

## Founding Is An Active Verb

Today is a special day in the heart of every IHM Sister.

Memories rise up. Images take shape: Theresa Maxis and Louis Florent Gillet coming to Monroe, the first sisters gathering in the rude log-cabin-like dwelling where, as the story goes, even their cutlery and china were in short supply. We try to picture these women - Ann Shaaff, Theresa Renauld and, within the year, the widow, Josette Godfroy Smyth, with her dowry and furniture. In that earliest setting we sense the chill of November presaging a cold Michigan winter.

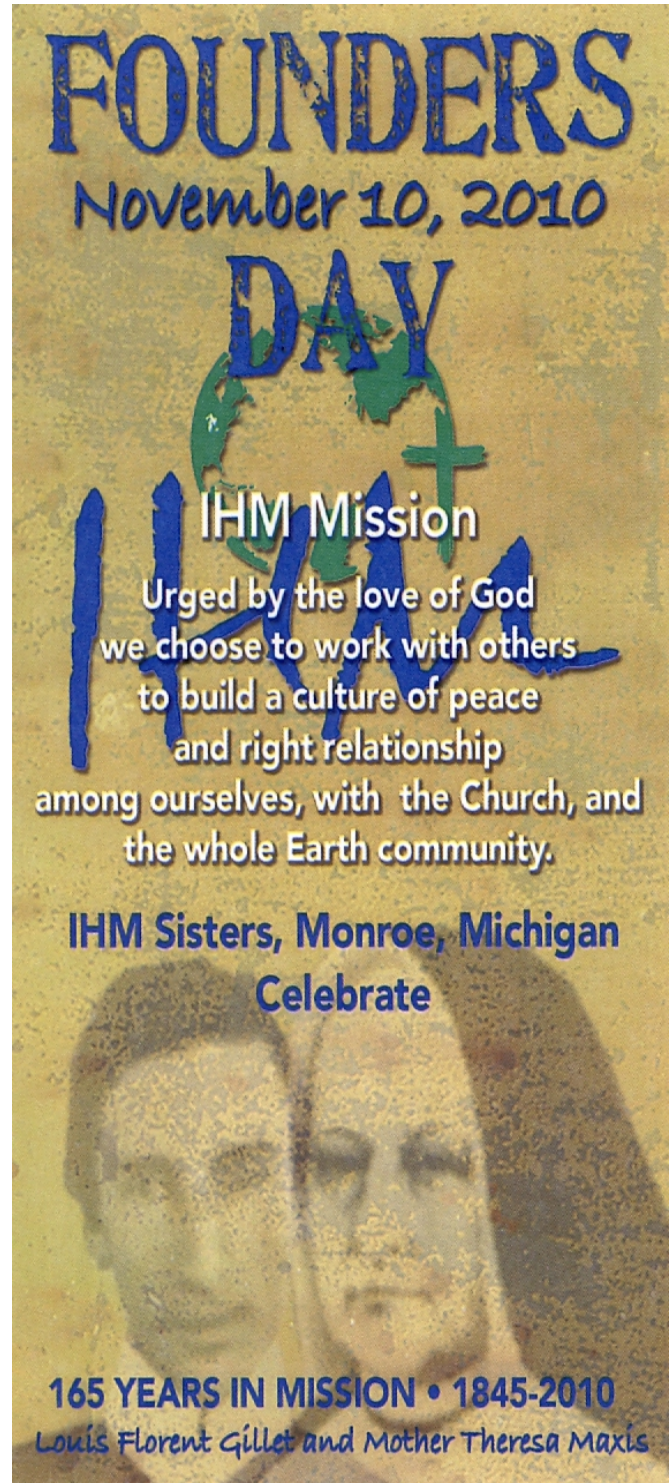
We swell with pride knowing that hardly a month after their formal beginning on Nov. 10, 1845, they published the opening of the Young Ladies Academy, promising an impressive curriculum. We marvel how they could take boarders and orphans into already too small a space.

Are these snippets in your album of IHM history, too? Do you envision the old Motherhouse, the buildings structured one by one as Monsignor Joos permitted it? Do you include the Academy fire? Do you picture the long blue line that developed and followed? Do you conjure up the expanding IHM enterprises far and wide, decade after decade?

Yes. We find much to recall on this fresh Founders' Day of 2010. Today we are 165 years mature.

To be sure, this heartwarming tapestry of memory is stitched through with shades of sorrow and pain, of estrangement and loss. We recognize that these somber threads only make the fabric more authentic and the tapestry more splendid.

In today's reading St. Paul grounds us as IHMs in this picture of contrasts. We hear him say, "[T]he only knowledge I claimed to have was about Jesus and only about him as the crucified Christ." (1 Cor 2: 2) Paul offered the Gospel to Christians of his



time. He did not know that we would ponder his words, internalize them, pass them on in our own way centuries later.

Last Saturday I was at the 50th anniversary of the Immaculata High School Class of 1960. One of the women - let's call her Jeanne - musing on her experience with IHMs spoke of Sister Grace, a 20th century bearer of the Gospel. Jeanne said, "I had some training in music, but I often neglected my lessons and simply skipped along the surface of things until I came to Immaculata and met Sister Grace. She looked me in the eye and said, 'Jeanne, you have great promise, but you have to buckle down and get your timing straight. Learn your fingerwork. Study the musical score.' Sister Grace changed my life. She made me measure up. I was able to go on to major in music and get my masters and use my skills."

Wasn't Sister Grace translating the Pauline Gospel promise of Jesus for an adolescent, moving her closer to the meaning of the Word of life embodied in both joy and trial?

As the day went on, other grads came by to recall Sister Grace. Surely, it was not just because she taught music. I suspect the testimony of her own life echoed the words of St. Paul and the words and witness of our founders.

I believe Sister Grace and other IHMs at Immaculata were IHM founding women themselves.

The second reading today, taken from our Constitutions addresses IHM life in this 21st century. We say of ourselves that "we dare to speak God's word with boldness, to risk deeds our own hearts could never dream. . . whatever the outcome." (Article 16) Do we not embody the dreams and deeds of our founders in these words? And here, it seems to me, we place the founding challenge upon ourselves.

"There I was arriving in Ghana," one IHM told me, "but no sisters met me in Accra. My date of arrival had never reached them. I found myself in a primitive setting with limited knowledge of the culture and the language and the barest sense of the direction to take. I faced a three-day journey to the other end of the country. Suddenly I realized it was my job to find a way to the mission in this foreign country." And in the Providence of God that's what she did. She took on the task; she found the way. She symbolizes what IHMs do over the decades. They take on seemingly gargantuan deeds to realize, alone and together, ministries whose outcome God alone knows.

The founding spirit goes on.

Jesus in the Gospel today unfolds the character of the call of every Christian and therefore of every IHM !! to bring good news, to proclaim liberty, overcome blindness, release prisoners, announce a year of favor. Is not this text being fulfilled today among us even as we listen?

The contours of our ministries differ from our images of the early days, but the substance conforms to Louis Florent and Theresa's vision, to Paul's message, to Jesus' life and ministry.

A time passes, I realize we are in the picture, too. Without us, the IHM founding dynamic is over. Founders' Day becomes simply a trip to the cemetery. But we know it is not so. We are active celebrants of Founders' Day. Wherever IHMs live, love and minister, the IHM community is being founded.

The past is not lost. Our earliest founders and our patrons still inspire. Their spirit resides within us; we cherish and embody it as we take up the work of describing and defining ourselves today and tomorrow. We are the decision-makers of IHM identity today. We're part of the story. We embellish the tapestry.

That's the joy of it. The fire of the founders burns on even in old bones and still stirs young bones, too.

We still weave the IHM image in Detroit, a city of many needs, and in Monroe where our log cabin is a sprawling Motherhouse. We are creating our identity in cities, towns, townships, near and far. We minister to sisters and brothers with many needs, immersed in today's problems. We still educate, blending new learning styles with the old. We invent fresh responses to emerging needs. Like all Founders' Days before us this is an active Founders' Day. It inspires the prayer, words, actions of every IHM who sings songs of hope, creates deeds of service. Founders' Day is a call, a charge; it is a trust given us. It is a gift to receive.

Oh, come to the feast and be happy!

Praise be to Jesus and to Mary ever virgin... Now and forever!

Joan Glisky, IHM  
Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2010