
CONVOCATION ADDRESS

WOMEN OF TRANSFORMATION: BOLD IN SPIRIT, BRAVE IN MISSION

JULY 25, 2026

Good Morning

In the IHM focus of our lived reality, there are certain rituals that have gradually become meaningful for most of us. Who would deny that Alex Trebek, Ken Jennings, Pat Sayjek, Ryan Seacrest, and Vanna White have become an integral part of our recreational lives? It may be because of our inherent insatiable love of learning or because of our craving for mindless moments after a long day of ministry that we engage in a different kind of thinking or even searching for an hour in our lives when we can leave the thinking to others and cheer them on in the process. Who knows? But somehow, we have to admit that for most of us it is a daily ritual that helps in crafting somewhat of a rhythm beyond our daily prayer.

If we are really paying attention to our recreational lives, we may discover that the daily doses of *Jeopardy* and *Wheel of Fortune* are giving way to a weekly anticipation of an episode of *Call the Midwife*. It is here that we welcome the idealistic Jenny Lee, the kind and loyal Chummy Noakes, the bold and humorous Trixie Franklin, and the intelligent and strong-willed advocate for social justice, Lucille Robinson/Andersen. These are the midwives who serve the poor communities in London's East End during the late 1950s and 1960s. Another interesting set of characters is the dedicated Sisters who work alongside this intriguing group of women.

Sister Julianne - The calm, wise, and motherly leader. She guides both the midwives and the community with kindness and practicality.

Sister Evangeline - Sweet, shy, and compassionate. She often provides emotional support to others and families.

Sister Monica Jones - Eccentric, quirky, and sometimes forgetful but with a heart of gold.

Sister Bernadette, who appeared in the early seasons, is practical and caring in providing community support.

It would be a fun exercise to spend this day looking at episode after episode of *Call the Midwife* and speak about which character we are especially attracted to or who in our local community each character reminds us of. While I am sure that could lead us into deeper conversation about the emotional storytelling of the societal issues of poverty, housing, healthcare, and women's rights that are central themes of the particular episodes, I would like to concentrate on perhaps what is the underlying theme of why this TV show resonates with so many of us.

The Nonnatus House is the central hub and heart of *Call the Midwife*, and its importance goes far beyond being just a building.

- Nonnatus House is the convent/home where the midwives and sisters live.
- It provides shelter, stability, and community for the staff, who face the emotional and physical challenges of midwifery.
- It's a home base for compassion, where the midwives plan their visits, share experiences, and support one another.
- Nonnatus House isn't just a location—it symbolizes the ethos of the series:
 - Service: Selflessly helping those in need.
 - Compassion: Caring for every mother and child, regardless of social class or circumstance.
 - Faith and Morality: The nuns' Catholic values guide decisions, but the midwives' human empathy often transcends religious boundaries.

In short: Nonnatus House is both literal and symbolic; a home, a sanctuary, a moral compass, and the beating heart of the series. Without it, the show would not have the sense of community, continuity, and compassion that makes it so impactful.

The Nonnatus Lens: Midwives of Hope

In Latin, “Nonnatus” literally means “not born”. It comes from St. Raymond Nonnatus, a 13th century Catholic Saint who was delivered by Caesarean section after his mother died in childbirth, which was extremely rare at the time. So, he was “not born” in the usual way- hence the name.

Today I would like to suggest that Nonnatus is more than a name: It is a lens. It teaches us that transformation is born often through intentionality, community, compassion, pain and suffering. Transformation is “not born” in the usual way, and as Pope Leo tells us, Christian hope is not about avoiding pain and suffering but about knowing that God gives people the strength to persevere and to love even when things go wrong. (CNS, General Audience August 27, 2025).

Sisters, today we are called to be the midwives of hope, not controlling the outcome, but to be with others in the period of gestation and in the labor pains of new life for them and the world.

What does it mean to be “Bold in Spirit and Brave in Mission through this Nonnatus Lens? Nonnatus, the name signifies new life drawn forth from improbable circumstances. It reminds us that God's grace arrives exactly where it seems least likely and precisely when courage is most needed. That is the heart of transformation; that is the soul of boldness in Spirit and bravery in mission.

Boldness in Spirit-Brave in Mission

Boldness in Spirit and Brave in Mission are inseparable movements of the same grace: one is the inner fire, the other its outward light. Boldness in Spirit is the deep trust in God that frees the heart from fear, widens vision, instills courage, and roots discernment in the Gospel; it is the quiet but unshakable conviction that the Spirit continues to call us beyond what is familiar or secure. From that interior freedom flows the courage to be Brave in Mission; to cross new boundaries, to respond to the needs of the time, and to serve with creativity and hope even when the path is uncertain. Mission without boldness of spirit risks becoming mere activity, but boldness of spirit naturally seeks expression in loving action for the sake of God's people. Together they form a dynamic fidelity: contemplative at its source, courageous in its response, and always oriented toward the unfolding of God's dream in the world.

Our IHM legacy is filled with countless stories that illustrate this boldness in Spirit leading to bravery in mission. We have heard these stories countless times, and we recall them with fondness. Sisters, these stories are much more than “feel good” moments. We must let them penetrate our hearts, increase our vision and permeate our discernment. Today, together with one another, can we view them through the Nonnatus lens of new life drawn from improbable circumstances.

Founders Day

Each year on November 10th in every IHM Convent, if there is not one, there are many log cabin depictions of our first foundation. The story of happily sharing eating utensils is told once again, and it seems as if that first local community, along with Father Gillet, relished, at least for a moment, the joys of coming together for a common purpose. And if we had the time, we all could recount these “log cabin moments” in our own lives where the vicissitudes of what preceded the actual event are forgotten in the telling of the shared joyful experience.

Looking past the log cabin, our understanding of our congregational history continues to unfold as we strive to strengthen our connections to our Oblate Sisters of Providence and our sisters in Monroe and Scranton. A deeper dive into the beginning of the founding gives us a more sober picture of that first log cabin experience. Looking with a Nonnatus Lens, we become fully aware that it is truly a work of Divine Providence that our IHM Congregation was not born in the usual way.

The Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first successful religious community of Black Catholic women in the United States, founded their ministry in response to systemic exclusion from education and religious life. This invites a more honest recognition about the development of our own IHM story, the hierarchical influence on the separation of our sisters, and the courage and foresight of Congregational leadership to begin the process of reconciliation among us. As we learn more about the life of Theresa Maxis, we come face to face with the challenges that led her to be hidden from some of our own historical accounts. However, both her and Father Gillet

persevered in their vision for Catholic education. When held alongside the Oblates mission to educate Black communities who were denied access, a fuller picture emerges: Catholic education has been a force for justice and, at times, shaped by exclusion. This dual reality challenges us to hold both pride and accountability.

The IHM charism of love, creative hope, and fidelity takes on sharper meaning in this context:

- Love becomes a call to confront injustice, not ignore it.
- Creative hope asks us to imagine and build systems that actively resist racism.
- Fidelity demands honesty about our past and commitment to transformation in the present

Understanding this shared history is not only informative. It is formative. It calls us today to:

- listen more attentively to marginalized voices
- examine how inequities persist in education and society
- act in ways that promote inclusion, dignity, and justice

Could it be that the intertwined histories of the Oblate Sisters of Providence and the three IHM Congregations are the midwife that is bringing to birth the transformation of our understanding of racism from a distant issue into a moral and communal responsibility? Our history has become a source of conversion and renewal, enlivening the IHM mission to respond to racism not just with reflection, but with faithful, hope-filled action.

Immaculata University

In 1908, when higher education for women, especially Catholic women religious, was still viewed as unnecessary or even risky, Mother Camilla Maloney acted with remarkable boldness of spirit. She recognized that the mission of the Church and the vitality of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary demanded more than goodwill; it required intellectual formation, professional preparation, and a vision that reached beyond the limitations of her time. Trusting deeply in Providence, she committed scarce resources, faced skepticism, and persevered through practical obstacles to secure what would become Immaculata University.

Listen again with your Nonnatus heart to Mother Alma's account:

But Mother Camilla's plans were more pretentious still; they included a plan for college education for Catholic women; the intellectual and moral training were the foundation, the sine qua non for the achievement of her plan; but of importance too was the material building. Here again her humble prudence planned wisely and well: her projects would place the efficiency of present-day construction in the limelight; their conception as far back as 1908 is incredible.

She had carefully selected her site; she admitted no obstacle to its acquisition; little by little this was accomplished. For \$2,349.76 she received the first deed in 1906, almost 68,000 was expended in 1907, and another thousand in 1909, giving to the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary undisputed title to 198 acres on a splendid height overlooking the Chester valley, about one mile west of Frazer.

Mother Alma continues the narrative by accounting the work of the administrations of Mother Mary James, Mother Loyola, and Mother Maria Pacis that eventually brought the estate to 400 acres. Simply an incredible example of Boldness in Spirit and Bravery in Mission (Alma, p. 238)

However, there is a line in the story that we cannot overlook. Mother Alma states:

“In all this Community expansion, the humble, retiring Mother Camilla was the guiding spirit; her ideals were of the highest; she never admitted the possibility of defeat in their accomplishment so that frequently no one was more surprised than the sisters themselves when, at her behest, they achieved the seemingly impossible.” (Alma pg. 237)

Our Nonnatus Lens, seen through the life of Mother Camilla, speaks to our IHM Legacy as that of bringing forth life through faith, sacrifice, and hope. As IHMs, we nurture possibilities through contemplative listening to the Spirit that allows an inner movement to become generative action for others. As women of the Church, we know that our leadership is not driven by personal ambition but by a self-emptying love that makes space for new life to emerge in the congregation, in our ministries, with the women who will join us, and in the Church. As IHMs, we mirror Mary’s heart-receptive, courageous, and fruitful, bringing into the world what only faith could first conceive.

Immaculata is defying the narrative of decline by demonstrating that relevance comes not from abandoning tradition, but from adapting it. As our world today grapples with the value of higher education, could it be that the humility and vision of Mother Camilla is the midwife to our ability to “let go” of Gillet Hall to make room for student life to grow and to demonstrate to others our strong belief that higher education can evolve while staying rooted in purpose?

South America

Our South American history presents a clear illustration of Boldness of Spirit and the Bravery in Mission. Looking through a Nonnatus Lens, this history teaches us that transformation is born often through intentionality, community, compassion, pain, and suffering.

The history of our educational mission in Peru is recounted in Sister Annette Pelletier’s dissertation titled *Schools of Mission: Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Peru 1922-2000*. It is a fascinating read which touches one’s heart and strengthens one’s resolve to grapple with issues that face the Country, the Congregation, the Church and the World.

There are countless examples within our South American experience that illustrate a Boldness in Spirit that leads to Bravery in Mission. The annals are replete with story after story of our sisters' ability to navigate the cultural, educational, political, and ecclesial challenges that they encounter.

In a difficult period during a change in the Presidential regime, the sisters had to return all governmental funds and were told that they did not have the proper teaching credentials. Yet the Archbishop at the time had previously promised the sisters that "he would take care of everything" (p.100). Up until this point, no government official or Church official had questioned any of the sisters' credentials. Now the patronage of the President and the Archbishop was nonexistent. Sister Cornelia states in a letter to Mother Loyola, "I can assure you Mother, I am ready to give up the ghost....We are in the depths of despair...There have been many lonely anxious hours spent in this far-away land, but never has the community been in any worse plight than at present. (p. 101). Relief came in the form of financial loans from the sisters in the United States so that the sisters could build schools independent from governmental subsidies. Mother Loyola was able through the help of Cardinal Dougherty to secure provisional teaching credentials from the Pennsylvania Department of Education to fulfill the Government's requirements in Peru.

Since these were only provisional certificates, Mother Loyola instructed Sister Cornelia to find instructors to teach the sisters philosophy, Spanish literature, and history so that permanent certificates could be obtained. And since gymnastics was a requirement, Mother Loyola sent a gymnastics textbook from the United States and told Sister Cornelia to have a sister read it and to teach the other Sisters. (p. 106).

Lack of financial support and constantly changing teaching credentials were among the many obstacles that the sisters faced. The Sisters were steadfast in their commitment to understand the Peruvian culture and to communicate through presence and education that all of God's people, rich or poor, are worthy of God's boundless love. Our sisters' presence in Peru confronted the notion of a class system. They accompanied their Peruvian students to the poorest of neighborhoods to teach them their obligation to share from their abundance. They trained leaders to address the inequalities that existed among the classes, and they worked hand in hand with the poor to help them help themselves.

While sustaining our own schools in Peru, in the late 1980s, the sisters at an intense time of political upheaval made the conscious decision to join with others in the collaborative ministries of the Fe Y Alegria schools. Ministering in Barranca and Montenegro during the terror of the Shining Path highlighted the IHM's boldness of spirit. Sister Annette writes:

Sister Mary McBride informed Mother Genevieve of the increasingly precarious situation the congregation faced. The sisters continued their ministry but not without risk. Sister Mary wrote, "In Barranca, the sisters are doing what the parish priest will not do. The father of a child in school was killed in the presence of his wife and children...Sister was asked to bless the woman's husband's dead body because the priest refused...The sisters in both missions (Barranca

and Montenegro) were asked if they wished to leave due to the fear of the terrorists. All replied “no” (p329).

The sisters’ no in the face of terrorism and political corruption was a gateway to a profound yes in our present-day history. Our South American experience opened our Congregational vision to understanding the nuances of cultural exposure, working beyond and around political constraints, seeing the need for pastoral ministries, and discerning in prayer and dialogue how, as a community, we develop a radical solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

Could we consider that our communities in South America were the midwives to our present-day Literacy Centers, our Spanish Apostolates, and our work at the border?

Persons With Disabilities

In February of 1984 Sister Gerald Mary IHM, as chair of the Archdiocesan Committee on Pastoral Concerns of Persons with Disabilities, wrote a letter to the Reverend Thomas J. Hilferty. In that letter, Sister passionately documented a proposed plan for the formation of an Archdiocesan Office for Pastoral Concerns of Persons with disabilities. Gerald knew that to effectively minister to people with disabilities, a committee was not enough. An intentional plan and full-time resources needed to be allocated to this important work. It took time for Gerald’s plea to be heard. The Archdiocesan Office for Persons with Disabilities was established in 1991 and strives to proclaim the Gospel to all people through witness to foster the full inclusion of people of all abilities into the life of the Church in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Could we consider that Sister Gerald Mary was a midwife giving birth to an awareness of the need to reach out to an underserved population? Is it possible to believe that her letter made a difference in giving birth to a bolder and braver ministry as the one we have today?

Little Known History

In July of 2021, Sister Helene Thomas Connelly received an email from Mark Sweeney. The content, I feel, illustrates an interesting piece of our history. Mark relates:

According to the oral history of our family, Anne Marie Salisbury was born in a hospital in New York City in 1913 to her Irish emigrant mother, Mary Salisbury. Anne’s father is unknown, but she was given the surname Salisbury, as was her older brother, Stephen, also father unknown. At some point in the next couple of years following her birth (we think around 1917). Mary died, and Anne Marie was given into the care of the IHM Sisters in West Chester, Pennsylvania, where she was raised. In Mary’s last will and testament, there is mention of the adoption, and it states that she left \$1,500 to the IHM Sisters for the care of Anne (quite a sum of money in those days).

In the 1920 US Federal Census, Anna is listed as living at Villa Maria Academy, East Whiteland, West Chester, PA. In 1930, Anne is listed at Immaculate Heart Academy, Butler, Schuylkill, PA. In 1939, she married Edward F. Lavelle, had a family, and lived out her days in Pennsylvania.

Sister Helene, after much research, was able to confirm that Anne Marie Salisbury was indeed enrolled in Villa Maria Academy and in Immaculate Heart Academy, Fountain Springs. This young woman, it appears, was adopted by the IHMs when she was 4 years old and educated in our schools. Our Archives do not have any history of this other than the school records. Ironically, the grandson of Anne we found out worked with Pat McGrenra and Ellen Convey at Gesu School.

Could it be that Mother Mary James, the General Superior, at the time of Anne's birth was the midwife to our own understanding of what it means to give birth to hope ...to accompany others amid the unseemliness of circumstances? To not judge what led to the need but to offer a compassionate heart that lifts others to live the life our God fully intended for them. Could this story be the midwife to our work at Mother of Mercy House or the welcome that people feel at our retreat centers?

Present Day

Just this month, on July 16th, 27 School Sisters of Christ the King traveled by bus to our Motherhouse to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of their foundation. In the mid-1970s, Bishop Glennon Flavin shared with Mother Claudia his bold conviction that Catholic schools were essential to forming strong apostolic laity. He wanted to build Catholic schools in southern Nebraska, but the religious communities in his diocese were unable to provide Sisters to staff them. So, like Father Gillet in Michigan a century earlier, "if he could not find Sisters, he would create them." And like Father Gillet, who sought the help and energy of a bold, courageous religious woman in Theresa Maxis, Bishop Flavin sought the help and boldness of Mother Claudia Honsberger, who agreed to allow three young women from Nebraska to begin their religious formation with the IHM community. Three years later, three IHM Sisters—Sister Joseph Fidelis, Sister Mary Lorraine Holzmann, and Sister John Evelyn DiTrollo—opened the newly built St. Joseph School. None of them had ever been on a plane, let alone visited Nebraska. Their task was to open a convent, a school, and eventually a Motherhouse. For the next ten years, IHM Sisters were assigned to Nebraska, and many of our Sisters taught summer courses for the newly formed School Sisters of Christ the King. During their visit this July, all 27 Sisters spent two days at Camilla Hall. They visited every Sister and had special visits with Sister Regina Marian, Sister Loretta Therese, Sister Patricia Daily, and Sister Marie Magdalena. During this visit, they told us that they are doing a visioning process for their future needs and just completed the construction of their "Aging in Place Center." This will provide for the future needs of their retired and infirm sisters. They have chosen the name of Camilla Hall for their Convent Home and Health Care Center.

After praying Vespers with the local community at the Motherhouse, they shared Philadelphia cheesesteaks, Tastykakes, and Philly pretzels for dinner. Their visit brought unique energy to Camilla Hall and the Motherhouse. Their fiftieth-anniversary pilgrimage to their Immaculata roots allowed the younger members to meet the sisters who were instrumental in the beginning of their foundation and to hear the founding stories firsthand. In her book, *The Secret Life of Bees*, Sue Monk Kidd writes, “Stories have to be told, or they die, and when they die, we can’t remember who we are or why we’re here.” Certainly, the telling of the stories was a moment for both IHMs and CK Sisters to remember who we are and why we are here.

Could we consider that our participation in the founding of the School Sisters of Christ the King, and our continued support of vocations to consecrated life, are bringing to birth a renewed personal and communal conviction? Through our fidelity to *Faithful Witness*, we are creating the stories that future IHMs will use to remember who they are and why they are here.

Could we also consider that the visit to Camilla Hall by the CK Sisters is giving birth to their understanding of transitioning from doing to being and the powerful Congregational support that a Health Care Center provides for its members and the life of the Congregation? It was very clear to every CK Sister that Powerhouse of Prayer is not a title that we take for granted. It was abundantly clear to every CK sister that joy is the visible fruit of a life of service.

How many stories of our sisters do we not know that have engendered life in the heart of another? There are so many unwritten Nonnatus events among us.

Alphonsian Connection

I do not think that it is a coincidence today that we gather on July 25th for this convocation. Sisters, today we celebrate Christmas in July...coming together to see one another for this common purpose is always an “incarnational event.” We share stories, laugh together, celebrate a simple meal, and share Eucharist. We can go home enriched by each other’s presence and reengaged in our own journey of transformation, perhaps with a new insight or a strengthened perspective. Often, we are encouraged by the Nonnatus Lens of another...seeing something born in us in an unusual way. Could we consider that even a day like today and the community gatherings that we fully participate in during the year are the midwives of grappling with the uncertainty of our present time, offering hope to one another and those with whom we share ministry?

It is easy to see the Nonnatus implications of the historical Incarnation. Jesus Christ was certainly not born in the usual way. We could stop here and reflect on the Boldness of Spirit evidenced in the fiat of a simple peasant girl from Nazareth. Her yes, without the full knowledge of how the mission would unfold, empowered her to be brave in all the circumstances of her Son’s life. And although today has some Christmas overtones...we cannot miss the Nonnatus implications of something being born not in the usual way through the feast of Mary Magdalene that we celebrated this week.

When we view the feast of Mary Magdalene through a Nonnatus Lens, we see clearly that Resurrection, new life, happens only after death has occurred. (Beautiful Year Kindle. P. 179)

What are the implications for us as religious women today? There are many. I offer a few for our consideration.

Witness in the Midst of Uncertainty

In the midst of grief and the blur of confusion, Mary comes to the tomb doing the only thing she knows what she can do...to offer her presence. It is precisely there that her encounter with the risen Christ transforms her from mourner to messenger. Our Nonnatus Lens informs us that in our world today, which is often marked by the uncertainty of declining institutions, social divisions, and injustices, we, like Mary, are called to stand in difficult spaces and still proclaim hope. We are the midwives who demonstrate that new life can emerge even when it is not yet visible.

Even in our own congregational uncertainty in regard to our buildings and our planning for the future, could it be that our grappling with the myriads of decisions before us is resurrecting in us a profound gratitude for the blessings we share as a congregation? Could it be that we are bringing birth to our own personal transformation? Sisters, deep personal transformation is a bold stance that allows whatever is blocking the tomb of our hearts. It is the gateway to a fresh and alive understanding of our vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience.

Recognizing Christ in New Forms

At first, Mary does not recognize Jesus; she mistakes him for the gardener. Only through encounters does she come to see clearly.

As our Nonnatus Lens of community history informs us, we are called to recognize Christ in unexpected places, especially in those who are suffering, in changing cultural realities, and in new forms of ministry. This requires openness and humility. Could we consider that our understanding of our charism of Love, Fidelity and Creative Hope in the birthing room of our hearts strengthens our belief that every encounter is a gateway to the boldness in spirit and the bravery in mission that is our founding legacy?

Being Sent: “Go and Tell”

After recognizing Jesus, Mary Magdalene is sent to share the good news with others. This moment highlights her boldness in spirit and bravery in mission. She was going back to a room filled with frightened men. As a woman, she was not considered a very credible witness. Her message was

simple, yet profound. “I have seen the Lord”. That first Easter sermon was just five words. Yet her proclamation to those frightened, fearful followers unleashed the afterbirth of courageous boldness that transformed the I have seen the Lord to the “We have seen the Lord.” Could we consider that this journey from I to we is the gateway that witnesses to the boldness in spirit and bravery in mission that our communal transformation is birthing in us?

Sisters, it may not seem it, but our world, our Church, and our Congregation are pregnant with possibilities. Our legacy informs us that we are the midwives of bringing to birth hopeful actions that witness dignity, compassion, and justice. Giving birth is messy work...as we listen to the resurrected Christ...

Sisters, can you hear the world saying...“Call the IHMs”...They have a Nonnatus heart!