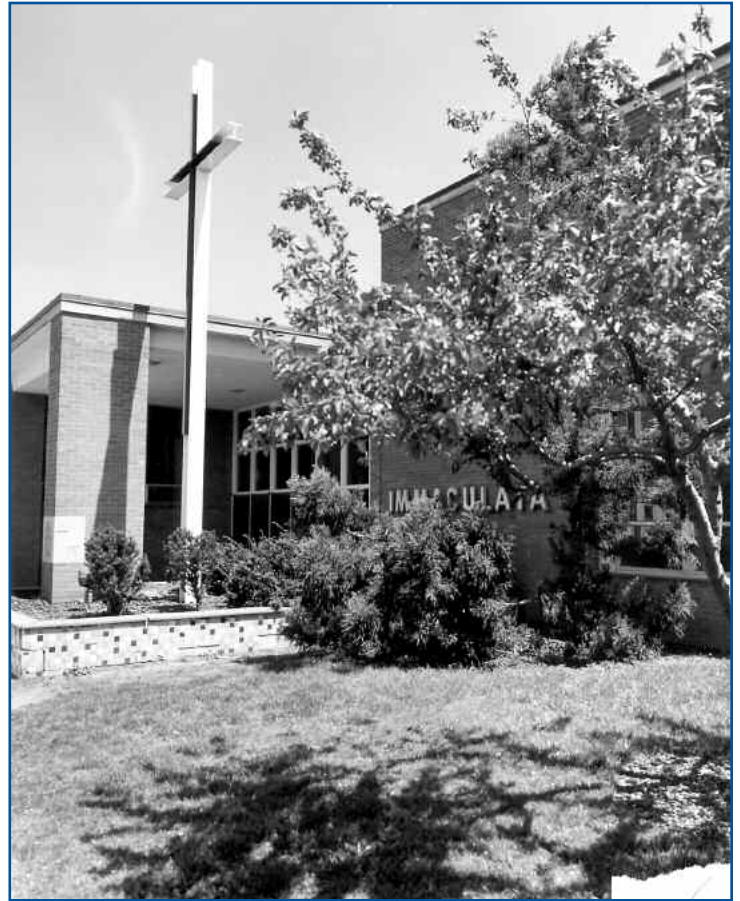
IHM sisters also opened Holy Spirit School in Asbury Park in September 1922. In June of 1927, Cardinal Dougherty, citing a need for the IHM sisters to return to the Philadelphia Archdiocese, recalled the sisters back to Pennsylvania. He was able to require this because, at that time, the community was a diocesan congregation, subject to the jurisdiction of the bishop of the diocese.

As the congregation approached 2,000 members in the early 1950s, it became increasingly urgent that it become a Pontifical Congregation. In January 1952, the new Archbishop of the Philadelphia Archdiocese, John F. O'Hara, not only supported and encouraged the request for Papal Approval but also visited the Sacred Congregation for Religious in Rome, making a personal recommendation for this approval. For many years, Mother Maria Alma worked tirelessly on this undertaking and on December 17, 1955, the official Decree of Praise came from Rome. One advantage of this honor is that the apostolic work of the congregation could continue to spread to new areas. With increasing numbers of vocation in the 1950s, the IHM community began answering requests from parishes in other states seeking to have IHM sisters teach in their schools.

Even prior to the granting of Papal Approbation, Archbishop O'Hara allowed the IHM community to return to the Garden State in 1953 with the acceptance of St. Teresa School in Runnemede located in the Camden Diocese. Four sisters directed the school which had an initial enrollment of 300 students. Today, it is known as St. Teresa Regional School and educates children from St. Teresa and the surrounding parishes of St. Maria Goretti in Runnemede, St. Gregory in Magnolia, St. Mary in Williamstown, St. Agnes in Blackwood, and Holy Family in Washington Township.

In 1955, four IHM sisters opened Assumption School in Atco, NJ. In the annals, Mother Magdalena Ambrose relates the grand housewarming given at their arrival by the PTA: flowers in every room, the kitchen filled with a well-stocked refrigerator, towels in the bathrooms, alarm clocks in every bedroom, set to go off at half-hour intervals as a sign of welcome! The sisters spent 40 years at Assumption Parish. With the strong belief that the school could continue with such a dedicated faculty and a firm foundation from the IHMs, the sisters withdrew from Assumption School in 1996.

Throughout the late 1940s, the Bishop of Trenton periodically asked for IHM sisters to teach in his diocese. Finally, with the ability to branch out to other states and the increase of religious vocations in the 1950s, the community began to mission sisters outside of Philadelphia. Incarnation School in Trenton opened in 1956 with three grades and 341 students. As additional grades were added, enrollment and faculty continued to grow. This academic year, 2005-2006, Incarnation School is celebrating its 50th anniversary. Monsignor Hugh Ronan, pastor of the parish for 24 years, comments that "The organized curriculum development of the IHM sisters throughout the grades along with their strong community supervision and academic support pro-



*Immaculata High School, Somerville, NJ*

vides many advantages for the education of our children. Even though the number of teaching sisters has decreased through the years, the parish has benefited from the presence of the IHM sisters. We are blessed to have the sisters here."

September 1957 marked the opening of Immaculate Conception School in Somerville, which, at that time, was part of the Trenton Diocese. The arrival of the four pioneer sisters under the leadership of Mother M. Vincentia Lawlor met with enthusiasm and joy since the IHM reputation for academic excellence preceded them. As the next four grades were added, Father Kelly, the pastor, dreamed of forming a Catholic high school, since Somerset County had no diocesan secondary schools for its predominantly Catholic population. In 1962, a ninth grade was commenced in the four unused classrooms of the elementary school. Joyfully, Immaculata High School opened in the fall of 1963 with freshmen and sophomores starting classes in the almost-completed high school building. Dedication of the new high school and convent took place on December 8, 1963 and Immaculata High School continues to be a star in the educational galaxy of Catholic high schools in New Jersey.

Reverend John Wiecekowski, pastor of Annunciation BVM Parish in Bellmawr, made an urgent request for sisters to staff his almost-completed school and convent. The IHM community sent four sisters to open the school in September 1957 with 320 children in grades one through six. Father expressed his boundless gratitude to Mother Maria Pacis in a



*Annunciation School in Bellmawr, NJ*

letter dated November 6, 1957. He writes: "It is just two months now that our parish has been blessed with the presence of four Immaculate Heart Sisters. In that short time, there has been a wonderful, almost indescribable change in the children who are fortunate enough to come under the care and guidance of your good sisters... who have taught our youngsters to be perfect little ladies and gentlemen, courteous, respectful, loving children of our dear Lord and His Blessed Mother. I and the people of this parish are deeply grateful to you for making all these wonderful things happen." Annunciation is presently a regional school serving students from many parishes, but predominantly from Annunciation Parish, Sacred Heart Parish in Mt. Ephraim, and Holy Maternity Parish in Audubon. In the next academic year, the school will celebrate its 50th anniversary.

St. Paul Parish in Stone Harbor opened a school in 1958. Three sisters and one lay teacher staffed the school and each teacher taught a double grade. With a small enrollment and the desire to consolidate the schools in Cape May County, the diocese decided to close the school in 1969.

The founding pastor of Queen of Heaven, Erlton/Cherry Hill, Father Anthony Kurylo, earnestly desired to start a school for his children and requested IHM sisters even though he had neither school nor convent blue prints. Classrooms were prepared for three grades in the church basement and two IHM sisters and a lay teacher opened Queen of Heaven School in September 1958 with an enrollment of 247 students. Before long, a convent and school were built, and by 1964, Father reaped the reward of his zeal with a staff of seven sisters, a lay teacher, and an enrollment of 728 children. To consolidate two small convents, Queen of Heaven Convent was closed in 1987 and the IHM sisters who taught in the school were welcomed at St. Teresa Convent in Runnemede. However, with the many prayers of parishioners and requests from Father Thomas Burns, the pastor, the IHM sisters were welcomed back to the convent in September 1991.

For two years, Father John J. Kelly, pleaded for sisters to staff a much-needed school at Our Lady of Grace Parish in Somerdale in the Camden Diocese. Father was bussing well over a hundred parish children to other Catholic schools. The assignment of three IHM sisters to his new school

thrilled Father Kelly and the parishioners. A former tavern building was refurbished and furnished as a new convent and a welcome committee warmly and happily greeted the new sisters. Grades one to four opened with 318 students in September 1960. Throughout the years, the school flourished with a wonderful spirit among the priests, faculty, and parents. With great sadness, yet knowledgeable of the strong faith community that existed at Our Lady of Grace Parish, the IHM sisters withdrew from the school in 1998 because of their own diminishing numbers.

"Your recent telephone message has made me the happiest pastor in the Camden Diocese," wrote Father Joseph Conlon of Holy Rosary Parish in Ashland/Cherry Hill upon hearing the news that he would receive IHM sisters to open his school in 1962. Five grades opened with three sisters, a lay teacher, and 327 students. School enrollment grew and then began to decline. In 1988, Holy Rosary Regional School formed serving students from Holy Rosary, St. Thomas More, and St. Mary Parishes in Cherry Hill. Because of declining enrollment, the sisters regrettably withdrew from the school in 1991. The school closed in 2005.

Father William Regan, founding pastor of St. Raymond Parish in the Villas, located about ten miles from Wildwood, anticipated his request for sisters. In **1957** he asked the IHM community for sisters to staff his school in the year **1962!** School did open in the church basement in 1962 for 206 students with folding chairs improvised as desks. By September 1963, a new, modern school and beautiful convent had been built. The school continues to receive strong support from the parishioners.

The last Jersey IHM mission to open was St. Bartholomew in East Brunswick in September 1964 when Father F. Morgan Kelly, founding pastor, welcomed four sisters to the parish. Because the convent was not yet ready, the sisters lived in an apartment in Colonial Village until December. School commenced in temporary quarters with 115 children in grades one and two. CCD classes numbered 950 children. Father Kelly and his devoted parishioners had the satisfaction of seeing a complete, modern complex of buildings dedicated in May 1965. The years were devoted to learning, the preparation of children for the sacraments, parish activities, and numerous memorable events. In anticipation that the school might continue the IHM educational charism in their absence, the sisters withdrew in 1996.

The Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters have left a lasting impression on all parts of the state, enjoyable memories for students to recall, and a strong educational foundation to prepare students for life. Their presence is still felt and appreciated; their legacy is recognized everywhere. The IHM community is grateful for all its New Jersey missions and memories.

# *I.H.M. New Jersey Schools*

NAME OF SCHOOL	LOCATION	IHM MINISTRY BEGAN IN	STATUS OF IHMS TODAY
St. James School	Pennsgrove	1921	Withdrew in 1927
St. Joseph School	Bound Brook	1921	Withdrew in 1927
Blessed Sacrament School	Trenton	1921	Withdrew in 1927
Holy Spirit School	Asbury Park	1922	Withdrew in 1927
St. Teresa School	Runnemede	1953	IHMs present today
Assumption School	Atco	1955	Withdrew in 1996
Incarnation School	Trenton	1956	IHMs present today
Immaculate Conception School	Somerville	1957	IHMs present today
Annunciation School	Bellmawr	1957	IHMs present today
St. Paul School	Stone Harbor	1958	Closed in 1969
Queen of Heaven School	Erlton/Cherry Hill	1958	IHMs present today
Our Lady of Grace School	Somerdale	1960	Withdrew in 1998
Holy Rosary School	Ashland/Cherry Hill	1962	Withdrew in 1991
St. Raymond School	Villas	1962	IHMs present today
Immaculata High School	Somerville	1963	IHMs present today
St. Bartholomew School	East Brunswick	1964	Withdrew in 1996