

GOING  
WHERE WE ARE  
NEEDED

A Life of Sister Aquinas Weber O. P.

by Gary Eberle





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# INTRODUCTION

When President Juan Olivarez commissioned me to write this biography of Sister Aquinas Weber as she approached her 90th birthday, I knew she would resist having her story told. Having worked with her for some 30 years, I knew she was a humble and private person, in spite of the amount of time she has spent in the public eye and the amount of public recognition she has received in her life. Sure enough, when we approached her, she was hesitant, expressing surprise that anyone would be interested in her story. In the end, she agreed to sit down with me over a period of some four months and talk about her life, but only if I would treat her life as one example of the lives and times of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids whose mission in Michigan and the world began in 1877.

In her nearly 70 years of professed religious life, Sister Aquinas has seen and overseen immense changes in the work and lifestyle of religious women. She has been part of the enormous changes in society and in the Catholic Church that have taken place since she entered religious life in 1944. As prioress, she had to guide the congregation through the momentous changes mandated by the Second Vatican Council's *Perfectae Caritatis*, and as one of the founders of the Eastown! neighborhood project she was deeply involved in both the expanding mission of religious women and the urban and social challenges of the 1960's and 1970's. As the first woman on the board of directors of the Old Kent Bank and Trust Financial Corporation, she was a pioneer during the early years of the modern women's movement. As a member of the board of trustees of Aquinas College and later head of the College's development department and finally as chancellor, she found herself far removed from her early days as a grade school teacher and principal, but she never lost her sense of mission and how her work moved forward the educational endeavors of the College founded by her congregation. Late in life, as awards were given to her in recognition of her years of service, she remained humble, saying repeatedly that she did not accept these recognitions for herself alone because she had done nothing, really, on her own. Throughout her life, she explained, she was able to do what she did only because of the support and encouragement of the Sisters of the congregation. She said she only did what all the other Sisters did—she went where she was needed. Like anyone who stretches her boundaries, she had moments of uncertainty about whether she could accomplish the tasks set before her and shoulder the responsibilities that were put on her, but she discovered that through prayer and the support of her Sisters she could learn what she needed to know and succeed at whatever task she was given.

I need to acknowledge, first of all, Sister Aquinas herself for sitting down with me for our weekly coffee and interview sessions which were a delight to me, even though it took her a while to get used to talking about herself. Typically, she found it easier to talk about the people she worked with. For help in research, I also need to acknowledge the assistance of: Jennifer Morrisson, Aquinas College archivist; Mary Haarman, director of College communications; Sister Michael Ellen Carling for help with archival materials from Marywood; Sister Mary Navarre for recent history of the Marywood congregation and background on Dominican life; and to Marty Allen, Paul Nelson, and Sister Catherine Williams for their willingness to share their memories of Sister Aquinas and the Dominican Sisters.

Gary Eberle  
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Early Years

**L**ucille Weber, later known as Sister Aquinas Weber, was born on May 2, 1923, and grew up on the family farm in the days when M-37 was a two-lane dirt road that ran past the Weber home near the small town of Kingsley, about 15 miles south of Traverse City. Kingsley was one of many northern Michigan German communities whose life centered on farming, family and church. The family attended Saint Mary Parish, and all 11 of the children of Anna and Jacob Weber would eventually attend the parish grade school and high school located in Hannah, a short distance from the family's farm. The schools were staffed by the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids who in the late 1800's had arrived in Traverse City and very quickly spread their teaching ministry throughout northern and western Michigan. On Sundays, farmers and their families from all over the area drove or walked to the church of Saint Mary which was both a religious and social center for the community.



Left: Anna and Jacob Weber, Sister Aquinas's parents, on their wedding day in the early 1900's.

Below: Jacob and Anna Weber owned a farm in Kingsley, Michigan, just south of Traverse City.





The whole community being German Catholic, faith and religious life were central. Sunday Mass was the highlight of most families' weeks. Families gathered to say the daily rosary in May and October. The Catholic schools observed every holy day with days off, and the Catholic farmers did not work their fields on those days or on Sundays. The boys all became altar servers and there was a men's choir at the church. On Sunday afternoons, close neighbors and relatives would get together and have a big farm dinner.

Lucille was one of two girls and nine boys born to Anna and Jacob Weber. As the fifth child of 11, she looked up to and competed with her older brothers and was expected to help with the care of the younger ones as she herself grew. Her farm life was fairly normal, and in the usual run of things the Weber children might have been expected to grow right into farming and continue the family tradition. Their father Jacob, however, knew farm life was not for everybody, so he encouraged all his children to get a good education so they would have options for careers when they came of age.

Jacob Weber was a general farmer, growing diverse crops. For a while, he had tried growing cherries, but he found he couldn't compete with the already-established cherry farmers north of Traverse City, so he turned to a variety of crops, including green beans, potatoes and radishes, working under contract for companies like Stokely who would come in and harvest the crops in the fall. Once the Depression hit, the strategy of diversity turned out to be beneficial because he needed reliable cash crops that he could sell if the companies he had contracts with went under. All the boys in the family were expected to work on the farm, and when it came time to harvest potatoes, everyone, including



Top left: Lucille Weber, later known as Sister Aquinas, in the eighth grade.

Above: Lucille Weber's high school graduation portrait, 1940.

the girls, was expected to pitch in.

Anna Weber was a busy farm wife and mother. An energetic woman who canned and preserved most of the family's food, she depended on her large family to help around the house, and in the process taught them valuable lessons about organization and time management.

As Lucille grew, she fell into the regular rhythm of the year. Walking with her older brothers two-and-a-half miles to school each day forced her to stretch her legs to keep up with them. Later in life, she realized that growing up with so many brothers had a significant effect on her character. In October 1976, she wrote a short article about herself in *Rapport*, an in-house publication of the Dominican Sisters. "My life and living, simply put, could easily fall into two worlds, one masculine, and the other feminine. I say this because I was born and raised with nine brothers and one sister. One of my mother's many challenges and concerns in that setting was to keep me from developing masculine traits. Her resounding reminder was 'be a lady.' I was so easily attracted and drawn into all of the activities of my brothers that my mother found the above admonition a necessity."

Lucille never let the fact that she was a girl hinder her. "If the boys were stilt-walking," she recalled, "I tried it too. If the boys were climbing trees, I climbed them as well. When my mother would say, 'I don't know if you are ever going to grow up to be a girl,' I would laugh it off. I was having fun." She became good at baseball, and all the things her brothers did, she could do, too. She didn't think twice about it. When the boys got ahead of her on their walks down the road to school and they threatened to leave her behind, she would run, even in the winter when the northern Michigan snow was



Lucille Weber, pictured at Belle Isle in Detroit during the time she worked at Parke-Davis, just prior to joining the Dominican Sisters.

piled shoulder-high along the road.

The feminine influences in her life came from her mother, of course, but also from the talented and educated Dominican Sisters teaching at Saint Mary School. The school was small (in the late 1930's, the high school had only 50 students), but the teachers were well qualified, most having already earned their teaching certification from Sacred Heart College or Catholic Junior College in Grand Rapids<sup>1</sup>. As Lucille grew, she found her favorite subjects were history and English. The Sisters were tremendous role models for a young girl, teaching her their academic subjects but also impressing her with the idea that women could learn and teach hard subjects, even the sciences. When she was in fifth or sixth grade, she briefly flirted with the idea of becoming a Sister, but that quickly passed, though the idea of someday teaching remained with her.

Reading was also encouraged at home. In addition to expected publications like the *Michigan Farmer*, the Weber family subscribed to *The Grand Rapids Herald*, *Liberty*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Each Friday, Lucille would check out an armload of library books to hold her for

“There was never a question whether we should do this or not,” she recalled. “We simply did it.”

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a few days over the weekend.

While she was getting a good academic foundation, Lucille was also learning more important life lessons on the farm. Her father was active in the community, involved with political campaigns and elections, supporting the school and being engaged in church activities. From her mother, she learned important lessons in compassion and community service during the hard years of the Great Depression. Though they lived in an isolated farming community and were spared the worst of the Depression themselves, the family did experience people's poverty indirectly and did what they could to extend aid. In the summertime, any number of men would hitchhike past the Weber farm on their way to Traverse City to see if they could get work as day laborers for the fruit harvests. Anna Weber would never turn anyone away, no matter the hour. One summer night at midnight, when Jacob Weber was in Grand Rapids at a funeral, there was a knock on the farmhouse door. When Anna opened the door, she found on the porch eight unemployed people on their way to Traverse City looking for jobs. They said they were hungry. Anna woke the older children. Having a large family meant she had fresh bread, butter and milk, and she said “You can have all three, but you have to be quiet because my other children are sleeping upstairs.” The men said they could eat outside, and they did. As the Depression rolled on during the 1930's, that sort of event repeated itself. And when drivers were marooned on

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<sup>1</sup> Sacred Heart College was a two-year college that grew out of the Sisters' Novitiate Normal School starting in 1922. In 1927, it changed its name to Marywood College, then in 1929 that institution became co-educational and was renamed Catholic Junior College. The school expanded to a four-year institution, becoming Aquinas College in 1940. It remained the training college for Dominican Sisters.



the highway (M-37), they often found their way to the Weber farm and were never turned away. Lucille learned that helping others was just what her family did. "There was never a question whether we should do this or not," she recalled. "We simply did it." When the state finally paved M-37 for the first time, most of the workers were African American. One of the older Weber boys went to them and made great friends by taking bread to the camps. That was the family's first exposure to people of color.

She learned social responsibility at Saint Mary School, too. "We didn't think of it as helping anybody, we just did that," she recalled later. "It was just part of your growing up. People needed help. Farmers got sick, you all went to the rescue to help with the harvest and all that. You helped your neighbor, even if your neighbor was twenty miles away."

Those who knew her later in life as a prodigious fundraiser will be interested to learn that Sister Aquinas began her advancement career early. In fifth grade, Saint Mary School began selling seeds as a way to raise money for school operations. "We always had to sell seeds to make money for school," she recalled, "and of course if you live in the country everybody has a garden. You get these order blanks from the seed companies, and you take them to the people and ask them to order seeds. Well, if you live in the country, you can't just walk down the block with your seeds. It was ok the first year, my dad took me around in his car to potential buyers. The second year, however, he said 'I thought I told you I was only going to do this for one year.' And I said, 'Well, the school needs the money.' Then the next year, he said 'Don't do this again.' And so on, year after year he took me. So I guess I was in development early on. You knew everyone in the parish, so I took my seeds to church on Sunday. I was a good sales person. I was very successful." No surprise.

Lucille graduated from Saint Mary High School in 1940 not sure what the next step in her life would be. World War II was on in Europe, and then, after Pearl Harbor, the war became a worldwide conflagration and America was engaged in it. Her third oldest brother Clarence was the first one from Kingsley to be drafted at age 21. Never having been away from the farm, he eventually found himself in the Battle of the Bulge. (He survived the war and lived until 2011.)

Restless with farm life, Lucille, 20, decided she needed to see something more of the world. One of her friends and the friend's sister had left Kingsley and got a job in Detroit at Parke-Davis, America's oldest and largest pharmaceutical company. Because of the war there was need for large quantities of penicillin, and Parke-Davis was hiring workers. Lucille's friends persuaded her to come down to the big city and work.

Lucille's parents resisted briefly, but she insisted the farm life was not for her; she wanted to go explore the larger world and have different experiences than she could have in Kingsley or Traverse City. In the end, her parents relented, partially because some of the older Weber boys had already moved to the Detroit area and had jobs with General Motors. (As it turned out, Lucille rarely, if ever, saw them after her move.) So, young Lucille boarded a bus that took her to Detroit where she and her friend arranged to rent the upper floor of a house owned by the friend's sister. Once settled, she and the friend went separately to Parke-Davis's employment office. "In those days, Parke-Davis did not hire married women," she said, "and once female employees married, they had to leave the firm. I completed the interview, was called back a week later and offered a job."

At Parke-Davis, she started work in the chemistry laboratory running the machine



that put labels on the medicine bottles. Her job was to see that the machine was working properly. Her boss, very strict, walked around with his hands behind his back, saying little but keeping a strict eye on the “girls.” After two years at Parke-Davis, though, Lucille grew restless. There were parts of her life as a “career girl” that she liked, but she realized she did not want to stay in Detroit doing this kind of work for the rest of her life. She found she wanted more intellectual stimulation, and at this time her mind went back to her days at Saint Mary School and she began thinking more seriously of getting a college degree and someday teaching. She also thought more seriously about entering religious life. Later she recalled the blooming of her vocation as an outgrowth of the values she had been raised with. “I would have to begin with my deep faith in God and in the example set by my parents who taught us material things were not important. We learned to worship and had a reverence for the spiritual. I saw my parents go through the Depression and how their faith brought our family through.” All of that led her to visit Grand Rapids and Marywood, the motherhouse of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids whom she had known in her grade and high school days. As her goal of becoming a teacher and of living out her religious vocation melded into one, she felt her life plan come together. She went back to

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they asked. “Marywood,” she replied,  
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Parke-Davis for six months as she thought about her vocation and confirmed her decision. Then, in February, 1944, she briefly returned to the family farm to inform her family.

For the first few days, Lucille couldn’t bring herself to tell her parents. Then, on a winter Sunday, she announced her plan. She told her family she was not going back to work at Parke-Davis. “Then where *are* you going?” they asked. “Marywood,” she replied, “I don’t have to stay, but I have to go and see if that is what I really want to do.”

On what turned out to be the coldest and snowiest day in February, the bus from Traverse City to Grand Rapids made a special stop on M-37 across from the Weber farm. There, Lucille’s father carried her suitcase on board and she followed. Then, after a brief good-bye, she was gone to her new life.

In those days, the first few years of formation for future sisters were difficult, especially for women like Lucille who had some experience of independence in the world. Her postulancy began immediately and would continue for six months. The break with an aspiring sister’s family was fairly complete as she learned whether or not she wanted to live with her new religious family and they with her. Postulants were not allowed to

visit their families at home for three years, and could have visitors only once during the novitiate. The future Sister Aquinas was admitted with two other women who would become her religious sisters, the future Sister Jordan and Sister Maurita. Because she was a bit older than the usual entrant, Lucille was given a six-month postulancy rather than the usual one year period, but she would have to spend a full year in novitiate, the “canonical year” during which she would study theology and the constitution of the congregation in preparation for taking vows.

Used to living on her own as a “working girl” during the war, Lucille found the restricted life of the aspiring sisters a cause of some doubt about her vocation. The scheduled daily life, the communal living, and the need to ask permission were especially difficult—as was the restriction on seeing movies. “In my single life in Detroit, I went to movies once a week. At Marywood, one movie a year was brought in, in the summer, and the title had to be approved by the superior. There were only certain radio programs the sisters could listen to.” Lucille had to ask herself whether she was ready to let those things go, and she admits she found it difficult at first. Soon, however, she found there were abundant compensations: new friends, going to classes at Aquinas College’s downtown campus, as well as learning about and participating in the community’s prayer and spiritual life and its special mission in social justice. Here she discovered that the prayer and liturgical life of the congregation were what bolstered everything the Sisters did. The community prayer life was the underpinning that had held the congregation together since the days of Mother Aquinata and, indeed, since the time of Dominic in the 13th century.

The main mission of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids was teaching, of course, but in those days some of the sisters were women who had previous careers in nursing or social work. Most of the sisters studied at Aquinas College for careers as teachers, but others, depending on their abilities, were put to other work: the future nurses were trained through Saint Mary’s Hospital, and some were put into domestic work within the convent. The main mission of the congregation, however, was teaching. At the time Lucille entered, the congregation consisted of over 500 Sisters under Prioress Mother Euphrasia Sullivan. As the war came to an end, the teaching mission of the congregation was about to undergo an expansion. According to Sister Mona Schwind’s *Period Pieces*, between 1942 and 1948, 85 new Sisters would enter, and 606 professed Sisters would belong to the order by the early 1950’s when many new schools were added to the Sisters’ mission to accommodate the post-war baby boom (201).

The Sisters attending Aquinas College walked from Marywood to downtown Grand Rapids on the corner of Ransom and Fountain Streets, a distance of about 3 miles<sup>2</sup>. Though full-time college students, the Sisters did not mix much with lay students. They had their own restrooms and lunch room. Young Sister Aquinas majored in History and English, but since she was preparing to teach grade school, she also received instruction in music and other areas that would come in handy in the next phases of her career. As her period of postulancy and novitiate went on, Lucille grew into her vocation and grew excited about the possibility of teaching soon.

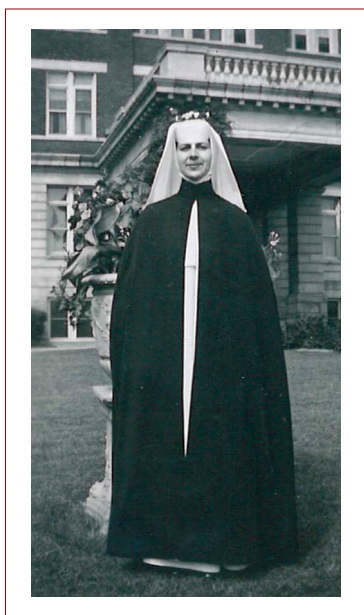
After completing her postulancy and novitiate training, Lucille Weber became Sister

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<sup>2</sup>The College owned the downtown campus from the beginning of Catholic Junior College in 1929 until 1955. From 1945, when the College bought the former Lowe Estate on Robinson Road, until 1995, the College had a split campus, with liberal arts on the Robinson Road campus and sciences, music and evening programs downtown.

Mary Aquinas Weber in 1945. The profession of vows came after an interview with the governing council of the congregation and the bishop of Grand Rapids who questioned her about her vocation and her commitment to the religious life. In those days, Sisters became brides of Christ at their profession of vows, complete with wedding dresses that were exchanged for the black and white habit of the congregation. Ironically, for those who have known her only as Sister Aquinas for all these years, the name Aquinas was not among the three names she proposed for her religious name. "I proposed three names and got none of them. The name was chosen by the prioress and governing council, after a Sister in the congregation who had died and had been a great educator." (It was a custom among the Sisters to honor their predecessors by bestowing someone's religious name on a young Sister. No last names were used in those days.)

Finally a professed member of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart, Sister Mary Aquinas completed her bachelor's degree at Aquinas College and in 1947 was ready for her first assignment as a full-fledged teacher. Throughout the summer, the young sister wondered what that first assignment would be. She was ready and eager to go where she was needed.



Sister Aquinas Weber stands in front of the main entrance of Marywood on the day of her first profession of vows in 1945. When aspiring Sisters began their novitiate training, they were given a symbolic crown of thorns. On the day of their profession, they received a crown of roses, just visible on Sister Aquinas's head.



Educator

Teaching was the primary mission of the Dominican Sisters since they first arrived in Traverse City in 1877. The story of their arrival has become the stuff of legend among the Sisters and exemplifies the spirit of service that infused the order from the start.

Father George Ziegler, pastor of newly formed Saint Francis Parish in Traverse City, wanted to start a school for the children of his mostly-German parishioners. He wrote to a priest friend in New Jersey to ask him to help find suitable teachers for the school, and the request eventually ended up with a group of sisters in New York City whose order originated in Regensburg, Germany. Mother Hyacinth Scheininger summoned Sister Aquinata Fiegler, age 29, and commissioned her to go to the rough-and-tumble lumber and shipping port in northern Michigan. Part of Mother Hyacinth's decision to send Sister Aquinata and five other young sisters may have been influenced by a deathbed vision of her predecessor Mother Augustine Neuhiel who reported that she saw, somewhere in the west, an island dotted with the white habits of Dominican sisters that spread across the island like daisies. Being formed of two peninsulas, Michigan was not *quite* an island, but in October of 1877, Sisters Aquinata, Boniface, Angela, Camilla, Borromeo, and Martha arrived in Traverse City after a long journey by rail, steamship and horse-and-carriage. They arrived on Thursday, quickly set up shop in a small wooden building Father Ziegler had purchased to use as a school, and began classes the following Monday.

In the following years, the teaching mission of the Sisters grew as Mother Aquinata tirelessly went from community to community in northern and western Michigan establishing parish schools staffed with more Sisters from New York and, after 1886, with Sisters trained in the Novitiate Normal School that would eventually evolve into Aquinas College.



Sisters at Marywood undergoing training to become teachers at one of the many schools in Michigan staffed by the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids. Left to right: (back row) Sisters Villana, Aquinas, Maurita; (front row) Sisters Helen, Jordan, [unknown Sister], and their instructor Sister Bernetta.

From the beginning, going where they were needed was the hallmark of the Dominican Sisters, who eventually established schools in Bay City, Saginaw, Battle Creek, Adrian, Muskegon and dozens of other cities and small towns through Michigan. In 1911, the Sisters moved their motherhouse and Normal School to Grand Rapids, eventually building the impressive building known as Marywood on East Fulton Street to house both their administrative offices, the Normal School and Sacred Heart (later Marywood) Academy. At the Normal School, literally hundreds of Sisters were educated as teachers and sent out into one of the more than 50 Catholic schools staffed by Dominican Sisters of



The teaching staff at Saint Boniface School, Bay City, where Sister Aquinas was principal, celebrates Saint Valentine's Day. Left to right, Sisters Michael Ellen, Teresita, Aquinas, Francis Bernadine, Marie Francis, and Laurena.

It was the heyday of Catholic education in the United States. Faced with religious prejudice and a public school system that, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, included Protestant scripture readings and hymns in the curriculum, American Catholics built a parallel system of grade and high schools that would be the public schools' match in educational quality and would also include instruction in Catholic dogma and incorporate Catholic liturgy, customs and the sacraments into the school life. The system was made possible by the labors of teaching sisters like the Grand Rapids Dominicans who, by working for virtually nothing, allowed even small country parishes to support their own grade and high schools like Saint Mary in Hannah where Sister Aquinas received her early education.

Until the late 1960's, Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters were given their assignments for the coming year on August 15. On that day, following a large retreat at Marywood, each sister would be handed a 1 ½ x 3" white card which was her "ticket" announcing her assignment for the coming year. In those days, Sisters were not consulted about where they wished to go. The mother superior, in consultation with her council, would size up the needs of the various schools the congregation staffed and then decide who was going where



and which grades she was going to teach. Rotations of sisters were common because if the congregation needed to move sisters to other assignments, they would be assigned to the schools where they were needed. The sisters themselves were not consulted. If a chemistry teacher was needed on Beaver Island, for example, the mother superior and her council would look at the backgrounds and experiences of sisters and make an assignment. Given a system with over 50 schools and some 500 Sisters to staff them, maintaining qualified personnel in the classrooms was a challenge, but the Sisters' vow of obedience made the job of the prioress somewhat easier. They would go where they were needed most.

Though the sisters joked that the mother superior made her decisions after breakfast as she watched people come into chapel, the system worked fairly well because the superior and her council also kept resumes of the sisters on file and knew their teaching competencies. For example, if a music teacher was needed in a parish to run the choir, the prioress could quickly determine someone qualified to send. Supervisors from Marywood—one for elementary schools and one for high schools—regularly went around the state visiting the schools the Sisters taught at, so the talents of the various sisters were fairly well known in the community. Because of this system of frequent rotation, Sisters moved through the congregation and got to know other Sisters and their abilities well in a short time.

Even though the Sisters had vowed to be obedient to the prioress's directions, every August at Marywood there was an atmosphere of needles and pins as the big day approached. Immediately after dinner on August 15, the Sisters were assembled in a big room, and the mother superior called out each name and everyone received her little white card. There may have been many kinds of reactions to the assignments, but the Sisters, with their vows of obedience, did not complain. They obediently packed their bags and went to their new assignments or returned to where they had been the previous year.

In 1947, young Sister Aquinas Weber was ready for her first full-time teaching assignment. With some trepidation, she looked down at her ticket and found, with some relief, that she was being sent to Saint Stephen's in East Grand Rapids to do her directed teaching. According to the plan, directed teaching was the last stage in her teacher training during which she would be working under the supervision of an experienced teacher. She was happy because she was already familiar with the school from some previous directed teaching during her education classes. She discovered she had been assigned to 5th and 6th grades, which pleased her. However, before classes started, the permanent teacher of those grades became ill. Suddenly Sister Aquinas was left without a supervising instructor just a couple of weeks before classes were to begin; the fledgling teacher found herself on her own. Supervision of Sister Aquinas was turned over to the principal, whose own classroom was just around the corner, but as Sister Aquinas had never taught before, this was small comfort.

The class was a mixed class of boys and girls, and she knew that if she was to be successful as a teacher, she would have to be consistent in her expectations and her discipline. Apparently, she succeeded at least according to one of her very first students Marty Allen, who would go on in life to become a senior vice president of Old Kent Bank and Trust Financial Corporation where he would meet up with his old 5th grade teacher again when she sat on the board of trustees.



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“She had a look,” Allen recalls,  
“We called it ‘the look,’ and you  
didn’t want to get the look.”

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“She had a look,” Allen recalls, “We called it ‘the look,’ and you didn’t want to get the look.” Allen’s memories of fifth grade with Sister Aquinas are not unlike those of other students who attended Catholic schools in those years. The nuns in full habit, looking stern and authoritative, with the oversize rosaries tied about their waists, had full command in the classroom—if they could keep it. The boys, especially, tried to test the new teacher’s limits. Allen recalls that Sister Aquinas was tough in that first year, but he admits he was a tough student, too. Having grown up with nine brothers, however, Sister Aquinas knew how to handle a roomful of potentially rowdy boys. “The look,” says Allen, was all it took. “Our only objective,” he says now, “was to survive fifth grade.” He and others did survive, but they would meet Sister Aquinas again.

Two years later, due to a series of events, the seventh grade class had run through several teachers in the first few months of the school year. A full-time substitute was difficult to get in the middle of the year, and the students were getting restless and hard to control. They had one teacher for a few days, then the assistant parish priests would try to fill in, and sometimes the school was reduced to using parent volunteers. Saint Stephen’s principal, trying to stabilize the situation, decided to transfer Sister Aquinas to the seventh grade because she already knew most of the students—and they knew her. By the time she got to them, the situation was serious, but she was also a more experienced teacher. “They were hellions, to tell the truth,” she says now. To get ready for her first Monday morning with them, Sister Aquinas went to the classroom over the weekend and swept up the leftover paper wads from the previous week. They were everywhere, under the radiators and desks. On Monday morning, the principal escorted Sister Aquinas into the classroom and faced the class of suddenly serious students. “Your new teacher needs no introduction,” she said. It took some doing, but Sister Aquinas took control of the seventh grade classroom and eventually established order again. Marty Allen, who was one of those rambunctious students, recalls, “She was a disciplinarian at a time when we needed discipline. We got discipline at home, but we needed it at school too. For me, she was an ideal teacher. Those are days when you are really forming your character. You begin to recognize at certain stages of life people who provided so much to you, whether it was a football coach or whatever. There was no question, she was a great teacher. She formed my character.”

At the time, however, Allen and the other seventh graders did not know what an influence she had been in their lives. Nor did they realize, perhaps, how much the year

of taming young teenagers had taken out of her. At the end of the year, as she was saying good-bye to her seventh graders, she overheard Tom Fitzgerald—a former student she still sees occasionally—mumble to Bob Murphy, “Think she’ll follow us next year?” And before Murphy could say anything, Sister Aquinas announced, “Not on your life!”

After eight years at Saint Stephen, Sister Aquinas was a fully seasoned teacher, and she looked forward to returning to the school and its new convent. In August, however, her ticket from Mother Victor Flannery informed her she was heading to New Salem, Michigan, a small town east of Holland, where the Sisters staffed Saint Mary School, a parish school with eight grades. Her new job would come with new responsibilities; in addition to being a full-time teacher, she would be principal as well. This was just the first of many positions of responsibility she would be given in her life.

“It was a big change to go from a city school to a little country school, and I thought I would return there, but the following August Mother Victor called me aside and told me I was not going back there, but was going to Saint Boniface in Bay City.” Apparently, the prioress and her councilors saw leadership potential in Sister Aquinas because the new school was larger, 250 students, and a step up in terms of the work load and responsibility.

Sister Aquinas credits her success as an administrator to the fact that she has always had good staff to work with. “I had a very good faculty at Saint Boniface, good music programs, good teachers all the way through. There was one lay teacher and the rest were religious. Lots of Sisters. They were all young, full of energy. It was a good setting. The

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“It was easy,” she says now,  
“until I got to the Detroit area.”

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families were good German families. Next door was Holy Rosary Academy which was boys only. That school was owned by the Grand Rapids Dominicans, and the faculty consisted of all Sisters. Saint Boniface was the parish high school, and Holy Rosary was a boarding school that eventually became co-ed.”

“I didn’t have to do a lot of supervising,” she recalls. “The teachers were all experienced. I stopped in each classroom once a week. If you’ve got a good faculty you don’t have to watchdog them all the time. Discipline was not a problem. The families in the parish were stable. It was rare to get a student from a broken family.” She remained at Saint Boniface for four years, the normal term for a principal. “It was easy,” she says now, “until I got to the Detroit area.”

Her next assignment would prove to be a greater challenge to the now-experienced principal. Saint Alfred Church and School were located in Taylor, Michigan, a downriver community southwest of Detroit. At the time, Taylor was a transitional community, with



In August 1947, Sister Aquinas returned to Kingsley to celebrate the 64th birthdays of her parents with her nine brothers and sister. It was her first visit home since joining the Dominicans because Sisters-in-training were allowed only one visit in three years. Back row, left to right, brothers Paul, Ray, Ambrose, Jay, Dan, Clarence, and Carl. Front row, brother Jack, sister Marguerite (Marge), mother Anna, father Jacob, Sister Aquinas, and brother Vincent.

poor family farms on one side of Telegraph Road and urban working class kids on the other whose families had roots in the South and had moved north to work in the Detroit area's automobile factories. Saint Alfred was a large school, 1,000 students, with a large faculty and a larger parish.

The school buildings consisted of one large brick building with one grade of first through eighth grade, then, to accommodate the rest of the students, three long wooden buildings that were leftover barracks from World War II. Another new circumstance for Sister Aquinas was that there was a large number of lay people, male and female, on the faculty. The upper grade teachers were all laymen, former Redemptorist seminarians who had left seminary before becoming priests. They were all well-educated and were good teachers. Many of the students, especially those from the other side of Telegraph Road, came from rough homes. There was a good deal of poverty in the parish.

"Saint Alfred presented me with a different set of challenges," Sister Aquinas says. "Because I had a good faculty, I never felt I was in it alone. The male teachers were good models for those students. They dressed professionally, they had high expectations. They

had come out of a disciplined life in the seminary, and we had one priest on the faculty who taught all the religion. Kids loved him. He was good interacting with kids and their parents, if needed, and the pastor was a great back up. I had good support from all of them. Not that it was that easy, but when you have that much support it becomes easier.”

She instituted some changes in the school. Since there was no music teacher, she took on the music lessons for upper levels. “There is something about the culture in a school when you have music that changes the culture of the school,” she believes. Her efforts did change the culture of Saint Alfred School. During art classes, she regularly played radio personality Carl Haas’s *Adventures in Good Music* in the classroom. The students got to like the music in the classroom and, if she forgot, would remind her to play music during art classes.

A common commitment to the mission of Catholic education bound the school and the parish together. The pastor of Saint Alfred’s spent much of his time doing what today would be called social work. He told Sister Aquinas that if she heard of a family that was having difficulty getting food, she was to tell him. Many times, he would personally drive to the supermarket and buy food for parishoners or would drive to Jackson, Michigan, to buy shoes from an Army surplus store there.

In addition to supervising the academic program, Sister Aquinas occasionally had to intervene in family problems. “Sometimes we had to have sessions with the parents. We tried to get outside help when needed. But you never made them feel they didn’t know what they were doing, or that they were unintelligent. The kids grew up in this kind of poverty, and we saw to it that every kid had something to eat—before government food programs. We got a lot of help from the parish. I was happy doing that. I didn’t think I could weather it the first year, but after a year when I got used to the routine and what I was dealing with, I just loved the place and the people. The people all responded, some had a little, some had a lot. The parish was large.”

She also, for the first time, had to assert her authority in new ways by occasionally standing up to the pastor of the church who tried to control school matters. She says she was never really combative with the pastor, but “I would tell him what I think.” For example, there was the matter of the school buses. Sister Aquinas recalls, “There was an expectation before I came that lay faculty, to earn extra money, should drive school buses. But I went to the pastor and said it was not fair. Some of them were married and had children, and I said driving a bus in the morning is no way for them to have to start school. And the priest said ‘Okay, we’ll hire some bus drivers, parents who could work off some of their tuition.’ And so the teachers didn’t have to drive buses. They were so glad. They had a day’s work in before they had to teach. The pastor was good about it. It was just that nobody had ever made a fuss about it before.”

After six years at Saint Alfred, Sister Aquinas was called upon to accept a new challenge. She had expected to be allowed to continue her education by pursuing a master’s degree and doctorate at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and she spent much of her summer studying German in preparation for the language requirement for graduate study. Mother Victor had other plans, however. In the middle of the summer of 1960, she summoned Sister Aquinas and informed her that she was to become the directress of novices at the three-year-old House of Studies that had been built on the edge of Aquinas

College's campus.

"Mother Victor said to me 'You're not going to Catholic U next fall.' I said 'No? Where am I going?' She said, 'director of the House of Studies.' I said, 'I can't do that.' She said, 'Yes, you can.' And I did, just because she said so."

Once again Sister Aquinas Weber had been called upon to stretch herself and



As a student at Aquinas College, Sister Aquinas in habit, right rear, participates in Catholic Book Week here inaugurated by Bishop Francis Haas. Priest in foreground is Father (later Monsignor) Arthur Bukowski, president of Aquinas College from 1937-1969.



her abilities, to learn new skills and accept new responsibilities simply because the Congregation needed her particular blend of personality and experience. She had already proven herself to be a good administrator, and now she would be called back to a closer connection with Marywood and take a major hand in the formation of the new Sisters who were pursuing their undergraduate degrees at Aquinas College.

It was an exciting and challenging time in religious life. Even when Sister Aquinas was in Taylor, the winds of change were beginning to blow through the Catholic Church as a result of Vatican II. The effects of the historic Council, however, were still unknown, though there was much speculation. New words, like *aggiornamento*, began to enter the vocabulary of Catholics, and documents like *Perfectae Caritatis* were being issued that would change Catholic life, and religious life in particular, in dramatic ways.

It was in that time of foment and change that Sister Aquinas took over the House of Studies, with 75 young sisters who had taken their first vows, 75 complex and different personalities studying and living together in common life with three professed sisters—Sisters Aquinas, Bede and Marjorie.

Though Mother Victor had told her to “do what you are supposed to do” with the young sisters, Sister Aquinas soon realized that the issues she faced were more complex than those she had faced so far. Her primary job was to supervise the Sisters’ studies and to prepare them for their next vows and to write reports on their progress or lack of it. She soon realized that formation in religious life was a global process, involving more than just intellectual development. All Sisters needed to have bachelor’s degrees in order to teach, and the decision about what to major in was a fine balancing act between the individual Sister’s strengths and the needs of the congregation. In addition to academic counseling, personal counseling was important in the House of Studies. Initial admission to the order involved psychological testing for all applicants, but Sister Aquinas soon realized that initial testing did not provide all the answers about what it would be like to live with these people from day to day with so many young personalities all with different sets of problems and varying levels of maturity. Spiritual direction for the Sisters was handled by Dominican priests and Father James Cusack, a diocesan priest. The Sisters could go to any of the priests for spiritual direction, but they came to Sister Aquinas for other problems.

The new director was surprised by some of the personal problems the young sisters brought to their life in the order, problems in their backgrounds sometimes with troubled families. She learned in these years to listen and observe and sometimes make hard decisions.

She was responsible for enforcing the many rules that governed the lives of religious Sisters in those years, though, significantly, she also learned to make the rules more flexible sometimes depending on circumstances. For example, because the students were enrolled full-time in classes, she gave them more leeway on bed time, making it 10 p.m. instead of 9 p.m. to complete homework.

She did not know it then, but her years as principal in schools of different sizes and levels of complexity, and the insights she gained into the development of the young religious under her charge at the House of Studies were preparing her for her biggest challenge ever, being elected prioress of the Congregation of Sisters she had been part of for just over 20 years.

# Lived Realities

Every six years, the Dominican Sisters hold a Chapter of Election to elect a new prioress. In June, 1966, Sister Aquinas Weber attended her first Chapter of Election as a delegate. She had been director of the House of Studies for three years, and was the official delegate from that group. Sister Aquinas, who was 43 at the time, had no way of knowing that this meeting would change her life.

In the normal run of events, the mothers superior of the congregation were elected for six years, with the term being renewable for another six years. By 1966, however, Mother Victor Flannery had been prioress for an unprecedented 18 years. In the 1960 Chapter, a large contingent of her contemporaries wanted her to continue in a third term, and Bishop Allen Babcock, who was attending the Chapter, informed the congregation that there was a process by which Mother Victor could serve a third term. The process involved petitioning Rome for an exception to the normal rule, and since the bishop himself would present the petition, the likelihood of her term being renewable was all but certain. The Chapter was suspended until the petition returned from Rome and then Mother Victor was elected to an unprecedented third term.

Her eighteen years in office saw significant growth in the mission of the congregation. According to the June 16, 1966 *West Michigan Catholic*, the Sisters had added 14 schools, opened three hospitals, including Nazareth Hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and expanded their foreign mission work in Peru during her tenure. In addition, under Mother Victor there had been tremendous growth at Aquinas College, including a major building boom that saw the opening of the new academic building, two dormitories, and the student center. In all, the newspaper story of the 1966 Chapter reported, the 874 Sisters of the congregation ran 74 elementary and secondary schools in those years.

However, during those same years, the winds of change were blowing through society and the Catholic Church. The historic Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) began under Pope John XXIII with an invitation to open the windows of the Church and let in some fresh air. Twentieth century theologians were pushing Catholic thinking further away from the Scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas, and the medieval trappings of the Church were considered by some to be anachronistic in the increasingly technological world. The wide-ranging changes initiated by Vatican II took the Catholic world by surprise. Few could have suspected in 1962 just how different the Church would be in the years following the Council.

In addition, the civil and social worlds were in turmoil. In the United States, protests against America's increasing involvement in Vietnam added to the agitation already begun in the Civil Rights movement, and the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was beginning to shake society's long-held assumptions about the place of women in society. There was widespread talk of a "generation gap" between the younger generation's aspirations and their parents' expectations. The general social unrest could not help but filter into the world of religious life as well.



As new ideas about the role and purpose of religious life came out of Vatican II, especially in the 1965 document *Perfectae Caritatis*, the “Decree on the up-to-date renewal of religious life,” a generation gap manifested itself in many religious congregations, including the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids. During Mother Victor’s third term, unrest and the desire for change among younger Sisters became part of the Congregation’s dialogue.

When the 1966 Chapter of Election was held, therefore, the tension that always accompanies a transition in leadership was especially high. The traditional religious life followed by the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids was static and ordered, governed by Augustinian-based rules that had been in place in the Church for hundreds of years. Governance was a top-down model in which Sisters had to ask permission from a superior to travel or to make even trivial changes in their daily routines. Sisters were rarely consulted about what work they would do in the world, simply accepting in obedience their annual tickets which told them where they were going.



When she was elected prioress in 1966 at the age of 43, Sister Aquinas was the youngest prioress ever to hold that position in the congregation. Here she is pictured with Mother Mary Victor Flannery, her predecessor, who had held office for an unprecedented eighteen years. The changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council are reflected in Mother Victor’s traditional habit and Sister Aquinas’s modified garb.

*Perfectae Caritatis* called upon religious congregations to undertake a thorough re-examination of their lives and their place in the world. Basing their self-analysis on gospel principles and a return to the historic charisms, or special characteristics, upon which their orders were founded, the Council challenged congregations of religious men and women to renew the original spirit of their orders to meet the needs of the contemporary world and Church. As such, they would have to examine how their “manner of life, of prayer and of work should be suited to the physical and psychological conditions of today’s religious” and how those could best be lived out in a congregation’s apostolate, or field of work. This would involve what the document called “prudent experimentation” and consultation among members. The Council called for congregations to “adjust their observances and customs to the needs of their particular apostolate,” even though this might lead to greater diversity than most religious orders were used to.<sup>3</sup>

Within religious congregations, there was both excitement and fear. On the one hand, many religious, mostly younger, desired great change, the sooner the better. On the other hand, many of the older members of congregations were reluctant to give up ways of life and dress they had been familiar with for most of their lives. Within the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids, there was a sense that Mother Victor’s long tenure as prioress represented the end of a way of life their congregation had followed since 1885, but it was not at all clear what direction the congregation, as a whole, wanted to go in the future.

The election of a prioress at this moment in history, therefore, would be crucial. Whoever would come into office would have to have skills in leadership and communication and also be someone who would not be polarizing because the coming years would be full of tension as the community attempted to work out its *aggiornamento* in line with what the Vatican Council was calling for.

Since this was her first Chapter of Election as a delegate, Sister Aquinas’s intention was to listen and learn. In the election process, names were suggested from the floor for nomination, and to her surprise her name was one of three that were put forward for

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“There was a lot of clapping and so on,” she says now, “I think they wanted a complete change from what was, and they thought this might do it. I was the youngest prioress ever elected.”

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<sup>3</sup>Vatican Council II: the Basic Sixteen Documents. Austin Flannery O.P., Gen. Ed. Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996. Passim.

prioress. She assented to having her name put on the ballot, not thinking she would be chosen over the other two more experienced Sisters. “The voting took place and there were two other names and my name,” she recalls. “I did not know why my name was in the running.” The first vote was taken with inconclusive results. “So the second ballot was taken, and I ended up being the majority choice.” She was both shocked and surprised by the outcome and could not immediately adjust to the idea that she would be the new prioress of the congregation. In those days, the bishop still attended the Chapters of Election, so with Bishop Babcock in the lead, Sister Aquinas and the other electing Sisters processed to the chapel at Marywood. The other members of the Congregation were summoned, and the bishop announced that Sister Mary Aquinas Weber would be prioress for the next six years. “There was a lot of clapping and so on,” she says now, “I think they wanted a complete change from what was, and they thought this might do it. I was the youngest prioress ever elected.”

Elected to her General Council were Sisters Letitia Van Agtmael, James Rau, Euphrosine Sullivan, and Norbert Vangsness. Secretary General was Sister Thomas Anne Miller, and bursar general was Sister Mary Faith Mahoney. These women would help Sister Aquinas guide the congregation through the coming, sometimes radical, change. They possessed a wide range of leadership experiences, some having been school principals or college teachers, and in the coming years they would call upon all their skills and work together to guide the Dominican Sisters through the uncharted waters of the post-Vatican II world.

Sister Aquinas recalls the process. “Before Vatican II, we thought things were pretty much black and white with nothing in between, and I think, as John XXIII said, with opening up the windows, letting in fresh air, it became a time of challenge and transformation. We took *Perfectae Caritatis*, Renewal of Religious Life, seriously. We had to consider how we could make the changes that were being advocated because we had more than one camp: those who wanted to keep things the way they were and those who were restless for change. You had to balance those two camps and that was the hard part. You were being bombarded from both sides, don’t do this, do this. Others were saying we have done this forever and we cannot change.” Sister Aquinas says the challenge was to see both sides of the argument, and at the same time to insist that the congregation respond to *Perfectae Caritatis* and undertake the work required by the document. Of course, that response was never fast enough for some, and for others it was too fast.

“But one thing we said, at the end of all the changes,” she recalls, “is that we stay together. A number of communities split—those who didn’t want the changes went off in their own direction. That never happened to us, thank God. People left, but not because we weren’t working fast enough. Some of them left, I think, who came during the time when the rush to religious communities was on [in the 1940’s and 1950’s]. For some [religious life] was a safe haven, and once we loosened they no longer felt comfortable in that milieu, and so it would be better for them to go back home and start life in a new way for them. And we did not try to hold them. We encouraged them if they didn’t feel they belonged there.”

Collegiality became a hallmark of the process under Sister Aquinas. "Collegiality meant that everybody had a voice, and you listened to the voice. We brought in all kinds of speakers because we wanted dialog about these matters. And for the first time people felt really free to express what they were thinking." As a sign of increased collegiality, Sister Aquinas decided not to adopt the title "mother superior" after her election, opting instead to continue being called "Sister." (Her successors have continued this tradition.)

Most important was reading "the signs of the times," a phrase which meant examining your congregation's special strengths and the needs of the world around you and discerning how you could extend your mission to meet them. "So, since we always had been in classrooms, we needed to look at something different as well. There were Sisters saying they wanted to be religious education directors in parishes, for example, and we knew our nursing Sisters would not stay in that profession forever because of the drain on their lives. So it was a process of re-educating ourselves as to what we might do."

Within the congregation, the life and structure of religious life were also undergoing changes. Sister Aquinas and her team decided to include younger members of the congregation in Chapter meetings. Though they were not allowed to vote, their voices were heard. Sister Aquinas remembers, "It was hard for the older women to make any kind of changes. We tried, and I think we succeeded, in understanding that and not pushing them beyond what they were capable of psychologically. So we had people continue some old ways—one of the practices we had, for example—and it was wonderful—was that no matter where you were in the congregation you stopped and prayed together at 5 p.m., so common prayer was practiced by all Sisters at 5 p.m. Reading the signs of the times, however, we realized we had to be more flexible in our prayer lives. Morning common prayer at 5 a.m. and afternoon common prayer at 5 p.m. might not be practices we could continue with more diversified jobs."

In the whole congregation, the new democratic notion that everybody ought to have a say in things gained some enthusiasm, especially among the young Sisters. "It was exciting to think that we would have something to say, and that somebody would listen to us," Sister Aquinas recalls. "The student Sisters were somewhat sheltered from the changes because they had to concentrate on their studies, but they had a sense of excitement that change was on its way. We knew that a lot of the rules had to go, like not being able to go more than 35 miles without permission. You couldn't go visit other convents on Sundays without permission. You couldn't wear wristwatches. These kinds of things were way past their time. And you knew that these young people were very much aware that things were going to change. They were optimistic."

Some of the older Sisters, however, were so used to the lockstep way of life that the changes were very hard for them. Perhaps the most difficult changes, certainly the most obvious, were changes to the traditional religious habits that the Sisters wore. The elaborate white and black habits, with layers of cloth, wimples and long veils harkened back to the Middle Ages, though many of them were actually developed in the 19th century. The Dominican habit included a constricting wimple that surrounded the face. While dramatic, the habits proved cumbersome in some of the new professions the Sisters were moving into. Sister Aquinas admits that changes in habit were probably the hardest transition for the congregation to undergo. Vatican II had left congregations free to do some experimentation with modified habits, so the Grand Rapids Dominicans took advantage



of the opportunity. However, the leadership team, out of deference to those who did not want to change, did not lock the whole congregation into the same style. *Perfectae Caritatis* gave only loose guidelines, saying “Religious dress, as a symbol of consecration, must be simple and modest, at once poor and becoming. In addition, it must be in keeping with the requirements of health and must be suited to the time and place and to the needs of the apostolate” (398).



As the Sisters' religious habits changed, Sister Aquinas and other members of the Congregation experimented to find suitable dress that would mark them as members of a religious community yet also look contemporary and professional.

Inset: As prioress, Sister Aquinas had to oversee the transition of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids after Vatican II as they interpreted the Council's document *Perfectae Caritatis*, expanding the congregation's ministry beyond the traditional roles of teaching and nursing.

Ironically, the Congregation had undertaken changes in their religious habit even before Vatican II. After Sister Marie Celeste Stang was killed in an automobile accident in October, 1955, a police officer said that if the driver, who was wearing the old style habit with the large veil, had not had her peripheral vision obstructed the accident may have been avoided. After that tragedy, the Sisters had modified the veil to allow better vision. *Perfectae Caritatis* encouraged further experimentation. The changes, while controversial, were not without their lighter moments. Sisters who were around during that period still remember “fashion shows” in which members of the congregation would model possible new habits.

The most daring experimenters were the Sisters who taught at Aquinas College. Some of them departed completely from traditional religious habits, and they became targets of criticism as they experimented with shortened veils, or no veils and clothing that was virtually indistinguishable from that worn by lay faculty. Sister Aquinas and the leadership team made a conscious decision that they themselves would make changes in their own habits only gradually in order to give a measure of comfort, continuity and stability to the congregation as they moved through the changes. The uniformity and conformity that once characterized religious life were giving way to diversity and individuality, and the leadership team under Sister Aquinas was learning how to navigate between these poles.

The expansion of the Sisters’ apostolate was another difficult matter Sister Aquinas and her councilors had to negotiate. When she came into office, she and the councilors stayed up late at night putting all the assignments together. They knew that not everyone was happy with the job they were given, and in the spirit of Vatican II, the governing council decided to modify the way in which Sisters were assigned to their jobs. They developed a form on which the Sisters could say what their preference for place and assignment would be. This “pink sheet” then became part of the discernment process for assigning particular Sisters to particular positions.

Most Sisters chose to stay with the traditional missions of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids, teaching and nursing. Some, however, began expanding the definitions of what Sisters could do. Initially, most of the jobs were in church-related fields, directing religious education at parishes, for example, and some Sisters moved into parish administration, relieving priests of administrative duties so they could concentrate on more pastoral concerns. Later, Sisters would move into social work and other forms of ministry. The new areas of ministry and employment had to be the result of a discernment process involving both the individual Sister and the leadership team, and every Sister was expected to work at some job that would bring an income to the community. The annual tickets were still issued, but the decisions were no longer made unilaterally by the mother superior and the councilors. The timing of this expansion was fortunate as traditional teaching jobs in parish schools were beginning to dwindle. Demographic changes were forcing the closings of some schools traditionally staffed by Dominicans. In fact, one of Sister Aquinas’s most painful decisions was to close Saint Mary School in Hannah, where she and her brothers and sister had gone. The closing was forced by dwindling enrollments and Sister Aquinas felt the few teaching Sisters at the school would be better used elsewhere.

It was not only within the congregation that Sister Aquinas had to negotiate big changes and difficult decisions. In those years, the prioress and the councilors of the Dominican Sisters were also the board of trustees of Aquinas College. The college had undergone considerable growth under the leadership of Mother Victor, but as the 1960’s

unrolled, campuses across the country were embroiled in change and protest. Students were demanding new rights and the repeal of *in loco parentis* rules that they deemed old fashioned. Sister Norbert (later Marjorie) Vangsness was the liaison between the leadership team and Aquinas College, and she and the members of the leadership team knew things were changing so quickly and radically in the world of higher education that the leadership model which had sufficed for the College for the past 50 years or more had to change. They needed the expertise of lay men and women who could bring their experience in the world of business to the running of the College. Men like Arthur Woodhouse and Joe Walsh had been part of a lay advisory board that had existed since the 1940's, but they were merely consultants and had no official voice in the running of the College. In addition, the College's president Monsignor Arthur Bukowski had been in office for thirty years and, though he was beloved by students and faculty of the College, he was a man of the past not the future.

"Monsignor was a wonderful man," Sister Aquinas recalls, "but times were changing and the College faced some real challenges. It was time for us to consider seriously re-organizing the way we ran the College." In fact, the relationship between Aquinas College and Marywood had become quite complex as the College had grown from the former two-year Catholic Junior College into a four-year school starting in 1940. Enrollment boomed in the 1950's, and the cozy liberal arts school of the post-war period became, by the early 1960's, a larger college, with a strained budget and, after the mid-60's building boom, financial liabilities. It was not unusual in those years for the College to have to cross Fulton Street and approach Marywood for a loan to sustain it through the summer until the fall tuition income came in. One year, the College had to appeal for a \$72,000 loan to tide it over. Clearly, the financial situation of the College had to be stabilized, and the financial fortunes of the College and the Sisters had to be separated to protect Marywood from being liable for the College's shortfalls.



As prioress, Sister Aquinas was also chair of the Aquinas College board of Trustees. Here she is pictured with Dr. Norbert Hruby, right, president of the College from 1969-1986, and honorary trustees Henry Fox, Sr., and Fred Vogt. In 1972, Sister Aquinas and Dr. Hruby established a lay board of trustees for the first time, and in 1974 the college and Marywood became legally separate entities.

The process of separation began under Sister Aquinas and in 1974 the College established a separate lay board of trustees and became financially independent. (The current prioress and members of her council remain *ex officio* members of the board.)

In 1968, Monsignor Bukowski announced his resignation effective in January, 1969, and a search was on for a new president for Aquinas College. After a national search, Dr. Norbert Hruby, a former vice president at Mundelein College in Illinois, was chosen. Hruby was fully aware of the challenges facing the College, including a \$60,000 debt, but he arrived full of confidence that he could turn the College around by effecting a revolution in what a small Catholic liberal arts college could achieve. Sister Aquinas and Hruby would have a long, close working relationship over the next 16 years of his presidency, with Hruby calling on her support while she was prioress and then later tapping her for other leadership positions within the College. “He said the College has to change and maybe you’re not going to like all the things I’d like to do make the changes, but he convinced us to take the risk,” Sister recalls. In the end, Hruby led the College through a massive self-study that resulted in significant changes in undergraduate education and campus life and also opened the door to thousands of non-traditional age students with the Encore Program for women, Career Action for adult learners seeking college degrees, and the Emeritus College for senior citizens, which, for a time, was headed by Sister Aquinas

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“We do know that as we spend an immense amount of human effort this summer, we will be animated each day by the Spirit of wisdom, by our daily common prayer, by the Mass, and by the love each of us has for the other”

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Weber.

In 1969, mid-way through her six-year term of office, Sister Aquinas addressed the annual Chapter about the ongoing change they had been negotiating for the past three years. Noting that the process of change “is primarily a process of spiritual renovation,” she went on to observe that the winds of change that have been blowing through the Church and the congregation “have not been generated by men, but by the Holy Spirit,” and that whenever in Scripture the Spirit’s “presence was felt, it was accompanied by turbulence.” Nonetheless, her address reaffirmed both the need for change and the underlying values that would guide the Congregation into the future. She wrote, “We do know that as we spend an immense amount of human effort this summer, we will be animated each day by



the Spirit of wisdom, by our daily common prayer, by the Mass, and by the love each of us has for the other" (*Lived Realities*, iv-v).

The new world that the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapid were entering under the leadership of Sister Aquinas was filled with new problems but also with great possibilities. Religious life generally was undergoing radical change and Sister was deeply involved. In 1970, she attended the Conference of Major Superiors of Women in St. Louis, Missouri where she was elected to be the regional chair of the organization in Michigan and Indiana. That fall, she also attended the International Union of Superiors General of Women's Religious Organizations in Rome whose theme was "Sociocultural Evolution and Religious Life." Through this organization, she was linked together with 1.5 million Sisters in 2,100 communities through the world.

It had been a period of rapid and significant change, an exhausting but exhilarating time for everyone involved. As Sister's term of office closed in 1972, she looked ahead to respite from the work she and her Congregation had done. Little did she know she would be called upon to expand her horizons and abilities beyond anything she had imagined.



# Community Service

As her term as prioress came to an end in 1972, Sister Aquinas decided it was time to complete her longtime dream of returning to school to complete her master's degree and pursue a doctorate. Though her undergraduate majors were in history and English, in the spirit of the times she felt called to work in a less academic area, Urban Studies. As part of the expanding ministries of the congregation, Sisters were moving outside their traditional classroom roles and into "ministries of advocacy" in such areas as corporate social responsibility, homelessness, racism, peace activism and other arenas of need.

At the age of 50, Sister Aquinas enrolled in the Urban Studies graduate program at the University of Michigan and during her last two months of study she undertook her final six credits of field work. Her degree requirement coincided perfectly with a project that Dr. Norbert Hruby, president of Aquinas College, had begun working on in 1971, the development of a community association in nearby Eastown. Sister Jean Paul Tillman, of the College's Geography department offered Sister Aquinas the opportunity to work with the emerging Eastown project in the College's Neighborhood Studies Program, and Sister Aquinas's advisor, Dr. Frederick Bertolaet enthusiastically endorsed the idea.

Today, with Eastown ensconced as one of Grand Rapids' most successful neighborhoods and small business districts, it is difficult to remember how marginal the area was in the late 1960's. Like many urban areas in the United States in those years, Eastown was suffering from the effects of "white flight," rapid suburbanization, and decaying infrastructure. When Sister Aquinas taught at Saint Stephen School in the 1940's and early 1950's, she knew the intersection of Lake Drive and Wealthy Street as a successful commercial area where locally owned businesses like Cook's Dime Store, Hammer and Cortenhof hardware store, a grocery store and pharmacy thrived. By the late 1960's, however, many of the storefronts were vacant, absentee landlords let building maintenance suffer, and the city neglected vacant lots and parking lots in the area. Street lighting was substandard, and Wilcox Park had become a dangerous hangout for local teens. The population of the surrounding neighborhood consisted of 6,614 people, an amalgamation of old and young, well-off and extremely poor, black and white. A 55 square block area bounded by Fuller, Fulton, Franklin and Plymouth Streets in the northern part of Southeast Grand Rapids, Eastown was a transitional neighborhood that appeared to be on its way down.

President Hruby realized that the future of the neighborhood and the future of the College were intimately bound together, and in 1971, he called on faculty members Thomas Edison (Geography), Linda Easley (Anthropology), and Michael Williams who had considerable community organization experience in Milwaukee prior to coming to Grand Rapids. Hruby commissioned them to set up a neighborhood study committee which spent a year meeting with local experts, statisticians from the City and County Health Departments, urban planners, and members of the Grand Rapids Board of Education. In early 1973, Hruby invited 100 residents of the neighborhood surrounding the College to share with them the results of the study group's work, then, two weeks later, he invited members of the Eastown business community and repeated the report. A grass-roots organization was born with the help of a \$129,836 Kellogg Foundation grant.



Above: Sister Jean Paul Tillman, of Aquinas College's Geography Department and Sister Aquinas at the intersection of Lake Drive and Wealthy Street, the heart of Easttown. As part of the expanding mission of the Grand Rapids Dominicans, Sisters were becoming involved in the community in new and active ways.

Inset: From 1973-1976, Sister Aquinas worked as liaison between Aquinas College and businesses in nearby Easttown. Here she looks at a copy of Easttown Access, the local newsletter, with Jim Geib, owner of Hammer & Cortenhof Hardware.

At that point, Hruby—who had known Sister Aquinas from her years as prioress and chairperson of the College board of trustees, and knew of her master's degree field work—tapped her to become the College's liaison with the businesses of the Easttown commercial district. As other members of the team organized neighborhood block agents, organized a food club that would later become the Easttown Food Co-op, and produced the first issues of the Easttown Access newsletter, Sister's job was to visit the business owners in the commercial district. She saw successful businesses as vital to keeping the community alive. "Once businesses leave an area, deterioration starts," she said at the time (*Aquinas* magazine Winter 1974). She took to the streets and met regularly with business owners like Jim Geib, owner of Hammer and Cortenhof Hardware, and Len Carbonneau, manager of Eberhard's grocery store. She got to know Aquinas College graduate Tom Zanella ('67) who was owner of the Intersection tavern, and together they formed an association whose aim was to improve the business climate. In the process, Sister learned much about the problems of businesses in a transitional area. Rents were too high to be sustainable in a diminished business climate, and absentee owners neglected maintenance. Improvements that were needed in the buildings were not made, and overall streetscape had been allowed to deteriorate.

"No one can say for certain why businesses come and go in any given area, but rent and improvements are big factors with the people I talked to," she told *The Grand Rapids Press* at the time, "Businesses making a decent profit don't move."

With other members of the Easttown Community Association (ECA), she became a regular feature at Grand Rapid City Commission meetings. One of her former Saint Stephen students, Joe Zainea, was city manager at the time, and after several visits to the Commission meetings by the Easttown Community Association, he would roll his eyes and ask her, "What have you got for us today, Sister?" Sister and the ECA arranged for the city commissioners to take a bus tour of the Easttown area, highlighting the urban blight and how the city had neglected its properties and public spaces like Wilcox Park. The group let the city fathers know the situation wouldn't be tolerated any longer.

Slowly, the neighborhood gelled, and small, locally owned businesses moved into the empty storefronts. One great achievement was when the ECA opened its own office on Wealthy Street which became headquarters for the fledgling organization under its director John Fodor, an Aquinas College alumnus. Sister Aquinas's goal when the project began was to "see a store front in Easttown where the Co-op could be housed, where the landlord-tenant council could have an office, where we could hold classes for senior citizens, taught by Aquinas faculty. It could be a visible center for the community, where people could stop in if they had a need, a place where resources could be pulled in to fill whatever needs there are." The first office, at 1443 Wealthy SE in the former Cook's Dime Store, moved the organization in the right direction.

New urban businesses like Funky Fingers slot machine emporium, Bikes Unlimited, Sara Sativa tropical plants and jewelry store, the Leathery Promenade and Sweet Loretta's gift shop opened up and were patronized by local residents. Easttown housing began a turnaround with the goal of keeping the neighborhood a racially and economically diverse area, with a unique mix of families, student rental housing and urban pioneers. Eventually, Easttown became a success story, picking up a distinct retro artsy vibe. By the end of Sister's involvement with the project, the ECA had become independent of the College, a primary goal from the start.



Sister remained with the Eastown project for three years. In 1973, at the beginning of the project, Sister addressed the College's annual faculty institute in one of her last acts as prioress and chair of the board of trustees. In it, she lays out the College's and her rationale for why the College should get involved in urban restoration. Some of the traditional-minded faculty could not see outside the classroom to the educational benefits of community-based service learning. In that speech, she also reinforced the College's and the Dominicans' vision of how Catholic liberal arts education can and should engage the world.

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"The role of the Catholic college in the neighborhood microcosm can be a vital one," she said. "Every problem, every issue and concern of global scale can also be found reflected in the neighborhood. . . . If members of a Catholic college cannot assume a role of leadership toward a better quality of life for all, who can?" Calling on the faculty of all disciplines to become partners in this new learning opportunity, she concluded, "we must continue to be involved in the problems of the neighborhood if we consider ourselves to be Christian and if the College is to survive in a transitional neighborhood. . . . I believe that Aquinas can, with your cooperation, provide a living response to the Gospel question, 'Who is my neighbor?'" (Welcome Address, August 25, 1973).

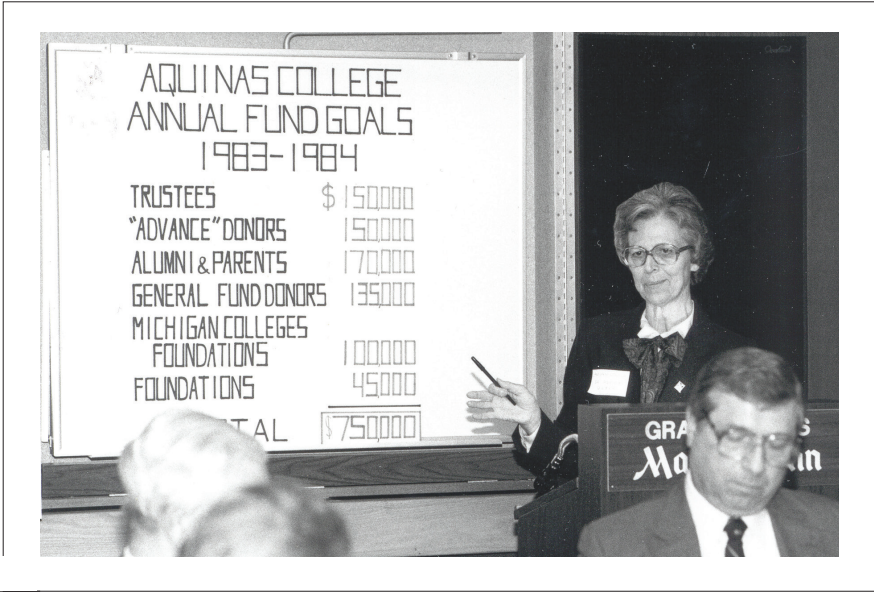
As she left the project in 1976, Sister told *The Grand Rapids Press*, "I leave Eastown with great satisfaction. My goals have been reached. Eastown has reached a level of consciousness of its own problems. This didn't exist prior to the Eastown project." In 1977, the ECA nominated Sister Aquinas to receive one of the Women's Recognition Awards, honoring Grand Rapids women for accomplishments in various fields.

Her graduate degree complete, and Eastown on its feet, Sister was called back to serve the congregation directly when she was elected treasurer of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids. She served full-time in that office from 1976-1980, gaining financial expertise that would come in handy when she was invited to become the first woman to serve on the board of trustees of Old Kent Bank and Trust Financial Corporation in 1980. In the interim, while she was serving as treasurer to the congregation, she continued her board

service as vice-chairperson of the Aquinas College board of trustees, as a board member of the Greater Grand Rapids Housing Authority (started while she was working on the Eastown project), and boards of national and regional religious conferences.

In November, 1977, she was one of six local women who were among 48 delegates from Michigan who attended the United States International Women's Year Conference (IWYC) in Houston, Texas. She had been selected while attending a statewide conference, Focus: Michigan Women, in Lansing the previous June. At the gathering, 18 women's organizations examined the full range of issues and concerns of women that had been brought out at the International Women's Year Conference in Mexico in 1975. According to *The Grand Rapids Press* report on the state conference, the group adopted 15 recommendations to take to the Houston Conference.

Sister Aquinas told *The Grand Rapids Press* in July, 1977, that the United States conference was needed "because it was felt the IWYC on an international level did not afford U.S. women the opportunity to project their needs. Congress appropriated the money for the November conference to examine [American] women's concerns from running a home to running for office." At the Houston conference issues included the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), equal treatment under Social Security, equal pay for equal work, a fair wage for health care and child care, and, more important, jobs for women in state and federal government. Sister Aquinas told *The Press* that she supported the ERA and said, "There is so much more involved in equal rights than gay liberation and abortion that it's a shame those issues are receiving the most attention." She thought if the ERA was adopted, the inflammatory issues could be dealt with in the courts. She wanted the conference to



As vice-president of Aquinas College's Development Department, Sister Aquinas addresses the board of trustees as they set goals for the College. Seated at lower right is trustee Joe Parini.

focus on issues of health, education, employment, child care, the legal status of women and representation of women in all fields. Her Dominican congregation urged her to become involved in this women's conference. She was already talking about women in priesthood, not necessarily advocating for it, but being open to the possibility. "I don't feel the call myself," she said at the time, "but I would support someone who did."

Her community involvement and engagement continued. From 1978-1982, Sister served on the board of Hospice of Greater Grand Rapids, helping that valuable end-of-life care service get established in the area for the first time. Then, in 1980, she was offered an unprecedented opportunity. Richard M. (Dick) Gillett, chairman of the board of Old Kent Bank and Trust Financial Corporation, asked her to become the first woman member of the board of trustees in the history of the bank. The choice surprised many people, including, perhaps most of all, Sister Aquinas herself. Though her youngest brother had worked for the bank all his life in operations, she had no real connection with the bank's upper levels.

One of Sister Aquinas's former Saint Stephen students, Marty Allen, who was then senior vice president for marketing at the bank, credits Dick Gillett's foresight for the choice. "Dick Gillett was a real visionary," Allen recalls. "He was behind the



Sister Aquinas confers in her Aquinas College office with development staff member Karen Loth.

renaissance of Grand Rapids that was taking place downtown in those years, and he saw something in Sister Aquinas that he liked. His choice probably stopped a lot of people. She was not only the first female member of the board, but she was a Sister, too.”

Sister herself recalls, “It was intimidating to begin with. It was a whole different area of business that I wasn’t in, but I had to learn about. I was also the only woman on the board. The only two women in the room were Dick’s secretary and myself, but I was accepted.”

In retrospect, of course, it is clear that Sister Aquinas’s resume prepared her very well for her groundbreaking role on the board. She had been prioress for six years, leading the 800-member congregation through a period of momentous change, and through her involvement in the Eastown project she had familiarity with the local business community. In addition, Old Kent Bank wished to move branches into new areas of the city, and her on-the-job training in urban neighborhood business development made her a good consultant on that project. The fact that she had been treasurer of the congregation must have been a plus, too. It was also clear, in those early days of the women’s movement, that corporations would have to open up their old boys’ networks to women, and in Sister Aquinas they found one of the rare women who had executive experience running large organizations. In short, she was the perfect candidate to be the first female member of what



Sister Aquinas introduces Congressman Paul Henry, right, seated next to President Norbert Hruby.

until then had been an all-male enclave.

Allen believes the board recognized very quickly what a good listener Sister was and how skilled she was at analyzing problems. In addition, Allen says, the board must have appreciated the fact that Sister Aquinas rarely gets involved in trivial conversations, choosing instead to focus on what is important. She never had reservations about expressing her opinions to the board. “Dick Gillett said he never regretted asking her to be on the board,” says Allen.

Of course, the history-making appointment was not without its lighter moments. Allen recalls coming into a board meeting in 1980 to make his annual report as senior vice

president for marketing. He had been making presentations like this for years to a room full of Grand Rapids' most powerful and wealthy men. He was usually calm and collected, but that day he found himself stammering and in a cold sweat for there, seated among the businessmen, was his old fifth and seventh grade teacher, the one who used to frighten him and other problem students with what he calls "the look." He finally stopped himself and apologized to the board, explaining, "You've got to understand, my fifth grade teacher's sitting here watching me. I feel like I'm ten years old again!"

In the first year she served on the board, there were other awkwardly humorous moments as the male-dominated business world got used to having a powerful woman in its midst. For example, in 1981, Grand Rapids celebrated its downtown renovation with the first Celebration on the Grand and the opening of the Gerald R. Ford presidential museum. As a major sponsor of the event, the bank was very caught up in the spirit of celebration, and when board members arrived for a meeting just prior to the big events, each one found a gift box at his or her place. The gift? A commemorative man's necktie with the Old Kent Bank logo on it! Sister reports that she gave her tie to her brother.

Her ten years of board service, during which she became acquainted with such West Michigan movers and shakers as Dick DeVos, Robert Pew, John Canepa, John Bissell and many others, would serve her and Aquinas College well when she was called upon to become head of the College's development department starting in 1983. Her board service allowed her to contact and network with these businessmen without first having to introduce herself. Dick Gillett, for example, once called her and asked her to come to him with the College's "wish list," and he helped connect her with potential donors.

"One time," Sister recalls, "we wanted to start a challenge grant of \$50,000, and [Dick Gillett] suggested that I contact Jim Sebastian of Rapistan, so I put together a brochure. He didn't give us a challenge grant, but he did, in the end, donate \$50,000 to the College." She was able to take advantage of a connection between John Canepa and John Lacks. Canepa arranged a meeting at the bank, and within a week Lacks donated \$50,000 as well.

As vice president for development from 1983-1988, her main responsibility was contacting potential donors to ask for money. As a result of her board experience moving



As director of the Emeritus College, Sister Aquinas visits with Robert Woodhouse, Sr., who is enrolled in a painting class.



in circles of money and influence, she did not at all feel intimidated. "Asking for money for Aquinas or the Sisters doesn't bother me. I tell our story. I believe in the College, and if I believe in something, I don't have any difficulty asking." She had mentors in advancement, including her predecessors at the College Tom Monaghan and Hugh Allen. "Hugh Allen was a tremendous mentor to me," she recalls, "He used to say 'You won't make a dime sitting at your desk,'" underscoring the importance of making personal contacts.

From 1988-1991, Sister briefly set aside her fund-raising activities to become director of the Emeritus College, working with Sister Elizabeth Eardley. The Emeritus College was begun in 1975, during the period of Aquinas College's expansion into non-traditional education. Originally intended as a program which would focus on issues related to retirement, it became clear after pilot sessions that seniors were interested in a far wider spectrum of educational offerings that would include the humanities, politics, and current events. The program blossomed, becoming one of the very earliest senior continuing education programs in the country, predating the internationally known Elderhostel movement by at least one year. At the time Sister Aquinas took over, however, the program was having some difficulty making its way financially and her first job was to stabilize the income sources by offering a wider array of courses and finding other funding sources. The first hurdle was to overcome a \$20,000 deficit from the previous year's operation. "We raised tuition a bit and moved over to Willowbrook," she explains, "then we got a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities as a matching grant for \$10,000" which got the program out of the red. After that, she and Sister Liz added some new programs and got another grant from the Michigan Council for the Humanities. The saving grace, however, came from an idea of Dr. Norbert Hruby.

"It was Norb's idea to have the Emeritus Dinner, and our first speaker was Gerry Ford," she recalls. The 1983 event proved to be a good fundraiser for the program and the following year opera star Beverly Sills was the featured speaker. A fine soprano during her career which spanned more than two decades, she was, at the time, general manager of the New York City Opera. The event was another success. It looked as though the Emeritus Dinner was destined to be a great annual fundraiser for the program. Then came year three.

"Our speaker that year was investigative journalist Jack Anderson, a nationally syndicated columnist who had won a Pulitzer Prize in 1972," Sister recalls. A brilliant and controversial writer and reporter, Anderson left much to be desired as a speaker. "He droned on for over an hour," Sister Aquinas recalls with a wry smile, "At one point, he asked 'Should I go on?' and the whole place in chorus said, 'No!' He went on anyway. It almost killed the event for the following year."

The Emeritus Dinner is still held annually and has become a huge success, as has the program itself. In 2008, the Emeritus College was re-christened "OLLI at Aquinas" for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, the result of receiving a \$1 million endowment grant from the Osher Foundation, which funds 116 programs for seniors nationwide. The endowment and the annual Emeritus Dinner, along with booming enrollment, ensure that lifelong learning will be part of Aquinas College long into the future.

In 1991, Sister Aquinas was called back to the College's development department to help newly appointed President Paul Nelson deal with the financial emergency the College





Above: In 1983, former President Gerald R. Ford was the featured speaker at the first Emeritus dinner, a fundraising event for Aquinas College's Emeritus College. From left, R. Paul Nelson, Peter M. Wege, Mr. Ford, Sister Aquinas, Sister Marie Celeste Miller.

Below: Sister Aquinas reads from scripture at St. Mary Church in her hometown during a special Mass to commemorate the 50th anniversary of her profession of vows.

faced in the wake of massive expenditures and debts incurred by the College during the administration of Dr. Peter O'Connor. In 1988, Aquinas College had purchased the adjacent campus of Reformed Bible College for \$6 million. The College took possession of several new classroom buildings, some houses along Woodward Lane and enough space to eventually build both new residence halls and a new athletic field. But the steep cost of the campus addition, increased maintenance costs, and the financing of the debt led the College into considerable financial danger. In 1989, the College launched an \$8 million capital campaign called "Aquinas Grows," headed by Dr. Frank Bruno, then director of development. Before the campaign could gain much traction, however, disaster struck. The late 1980's saw the advent of the "baby bust" when the number of 18-year-olds in the pool of potential students declined significantly. Enrollments declined and then the situation worsened when, two years in a row, accounting oversights led to operating deficits in excess of \$1 million each year.

In March, 1990, President O'Connor resigned and the board of trustees recruited R. Paul Nelson, who had served Aquinas College in many capacities since 1969, to become acting president. (Nelson was made president by the board after three months and served as president until 1997.) The financial exigencies were almost life-threatening for the College when Sister Aquinas came back on board with the development department. "It was like hanging from a window ledge by your fingernails," she recalls, "In the community it was embarrassing. We had to ask people to use money they had donated for the library campaign for other things or to take the money back." She and Nelson worked together closely to patch the College's shredded financial picture. "Paul helped the needed healing take place," she says now, "We had meetings over the summer to restructure finances and Old Kent Bank came through. (Union Bank said no.) John Canepa helped us greatly on that, but it was hard to raise money because [the community] did not have confidence in us." In the end, drastic cuts in the College's spending—made without endangering the academic program—meant that the fundraisers under Sister Aquinas could present the public with an improved financial picture in a short time. Today, she reports, the picture is much better and Aquinas College's reputation in the community is much stronger than it was in those days.

In 1992, as she approached seventy years of age, Sister Aquinas stepped down as vice-president for development and took the title Chancellor Emerita. (She had been given the title Chancellor in 1988.) But, at a time when she could have been expected to retire and pursue her longtime hobbies like vegetable gardening, reading, sewing and cooking, she showed few signs of slowing down. And, in fact, she had many new challenges and rewards, not to mention awards, to come.

# Rewards and Awards

Sister Aquinas's service on the Old Kent board of directors in the 1980's led her into increasingly greater involvement in the West Michigan community as her ministry moved outward from service and leadership in her own community and the College to the world at large. When Dick Gillett tapped her to be on the Old Kent board in July, 1983, he told *The Grand Rapids Press*, "we did not appoint her just because she was nun. She has had particular experiences as the financial head of her order. She also has experience in the community as well as administrative and financial experience." It was not long before other groups began to seek her expertise and wisdom.

For Sister, it was all part of her vocation of serving the world. Old Kent Bank was the only for-profit corporation on whose board she served, and that experience in the financial world made her a valuable member of not-for-profit boards who sought her help.

She served as a member of the original board of Hospice of Grand Rapids from 1978-1982, then as her reputation for good judgment and guidance gained ground, other organizations came knocking in the 1980's and 1990's. The entire list occupies a good portion of her resume, and includes service on the boards of the YMCA, Saint John's Home, the Gleaners of West Michigan, Porter Hills Presbyterian Village, the Hugh Michael Beahan Foundation, the Porter Hills Foundation, the Salvation Army, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Grandville Academy for Arts and Humanities, and the Aquinas College Emeritus board of directors. Many of these were organizations with long histories, but some, like the Gleaners of West Michigan, were start-ups which needed nurturing and guidance in their early years. "It was not immediately successful," she recalls of Gleaners, "It was touch and go for some time, but after we left our original Jefferson Street location and moved to First Street, we became better known." Today, the Second Harvest Food Bank, which grew out of that organization, distributes over 24 million pounds of food each year to the hungry in West Michigan, distributing it through 1,300 organizations.

The most enjoyable times of board service for her were her years with Porter Hills and the Salvation Army. Once, when she found herself overloaded with duties, she resigned from three boards she was serving on, but maintained her connections with those two groups. She sees a pattern to her life of service and is grateful to her Dominican Sisters for supporting her and encouraging her to expand her ministry and service into all these areas. "If I had stayed a lay woman," Sister says, "I probably would not have done any of the work I've done. I have had opportunities to do work I would never have had."

As she entered a time of life when most people think of retirement, Sister continued to show her strong work ethic, coming to the office daily to work with the development department of Aquinas College to maintain the College's longtime friendships with donors and to offer the wisdom of experience to several presidents. When the college needed a new development director after Dr. Frank Bruno left in the early 1990's to become president of a community college in New Jersey, President Paul Nelson asked Sister Aquinas to leave her position as director of the Emeritus College and return to development. "She loved her work at Emeritus," Nelson recalls, "and when I asked her if she would do this, she agreed though it was clear to me she wanted to stay at Emeritus. Her commitment to the college showed through, and she brought knowledge of Aquinas College with her and also



Above: Sister Aquinas shares a quiet moment with her friend retired Bishop Robert Rose after the dedication of a bench and plaque in her honor in the garden of Holmdene at Aquinas College.

Below: At her 2003 retirement from Aquinas College, the Weber family joined their sister to celebrate. From left, back row, Dick and Marge (Weber) Wagner, Jay and Donna (sister-in-law) Weber, Paul Weber, Dan Weber, Barb (Paul's wife) Weber, Thelma (sister-in-law) and husband Clarence Weber, Jack Weber, Ray Weber. Front row, Sister Aquinas, Mary Ellen Weber, Jack's wife.



knowledge of who in the Catholic community and the West Michigan community would support the College. She was universally admired and respected. Whatever she does brings credibility to the College. She is unique in the history of the College, having served all seven of its presidents.”

As Sister approached her seventies, a flood of recognition began in the form of honors and awards. In May, 1990, the Notre Dame Club honored her at the Universal Notre Dame Night banquet. The annual award is given to an individual who possesses “qualities of character and spirit associated with Notre Dame ideals.” The award was presented to her by the previous year’s winner, Henry Fox, Jr., whose citation, as quoted in *The Grand Rapids Press*, reads, “Honored as a distinguished leader in the Christian ideals of justice and moral responsibility, she has given herself unselfishly to the Dominican order, Aquinas College and the community.”



In 1990, Sister Aquinas received the Tree of Life award from the Jewish National Fund in a special ceremony and recognition dinner at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. Personal friends and friends of Aquinas College join together to help her celebrate. Left to right, Pat Quinn, Hy Berkowitz, John Canepa, Sister Aquinas, Raymond Knappe, Mr. Subar, and a representative from the Jewish National Fund.

In fall of the same year, the Jewish National Fund awarded Sister Aquinas its Tree of Life Award, its highest honor. The award is given annually, and previous Michigan recipients had been Governor James Blanchard and Cardinal Edmund Szoka. The Jewish National Fund recognized her professional and humanitarian leadership and dedication to American-Israel friendship, according to Laurie Nosanchuck, spokesperson for the Jewish National Fund. The award took Sister completely by surprise as she had no direct dealings with the Jewish National Fund. In an interview with *The Grand Rapids Press*, Sister said, “I think they came to me because I worked closely all these years with Jewish people in the community. In the 1960’s, Aquinas College and Temple Emmanuel held a Jewish-Catholic dialogue. We’ve had a long close relationship with the temple. The connection with Aquinas has been a good one.” With Father Arthur Bukowski and the rabbi of Temple Emmanuel, Aquinas College had sponsored weekend sessions of interfaith dialogue. “It



Right: After her retirement, Sister Aquinas took some time to travel. Here she samples a bell at Arcosanti, an artistic and architectural experimental community in the Arizona desert.

Below: In fall 2011, as part of the College's 125th anniversary celebration, Aquinas College bestowed Reflection Awards on Ralph Hauenstein, Peter Wege and Sister Aquinas for their lifelong commitment to the values of the College. Standing center, back row, Dr. Juan Olivarez, the seventh Aquinas College president. Sister Aquinas has worked with all seven of the College's presidents.



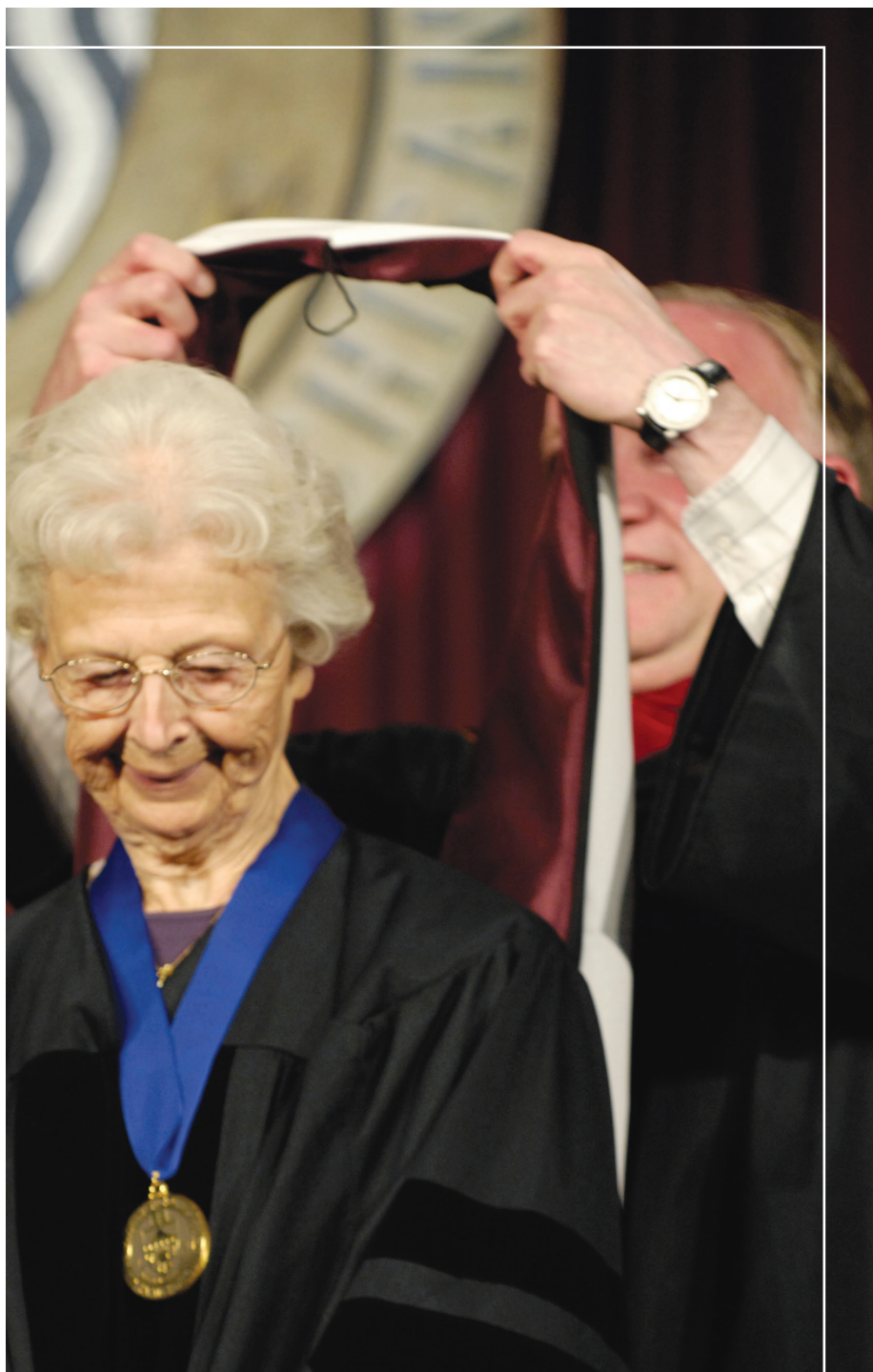


Though “retired,” Sister Aquinas continues to participate in the activities of the college. Here, she cuts the ribbon for the opening of the Sturmus Sports & Fitness Center in 2010.

was a way of trying to understand the Christian community and the Jewish community. I think we formed some very nice ties.” In later years, Sister became friends with Rabbi Albert Lewis with whom she worked on several boards and in the Aquinas College Emeritus program. As part of the award, a Sister Mary Aquinas Weber Afforestation Project was to begin in Israel in the American Independence Park.

In 1993, she became the first recipient of the Aquinas College Reflection Award, and in the few years after that came the Sister Elizabeth Ann Seton Award from the Sisters of Charity in Cincinnati, the National Kidney Foundation Galaxy Award, and awards from the Grand Rapids Rotary Club, Second Harvest Gleaners Food Bank, the Salvation Army, the Porter Hills Foundation, and the Hugh Michael Beahan Foundation. In 1999, she received the Edward J. Frey, Sr., Distinguished Achievement Award from the Junior Achievement West Michigan Business Hall of Fame, and in 2003, the President’s Award from the Association of Fundraising Professionals. In 2012, she was presented with the Slykehouse Lifetime Achievement Award by the Economic Club of Grand Rapids, where she shared the stage with former Prime Minister of Great Britain Tony Blair, who was the featured speaker. In that same year, she received the Papal Cross, *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*, from Pope Benedict XVI in a special ceremony at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew in Grand Rapids, Bishop Walter A. Hurley presiding.

Throughout all these honors, Sister Aquinas retained her humility. At the time she received the Tree of Life award, she said, “Anything I do, I do with the thought of creating a better world and helping people. Anything that succeeds, anything I have done here has always been the result of people who supported me—my coworkers, my family, my religious community. I always feel I’ve had people to help me do these things.” In 2006, when she received the Women of Achievement and Courage Award from the



Monsignor William Duncan hoods Sister Aquinas as she is awarded an honorary doctorate from Aquinas College in 2008.





In 2012, Sister Aquinas was awarded the papal cross, *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*, by Pope Benedict XVI. The award was bestowed by Grand Rapids Bishop Walter A. Hurley, assisted by, from left, Fathers Anthony Pelak and Thomas Tavella, CSP.

Michigan Women's Foundation, she said, "I entered the religious community to be able to serve others. That's why the order was founded, to preach the word of God in all sorts of different venues."

In 2003, Sister Aquinas announced that she was retiring as chancellor of Aquinas College. She had reached the age of 80, and felt, perhaps, it was time to slow down a bit. No one who works in Holmdene, however, has noticed much change in her work habits. Though she has a smaller office now, she still can be found there several days a week and she still maintains ties with old friends of the College and is active in making new ones.

Reflecting back on her life of service at the time she received the Edward J. Frey, Sr., award, she had said, "My life is dedicated to service. And I see various organizations where I think I might contribute something. Even if I retire, I will not be an idle person."

Sister Aquinas, a longtime member of the Monsignor Hugh Michael Beahan Foundation, sits among students at St. Andrew School which the Foundation supported until its closing in 2010.



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“My life is dedicated to service. And I see various organizations where I think I might contribute something. Even if I retire, I will not be an idle person.”

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With the perspective of someone turning 90, she is philosophical about the changes she has seen in her lifetime. The biggest change for her, by far, has been in religious life. What religious life is like today would have been virtually unimaginable when she entered the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids in 1943. “The most momentous change since Vatican II is the idea that you are seen as individuals and adults who can make decisions,” she reflects, “Before that, a lot of decisions were made for you as part of the rules that were set up. Then, both within the congregation and the Church, those largely disappeared. I had made decisions before I entered as a young adult woman, and, after Vatican II, I again felt a sense of freedom and responsibility. I was directoress at the House of Studies [during that time], and now these women are in their 50’s and they remember I always told them, ‘Be responsible, I am not going to make decisions for you.’ The change was a good thing. We were able to do things, pursue things we were never able to do before.” Her life, of course, was a prime example of the expansion in the definition of religious life enabled by Vatican II. Throughout her life, she has changed with the times, a lesson she claims to have learned from Dick Gillett in her years on the Old Kent board. “You can’t ignore the changes. I remember Dick Gillett saying that if you are not flexible and able to change, you’d die. That always said something to me personally. A lot of times the change wasn’t easy when I made it, but after I made decisions in retrospect I am glad I made them.”

Though she is turning 90, Sister still maintains an interest in the future. Perhaps the biggest challenge is the future of religious life itself. “I don’t think about it as not being around. There will always be some sort of religious life,” she predicts. “I just finished reading a paper by Sister Sandra Schneiders who said there will always be a form of religious life. Not in the forms we know it today, but there will always be some.” Sister imagines there will always be a place in the Church for cloistered communities, like the Carmelites, and that sort of life will be attractive to some women. “What the other exact forms will be, however, I don’t know, but I am not worried because the Church has some good lay men and women who will be ready and willing to take over many of our traditional activities like running vigil services for the dead or training altar servers. The Church has learned in many instances that the laity have a role they were never given before.”





Sister and Aquinas College President Juan Olivarez greet guests at the Brookby Christmas Ball in 2011. Though nominally retired, Sister Aquinas continues to be active in fundraising for the College.

She predicts that religious orders will continue to be small. Part of this has to do with increased opportunities for women in the world. “Many modern women say they can do things today without entering a religious order,” she notes, “For example, the only women who could become college presidents in the old days were members of religious communities. That is no longer true, but in religious life, women could hold any of these positions, but it was never thought lay women could hold these positions.” She feels that the unusually large numbers of women who entered religious life in the 1940’s and 1950’s

were something of an anomaly in the modern Church, and that in the future, though numbers will be smaller, there will continue to be congregations of women religious within the Church, with new and expanded opportunities thanks to the current shortage of vocations to the priesthood. The work of the sisters will be supported by Associates. The Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids currently have over 100 Associates who do not take vows but who dedicate themselves to participating in and supporting the work of the congregation.

As always, the center of the religious life of the future will be liturgical. She feels the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids have always been bonded together by their liturgy which they have deliberately fostered through education and musical training.

As for Aquinas College, her great hope is to see the College's financial future stabilized with a large endowment, and she also feels it is very important, as the number of Dominican sisters on the faculty and staff diminishes, that the College continue to imbue its faculty and staff with the Dominican values that gave birth to and sustained the College. In recent years, the College and the Dominican Sisters have made it possible for faculty and staff to attend a summer symposium on Dominican life in Fanjeaux, France, where the order was founded in the early 1200's.

"In the future," she predicts, "we will continue to do what we have always done, respond to the needs of the times. We will go where we are needed, which is what we have always done, from the first sisters who came from New York City. We ask where we are needed and we go there."



In 2012, Sister Aquinas received the Slykehouse Lifetime Achievement Award from the Economic Club of Grand Rapids. She shared the stage with featured speaker, former prime minister of Great Britain, Tony Blair.



# AQUINAS COLLEGE

2013

Grand Rapids, Michigan