

IHM Spotlights

*Sister Laura Downing, Vocation Director
Malvern, PA*



“The call to religious life is really a great calling! I absolutely love my ministry!”

What is the key to living a fulfilling life? For Sister Laura Downing it’s living her vocation as an IHM and following her deep desire to lead others to Christ. “Living your vocation, whatever it is, is the greatest and most fulfilling adventure you can have,” says Sister Laura as she reflects on her current ministry as Vocation Director for the IHM Congregation.

GREATEST DESIRE

“My greatest passion is helping young people develop a meaningful relationship with God,” Sister Laura says proudly. In her current vocation ministry, she is able to do just that as she offers guidance and support for women discerning a call to religious life. Sister assumed her current position in the summer of 2024 and has been involved with vocations as an IHM Vocation Committee member and as committee chair during the 2023-2024 academic year.

Feeling drawn to work with young people and heeding her call as an educator, Sister Laura began teaching Theology at Bishop O’Connell High School in Arlington, Virginia, followed by teaching positions at Cardinal Gibbons High School in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Immaculata University. Beyond the classroom, she has led high school retreats and served in campus ministry, creating spiritual spaces for young people to deepen their faith.

She recognizes how the various roles and experiences throughout her vocational journey have continued to shape her approach to guiding others in faith. “In hindsight, I can see how my previous mission assignments have worked together to prepare me for this ministry.”

DAY-TO-DAY

Sister Laura witnesses firsthand how discerning and committing to one’s calling can lead to deep fulfillment. She meets with women who are interested in religious life but not yet formally discerning



As Vocation Director, Sister Laura participated in the Diocese of Richmond’s Fiat Days and explained how to pray the Liturgy of the Hours.

a call to the IHM Congregation. For those who wonder what life as an IHM looks like, she plans “Come and See” events throughout the year to meet the sisters, ask questions, and explore what an IHM vocation entails. She also travels to high schools and university campuses to spread the word about vocations. She attends vocation-related events and works diligently to build relationships with women discerning the call through young adult outreach efforts and through social media. She also collaborates with the IHM vocation team in Peru, the IHM Congregational Vocation Committee, and with local vocation representatives.

Anyone who has met Sister Laura can feel the unmistakable energy she brings to her role in vocation ministry. “The call to religious life is really a great calling!” she says with a smile. “I absolutely love my ministry!” She hopes to build upon the culture of vocations fostered by former IHM Vocation Directors and to build relationships between young women discerning religious life with those (sisters, clergy, and laity) who have guided them on their vocational journey. “I am humbled by the responsibility and opportunity that this work entails both for the Congregation and in the lives of the women whom I meet. It gives me great joy and peace.”

CHANGING TIMES

Like any job, the role of Vocation Director comes with challenges especially in a time of fewer religious sisters and with the cultural influence of social media. “So much of discernment happens online now,” Sister Laura adds. “So many of the young women that I speak with have no “in-person” experience of religious sisters, IHM or otherwise. Everything they know comes through the Internet or social media. Because of this, creating a consistent, authentic, and attractive online presence that



Sister Laura enjoyed her time serving in campus ministry at Immaculata University.

appeals to the communication style and preferences of millennials and the Gen Z population is so important. I am constantly looking to our youngest members for their insights.”

RELIGIOUS CALLING

Sister Laura’s personal calling to religious life began in fifth grade when she had a sense that she would one day be like her principal, a Benedictine sister. After that, she says the thought of religious life “popped up occasionally” despite attending public school and not having interactions with religious sisters other than her aunt (a Religious Sister of Mercy), and the sisters she encountered during her Irish dance competitions whom she later discovered were IHMs. Her calling became more persistent during her time at Immaculata College (now University), and she slowly found herself “attracted to the joy and holy normalcy of the IHMs.” She began formally discerning the call to religious life in the fall of 1998 and entered the IHM Congregation at the start of her senior year at Immaculata in 2001.

She credits her family, particularly her father and grandmother, for instilling values of self-sacrifice and generosity. She is also deeply grateful for the support and guidance of her religious community including Sister Elaine Glanz, her sponsor, and Sister Kathleen Ann Donnelly, her Vocation Director. She remembers those who influenced her academically (such as

Dr. Elizabeth Nagel and Msgr. Christopher Schreck) by fostering a love of Theology, scripture, and the saints. She describes Saint Maria Goretti as the first saint she ever learned about who made her feel like a holy life was possible for “regular” people.

PERSONAL LIFE

Outside of her ministry, Sister says she is a “nerd at heart” who enjoys reading and learning different languages including Koine (New Testament) Greek. She also enjoys the theology of ministry and how that shapes who we are and what we do. Many people might not know that she was a former Irish dancer until a fall and a torn Achilles tendon (in front of a pep rally of 1,400 students!) led to the end of dancing competitively.

COMING FULL CIRCLE

These days, besides helping young people grow closer to God, Sister Laura is living out her calling to “help all people (young and not-so-young) find their place and role within the Church and providing them with the opportunities and formation to do that well.” She has found that a fulfilling life is not found in external accomplishments but in following God’s call. She hopes to help others experience the joy and peace that she has found in her calling, creating a legacy of inspiration and encouragement that will nurture vocations for generations to come.