

From the IHM Archives...

The Past is Prologue

William Shakespeare

A tribute to our former IHM Congregational Archivists, three of whom are living at Camilla Hall

The Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary are greatly enriched by the fact that women of vision, since the earliest days of the founding in 1845, have recognized the importance of preserving the Congregation's history which inevitably defines the present and lays the groundwork for the future. The sisters today know who they are and have a clear understanding of their charism and their mission because they are grounded in their history. They look to the hundreds of sisters who have gone before them in the broad spectrum of their 174 year history, and often speak of "walk(ing) on their shoulders." They know the truth: The Past is Prologue.



Sister Rose Bernard

The repository for the massive collection of IHM historical papers and artifacts is known as the **Archives**. Located in Villa Maria House of Studies, this collection contains all of the very early communications of the founders, Father Louis Florent Gillet and Mother Theresa Maxis, and also, gathered throughout the years, all of the important

papers of each of the 17 General Superiors. It contains artifacts from the sisters' lives on the many missions, files on the living and deceased sisters containing achievements, awards, etc. gathered since the year 1845. There are Menologies, which are compilations of historical accounts and sisters' memories of individual deceased sisters, that date as far back as some of the pioneer sisters. Also, one of the greatest resources is the section housing the Annals. Begun in 1945, these are day to day accounts of life in each convent and school and are submitted yearly. There is also a special collection dedicated to the IHMs' 97 years of service in South America.

This amazing compilation did not just happen. Again, it is the result of the vision of many of the early sisters who recognized the importance of preserving history. Before there were "Archives," there was a collection of boxes containing the papers and artifacts that the sisters believed were vital to their history. At the West Chester Motherhouse, these boxes were stored in Lower Tile Hall section where the music rooms were located. In that era, the Secretary General of the Community was charged with gathering and preserving these important entities.

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In 1953, Sister Rose Bernard, a teacher of history at Hallahan High School, was asked to spend her summer at Villa Maria, West Chester "working on records." Once she realized the tremendous wealth of Congregational history stored in those boxes, she fell in love with her undertaking. She extended her work throughout the year, spending weekends at Villa Maria with another sister, Sister Paul Marie O'Donnell. In 1957, Sister Rose was elected Secretary General of the Congregation. Since the records were ultimately the responsibility of the Secretary, this gave her more time to apply her well-developed organizational skills to the task. After her term as Secretary General was over, she continued her

part-time organizational work on the collection.

By this time, the West Chester Motherhouse had closed and the Archives were moved in August of 1966 to Villa Maria House of Studies at Immaculata. They were stored in a room on the terrace floor and again, they were not displayed. Sister Rose's interest and commitment never waned. By this time, Sister Clare Immaculate McCrosson, a strong advocate for preserving the history of the Congregation, was the Secretary General. She supported the appointment of Sister Rose Bernard as the first Archivist. Sister held this position for 15 years.

It was during the tenure of Sister Rose Bernard that the Archives finally emerged out of boxes and were put on display. In 1980, Sister Rose was given an Assistant Archivist, Sister Genevieve Mary Simons, and the two of them were charged with the moving of the Archives from a small room to a very large display area, the original sewing room on the second floor of Villa Maria House of Studies. This was a massive undertaking. According to Sister Genevieve, it took months to move and unpack the boxes. By this time, though, Sister Rose's many years of work had resulted in a strong organizational structure for the Archives. Every single document and artifact was catalogued. They purchased display cases, furniture and shelving. The outside room was set up for display and research; the back room, climate controlled, for the storage of catalogued papers and artifacts.

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Sister Genevieve Mary Simons, the second Archivist, is effusive in her praise of Sister Rose Bernard. Sister Rose patiently taught Sister Genevieve everything she needed to know to keep future acquisitions organized. Sister Genevieve says, "It didn't take me long to love the Archives." She especially enjoyed the development of the catalogue cards, because she knew that these made

the collection accessible to anyone searching for information. Sister Genevieve worked in the Archives from 1980 to 1999.



Sister Genevieve Mary Simons

It was during the latter segment of her work in the Archives, when Sister Marie Angela Natoli was elected General Superior, that Sister Angela commissioned Sister Genevieve to organize a South American Room. This South American Room remains to this day, showcasing many beautiful treasures and artifacts from Peru and Chile. These are gifts and honors received by the sisters, both during their missionary years there, as well as during return visits to South America. Sister Genevieve still recalls her wonderful years in the Archives and insists, "I want the history of the Congregation to be preserved."

Sister M. St. Michel Mullany was appointed Assistant Archivist in 1996 and became Archivist in 1997, although Sister Genevieve remained with her for a few more years. Just as Sister Genevieve appreciated the guidance that she received from Sister Rose Bernard, Sister St. Michel recounts similar coaching from Sister Genevieve. She loved the way Sister Genevieve would show her how to process materials and then "trust" her to "handle things." When speaking of her time in the Archives, Sister St. Michel says, "I can never say

my work in the Archives was just a job for me. I was awestruck that I was actually seeing and handling things that I read about in history books.” Sister St. Michel made many contributions to the Archives. She began to computerize the catalogue.

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Sister St. Michel

With the help of some IHM volunteers, she also enhanced the Menology collection. She says that she would like to have gone all the way back, but lacked the “manpower.” Sister always loved history, especially community history and she spent 17 years cataloguing and preserving it for posterity. No wonder she describes her time in the Archives as truly “awesome” in the traditional sense of the word.



Sister M. St. Michel Mullany

In 2013, because of her background in history, Sister Marie Maynes was brought in to assist in the Archives. Two years after her arrival, Sister St. Michel moved to Camilla Hall. Sister Marie remained for two more years as Archivist. Record keeping and cataloguing are, of course, the most important roles of the Archivist, but Sister Marie’s favorite task was to research the sisters. She says, “Each sister’s history is precious. Each deserves to be remembered.”



Sister Marie Maynes

To illustrate, Sister Marie adds, “Often families would call about a sister, and because of the comprehensive records that have been kept, I was usually able to answer their questions.” Sister Marie sees the role of the Archivist as the “Guardian of Community History,” and she believes that Archivist to Archivist, they have “passed the flame.”

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So, today, Sister Helene Thomas Connolly, current Archivist and receiver of “the flame” has a tremendous and humbling responsibility to “walk on the shoulders” of the First Archivist, Sister Rose Bernard and the three living Archivists: Sister Genevieve, Sister St. Michel and Sister Marie, as she preserves and protects what has been and looks forward to what will be -- for the Past is truly Prologue!

Contributions to this article from the staff of the IHM Archives-Villa Maria House of Studies, Immaculata, PA. Information included current as of March, 2019..