

Alive

WITH THE CALL OF THE GOSPEL

School Sisters of St. Francis



Congregational Prayer for 150th Anniversary

Ever-loving God,

You birthed our congregation through the Spirit at work in the lives of three faith-filled women – Alexia, Alfons, and Clara – 150 years ago.

As we approach the 150th celebration of our founding, we turn to You in love and gratitude for all the ways You have been with us, guiding and sustaining the journey of our belonging and our becoming more deeply and fully yours in service to your people in Europe, the Americas, India, and Africa. We also give thanks for our Sisters now departed and all former members who shared their lives with us.

As School Sisters of St. Francis, we have pledged to be witnesses of your love and a source of hope in our world by responding to the needs of our times wherever we are led by your Holy Spirit.

We earnestly pray to be faith-filled generous, and courageous in our care of creation, in our care for those we encounter along the way, and in our care for one another as Sisters, Associates, and companions on our journey.

With your guidance and grace, help us to partner with others to alleviate suffering in our world, to change unjust systems, and, like Saints Francis and Clare, to care for our Mother Earth and be close to those pushed to the margins of life.

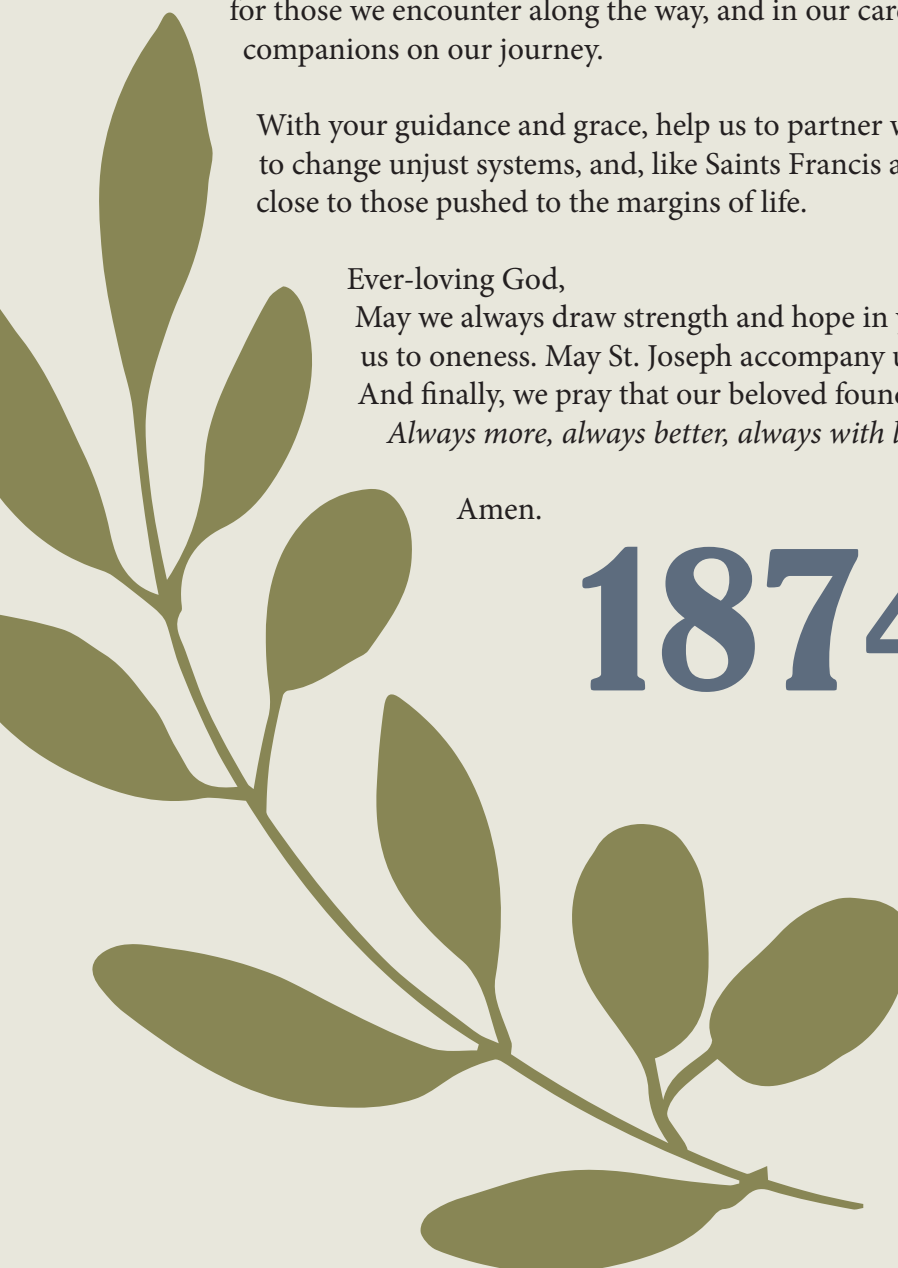
Ever-loving God,

May we always draw strength and hope in your Presence, within and around us, leading us to oneness. May St. Joseph accompany us as our gentle, faithful guardian and protector. And finally, we pray that our beloved foundresses continue to inspire us...

Always more, always better, always with love!

Amen.

1874 - 2024



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FRONT COVER
As our congregation observes the
150th anniversary of our founding in
April 1874, we share a small sampling of
the faces and places that capture moments
of our ministries and missions across the
United States and around the world.
You'll find the stories behind these images
throughout this issue, with many more
available on our website: www.sssf.org.

PHOTOS: SSSF ARCHIVES

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From Our Leadership

Our congregation is a breathtaking tapestry, woven over the course of 150 years with myriad threads that represent the rich cultures and worldviews of thousands of faith-filled women. Embroidered with God's grace and love, the tapestry's first strands emerged in the 1870s, in the foothills of the Black Forest in Erlenbad, Germany.



Nineteen-year-old Alexia Hoell was searching for the answer to the question of where God was calling her, and it launched a faith-filled journey across the Atlantic to America. Today, we reflect with gratitude on the magnitude of Alexia's response to that call, and her steadfast belief in God's will. It gives us great joy to look back on 150 years filled with so much history and so many blessings.

In *A Century of Service*, Sister Joann Euper wrote that the key to understanding Alexia was "her very clear sense of mission, which was always shaped by a keen awareness of, and attention to, the world."

Alexia's dreams of ministry in distant lands brought her face-to-face with many challenges, including a world war, global hunger, discrimination, and ecclesial and political upheaval. But her vision of a worldwide congregation was accomplished thanks to the faithful "Yes" of thousands of women who have followed.

Alexia and her sister foundresses, Alfons, and Clara, were women who looked to new horizons around the world in expanding ministries. At each step in our congregation's history, the Holy Spirit has inspired and challenged our sisters to reimagine our mission and our charism to "discern the will of God in the needs of the times, responding wherever the Spirit leads us."

Our mentors, our teachers, our friends, our heroes – and all of us, who have also said our own "Yes" to God's call – ALL of us have played a part. That part has brought us to this moment, to bring forth the energizing messages of peace, of reconciliation, and of God's immeasurable love for our world.

Today, we share our mission and charism across five continents with a renewed mission perspective. Through your prayers and your faithful and generous support, you are an integral part of our collective tapestry. We are woven together, witnesses to God's love.

Sister Deborah Fumagalli
President, International Leadership Team
School Sisters of St. Francis



Teaching Life Lessons for 150 Years

Sister educators have changed lives inside and outside the classroom

SSSF ARCHIVES

The following anecdotes represent some of the countless examples of faithful witness by our sister educators who touched the lives of millions of children both inside and outside the classroom. Please visit our website www.sssf.org for many more stories from our sisters.

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Sister Cathy Mauge

During one of my first years of working in Mississippi, a family invited a small group of sisters to Sunday dinner. We were really welcomed, introduced to the people in photos, and feasted with stories. Dinner was such a plentiful sharing of love. Stories were bountiful and laughter filled the room. I remember being aware of how proud that mother looked. She and her family had gifted us in so many ways!

.....

Sister Julene Stromberg

When I was 24 years old, Mother Caestine told me I would be teaching the Aspirants at the Provincial House. I protested, "They should have the best teacher in the community, not me!" But Mother Caestine told me I would be teaching them math, biology, physics, and chemistry. I told her I had never had any chemistry myself. A few hours later, Mother said she was sending me to New Orleans in a few days to take a chemistry course. I did, and I taught math and science for two years.

Sister Joan Korte

I was sent to teach at Our Lady of Good Counsel in Aurora, Illinois, in 1960. It was my second assignment after three years at St. Clare's in Chicago. I was only 22 years old, I had not yet completed college, and I didn't know any of the sisters, so I was so grateful for their support and for helping me to adjust. The success of the school came as each sister committed herself to the education of each child. Often, as I go shopping in Aurora today, someone will approach me and ask, "Are you Sister Joan?" When I say yes, they tell me what a good education they received at Our Lady of Good Counsel. I thank God that all those years ago I became a School Sister of St. Francis!

.....

Sister Madelyn Gould

I had never had a relationship with religious sisters before entering Madonna High School in Aurora, Illinois. I was captivated by their energetic approach to teaching. They were dynamic, challenging, relevant, and creative. One day in 1956, Sister Lenora Maier was teaching us where to put the comma when writing prepositional phrases. She gave many examples, but this example changed my life forever: “If you do not wash your hair (comma) you will get lice.” In that moment, I realized Sister Lenora must have hair underneath her veil! Maybe I, too, could become a religious sister and teach like she teaches! The seed of my vocation was born that day in freshman English class.

Sister Jeannine Weidner

In 1949, my reception class was privileged to participate in the community’s 75-year anniversary celebration. This experience was such an affirmation of our Franciscan roots and heritage. It was a continuation of my personal connection with the sisters who gave me music lessons, taught me to play for liturgies, and encouraged me through high school and Alverno College. Their modeling and caring leaves me with joyful memories of my life with them.

.....

Sister Joneen Keuler

The experience of having the sisters join with us for the many high school activities and fun times – dances, basketball games, ice skating parties, the end-of-year picnic at a state park – helped me see that a life in the convent could be a great way to be of service and also be happy. At 18 years of age, those reasons were as definitive as I could be about my life’s goals. The details have unfolded in surprising and grace-filled ways over the past 61 years. As I look back, I’m so very grateful to the women who, by their example, showed me that wholeness and holiness are integral to a life well lived, and supported my decision to join the School Sister community!



SISTER JOAN BREDE PHOTO

Sister Joan Brede

During summers in the '60s, I was often assigned to work with the children of the migrant workers who worked on the pea farms in Hartford, Wisconsin. These families moved from farm to farm, and the children missed consistent teaching, so I emphasized reading and math in the mornings. In the afternoons, I would sometimes take them on field trips that were both educational and fun. I truly enjoyed these lively and affectionate youngsters. Summers with them were so enjoyable, it didn't seem like work.

Sisters Paulea Kraft (batting) and Dorothy Domagalski take batting practice.



SSSF ARCHIVES



A Place Where All Belong

Alverno College embodies our sisters' educational charism

Since its founding, our congregation has emphasized that education is essential to empower people to participate in the Church and in the shaping of society. That focus inspired the community's leaders to open St. Joseph's Normal School, the precursor of Alverno College, in 1887 to teach sisters to be parochial school teachers. The school would later open its doors to lay students who also wanted to further their education and prepare for careers.

"At the heart of Alverno's educational philosophy is the School Sisters' belief that education has the power to prepare a person for a life of meaningful service to others," said Sister Bernardin Deutsch, whose 60 years of service at Alverno have included roles as professor, administrator, and advisor. Sister Mary Diez, past president of our congregation who served for 38 years at Alverno, concurred, noting "Alverno's lasting legacy is that it has lived our sisters' charism to discern the will of God in the needs of the times in a variety of ways."

For generations, Alverno's inclusive spirit has made it a vibrant community of students, faculty, and staff who support and lift each other up. "The student and her learning have been central to each faculty and staff working at Alverno College," said Sister Marlene Neises, an administrator at Alverno for more than four decades. "Alverno students and alums represent all races, ages, economic, geographic, and

religious backgrounds. They take the strengths and abilities recognized and further developed during their Alverno education and take it to their world of work, family, and community."

When it was introduced in the early 1970s, Alverno's abilities-based curriculum was a ground-breaking approach to providing students with real-life experiences to enhance personal and professional growth.

"In the late 1900s, when many critics urged higher education to be more accountable for student outcomes, Alverno became a beacon of just how this could be done," said Sister Kathleen O'Brien, who serves as the U.S. Provincial Coordinator after a 40-year career as an Alverno professor and administrator. "The college met the needs of the time, and it continues to maintain and improve its groundbreaking educational innovations, seeking to find new ways to serve students and their learning needs."

"By developing competence in abilities such as analysis, interaction, and speaking in the context of the liberal arts and disciplinary studies, women gain confidence and the skills to participate and succeed in varied arenas," said Sister Judeen Schulte, who has been an instructor, professor, and dean at Alverno for 43 years. "This legacy lives on today and as a result, Alverno is one of the most ethnically diverse colleges in Wisconsin, and continues to innovate."

Ministering Amidst Struggle and Change

Our sisters served on the front lines of school integration

The School Sisters of St. Francis began ministry in southern missions in 1940, when the first sisters began teaching at St. Francis School in Yazoo City, Mississippi. For the first three decades of their ministry in Mississippi, the sisters were required to teach in segregated schools. Finally, in 1968, it became legally possible for Sacred Heart School in Walls to become integrated.

“The Mississippi missions experienced the struggles of a segregated society where black people had little voice and no authority in their lives,” wrote Sister Jeanne Schweikert in her *History of the Holy Name Province*. “Throughout these tumultuous times, the sisters were not immune to the injustices and indignities suffered by the communities they served. There were bomb threats at Sacred Heart School during the early years of integration.”

The sisters who served in Mississippi witnessed remarkable changes during their tenure, including school integration, the Civil Rights Movement, and the passage of the Voting Rights Act. In addition to sisters who ministered in Mississippi year-round, Sister Rosemary Reier was among the Chicago area sisters who traveled by van to Walls to teach in the “Aunt Virginia” summer enrichment program.

Sister Rosemary Reier (below) with students in the “Aunt Virginia” summer program.

“The Aunt Virginia Program was started and directed by Sister Virginia Reinl,” Sister Rosemary said. “It offered children opportunities they were not afforded during the school year. These children didn’t go to school because Mississippi had no obligatory education laws. This was an eye-opener for me! The children arrived each morning eager for a summer of fun. Our mornings were spent with different age-appropriate activities. I was assigned the eight- and nine-year-old boys.”

“Sister Virginia worked hard to find a pool for the children,” Sister Rosemary recalled. “Most of the children had never gone swimming before and they looked forward to the days, usually twice a week, when they got to go to the pool. A happier group would be hard to find – unless they were on the bus going to the roller-skating rink! After a warm, home-cooked lunch, it was time for the children to head home.

“Once the children had left for the day, we delivered meals to the needy elderly. Afternoons were spent cooking, creating stuffed animal toys for the last day of the program, or preparing an art project for the following day. The summer passed quickly, for the children and also for us. They enriched our lives as we hoped to enrich theirs.”



Loving Memories from Days Gone By

Students look back on lessons taught by our sisters

Since the community's founding, our sisters have instilled a love of learning in children and adults around the world. Alive readers and other friends of the community took a fond look back and shared these loving remembrances of important life lessons.



My beloved sister, Sister Patricia Collins (Marjean), was a member of the order from 1955 until her death in 2008. We both attended Holy Redeemer Grade School in Milwaukee and benefited from the outstanding sister teachers there. I met my oldest friend, Josetta Berg, there and we still talk about our experience. I also attended Alverno College and found my life's work because of meeting and learning from my history teachers, Sisters Joel Read and Austin Doherty (above). Sister Maria Terese Patterson was also a dear friend. My life wouldn't be my life without the sisters, and I am grateful every day.

- Mary Jean Collins

Beautiful Sister Anne at New Cassel was gentle, loved Jesus, and was such a servant. I will never forget her.

- Kathryn Hraban Goodwin Merriman

I met the School Sisters of St. Francis when they came to Rosendale, New York, to teach at St. Peter's School. For many years I enjoyed their friendship, and I forever will thank the good Lord for sending them to Rosendale.

- Jeanne Helmich-Bingham

I remember Sister Marcina, our choir director. I always think of her when singing a song with the word 'Hail' in it, like our school song. Sister would stop us and say, 'Ladies, the word is HAIL Alvernia. Enunciate!'

- Lois Weiler DeFelice



I remember Sister Gordon, who is now Sister Dorothy Anne Jackson, who taught me in first and fourth grades at St. Gregory Elementary School in St. Nazianz, Wisconsin. St. Gregory's was Sister's

first assignment. I can just imagine how she felt coming to a strange place north of Milwaukee. She certainly was a brave, young girl with a lot of faith. She was given the mighty task of teaching 60 students in 1956-57, which included 28 first graders with no prior kindergarten training, and 32 second graders. I was one of those first graders who barely knew how to write my name or to sit quietly at a desk.

- Cheryl (Wernecke) Bauer



We had many great teachers at Ss. Peter and Paul grade school in Naperville, Illinois. One teacher who was everyone's favorite was Sister Marya (Rosie Kuehne). She taught sixth grade. She had a loving spirit and inspired us to learn. We all looked forward to Friday afternoons when she would read us a chapter from a classic book. In her 'spare' time, she was attending graduate school in Chicago, which made her life very full. She was always upbeat and motivating in our classroom. We had no idea that she working so hard outside of the classroom.

-Bob Raymond

I met the School Sisters of St. Francis as an Associate and then Novice in 1976. So many to love in initial formation: Sisters Joann Riesterer, Roseann Wagner, Pat Bates, Pat McCarthy, Jeannine Weidner. Their love and guidance helped to shape me into the woman - and then priest in the Episcopal Church - that I eventually became. I am forever grateful. - The Rev. Debra Trakel

Sister Lorraine Marie Ritger was a young nun at our parish when I was a little girl. I remember Sister riding her bicycle around our neighborhood on summer evenings, dressed in a modest powder blue suit. She invited all of us kids to join her, and she did not care if some of our neighbors were not from our parish. She only cared that we were God's children and wanted us to have the best lives possible. I carry that beautiful woman in my heart today.

- Lisa Koenigs

Sister Mary John was my second-grade teacher at St. Philomena School in Chicago in 1962. We had a classmate who was hit by a car and died. Sister spent so much time talking about heaven and God's love for the boy. The whole class cried together. She helped us grieve and spoke to us about not being afraid to talk about him, especially to his family, because we held some memories they could cherish. She was the most amazing teacher I ever knew.

- Suzi Johnson



The three Acker sisters (above), Sisters Haroldine, Elmerine, and John Rose, taught for different lengths of time at St. John The Baptist in Johnsburg, Wisconsin. I have many memories and appreciation for them emphasizing success in reading, math, and education in general. Complementing daily Mass and religion class, the sisters ingrained in us ethics, morals, and a sense of right and wrong in our Catholic beliefs. I look back over many decades and appreciate their influence on making good decisions.

- John Endries

Visit our website for many more remembrances from former students and sisters: www.sssf.org.



Students staying at Maria Sadan Hostel take part in a meditation exercise.

Nurturing Young Lives

Across India, our sisters are empowering and inspiring young people

From urban centers to remote rural communities, the School Sisters of St. Francis have helped to change the face of education throughout India. In 1936, sisters from our European Province initiated missionary work in India, planting the seeds for young women who went on to begin consecrated life in Europe. Four decades later, Indian sisters who had been serving in Germany began returning to their home country to undertake ministry as educators.

The sisters have sought to serve those who otherwise would not have access to education. In Bichhia, in the remote district of Mandla, our sisters built a hostel so that girls from outlying villages would be able to attend the local diocesan school. Since 2004, **Maria Sadan Hostel** has enabled more than 1,000 girls to complete grades 9 and 10 at Vidya Jyoti School.

Sisters ministering at Maria Sadan provide clothing, three meals a day, a bed, school, supplies, and medical care for the girls at the hostel. They also help the girls with homework and provide them with guidance, friendship, and encouragement.

On the outskirts of Bangalore, a city of more than 13 million people, many children with

special needs have historically been unable to access educational services. Families faced social stigma associated with disabilities as well as cost and transportation hurdles to providing appropriate support and care. In response, our sisters established **Assisi Special School** in 2010 to offer individualized therapy and vocational training that provide children with support for physical, cognitive, and behavioral challenges. The response was immediately enthusiastic, and hundreds of children have benefited.

By opening **Assisi Nilaya Hostel** in the city of Mysore, our sisters enable three dozen girls ages 5 to 17 to attend a school for hearing-impaired students. The girls receive room and board at no charge, and receive loving care and guidance from four sisters in residence, who help them to excel in school and grow into confident, independent, self-reliant learners.

These are just a few examples of the thousands of lives our sisters touch on a daily basis in schools and related educational institutions across India. Thanks to the generosity of our donors, our sisters are able to offer more children excellent academic and spiritual preparation in the Franciscan tradition.

Building a Brighter Future

Sisters instill Franciscan values through education

Our sisters' presence in Latin America began in 1932, when the community responded to a request from the Diocese of Tegucigalpa by sending five missionary sisters from Europe to Honduras. Over the next decade, 26 sisters from our European Province served in the Central American country. The Union of Latin American Franciscans became a province in 1971, with missions in Honduras, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru, Nicaragua, and Guatemala.

Many of the earliest ministries in Latin America involved the care and education of orphaned and abandoned children, and that commitment to teaching children on the margins continues today.

Beginning in 1985, orphaned and abandoned children living at our **Guadalupe Homes** children's home in Santa Apolonia, Guatemala, received educational support and vocational training in carpentry, shoemaking, and tailoring. When changing government policies in recent years dramatically reduced the number of children living at the former orphanage, our sisters introduced new initiatives at the **Alternative Programs Center** to increase educational opportunities and provide scholarships for young women.

"Our donors' prayers gave us the divine light, wisdom, and courage to start this new program," said Sister Rusbi Aldana. "Their assistance directly benefits these women by providing resources to establish and sustain the center."

Generous funding of scholarships has been a tremendous benefit to the education of students at **San Jose el Tesoro Parish** in Yalpemech, Guatemala. Sister Elena Josefina Felipe helps to identify deserving students enrolled in secondary

or vocational training, who are then eligible to receive a scholarship of half the student's tuition. Generous donations from members of St. Patrick Parish in Hudson, Wisconsin, have funded 25-30 scholarships a year for more than a decade.

Three decades ago, Sisters Carol Jean Ory and Joan McCoy identified a need for reliable childcare for single mothers in the coastal city of Paita, Peru. In response, they opened a center that was so well received that it expanded to become **Santa Clara School**, which today serves children from preschool through high school (below).

Sister Matilde Maravi, who now serves as vice president on our international leadership team, said of the school, "Our sisters don't just educate within the walls of the school, but also through the way we live our lives." Sister Monica Olguin, past director of the school, emphasized, "We want our students to see St. Francis and St. Clare as role models."





A Focus on Wellness and Human Dignity

Health care has been an important ministry since our inception

“The mission and witness of the compassionate healing love of Jesus threads through the history of the School Sisters of St. Francis,” wrote Sister Theresa Marie Jarvis in her *History of the Health Agencies Council Provincial Unit*. “Impressed by experiences of therapeutic bathing facilities and water cures in Europe, Mother Alexia [Hoell] was determined to bring these beneficial treatments to others. In 1893, the community’s first health care facility opened in Milwaukee: Sacred Heart Sanitarium.”

Its success sparked the opening of other agencies in Wisconsin, including St. Mary’s Hill Hospital in Milwaukee (1912), St. Joseph Hospital in Beaver Dam (1938), Waupun Memorial Hospital (1951), Villa Clement Nursing Home in West Allis (1962), and Clement Manor in Greenfield (1982). The community also developed Sacred Heart School of Nursing, which later became the Department of Nursing at Alverno College; and the Sacred Heart School of Practical Nursing. “These agencies covered the spectrum of health care,” Sister Theresa Marie wrote, “including chronic debilitating illness, acute care, mental illness, care of the aged, and rehabilitation.”

Sacred Heart, the inaugural health ministry, has undergone many changes throughout its 130-year history. Author and congregational historian

Sister Barbaralie Stiefermann wrote that what started as a four-story spa with a variety of baths, quickly became nationally renowned for offering the latest medical therapy and physiotherapy “with the comforts of a first-class hotel.”

Beginning in the 1950s, health care in America was shifting its focus to outpatient consultation, rehabilitation, and specialized care for veterans. After much evaluation and consultation, the sanitarium was transformed into Sacred Heart Rehabilitation Hospital. “The hospital opened with 95 beds in 1965,” Sister Barbaralie wrote, “serving clients who had strokes, spinal cord injuries, and orthopedic and neurological disorders. Its focus was to help individuals overcome the effects of their disabilities and regain their maximum level of independence.”

In the 1990s, Sacred Heart’s mission shifted to the care of elderly sisters. Today, the facility provides a continuum of care for our sisters.

At every stage, and through every change, our sisters’ commitment to health ministries has remained the same. As Sister Joyce Fey wrote in *New Dimensions*, “We have the privilege and the challenge to collaborate in creating a society that promotes the humanity and dignity of us all.”

Reaching Out with Loving Care

Across India, sisters provide healing and hope

India is a vast country – indeed, a subcontinent – with daunting terrain, extreme weather, and a wide range of climates. For many people, receiving even routine medical attention can be a challenge both logistically and economically. For those who need acute care or who have experienced trauma, help is often completely out of reach.

When the first Indian sisters who had been ministering in Europe returned as missionaries to their home country in the mid-1970s, reaching out to provide medicine and health care assistance to impoverished people was among the first acts of mercy they performed. With generous support from our donors, these ministries flourished and missions in both North and South Indian provinces expanded exponentially across the country over the ensuing half-century.

One example is **Assisi Clinic** in Kanjikode, where our sisters have converted a former hospital into a women’s college, clinic, and palliative care center. The renovated palliative care unit offers

much-needed, end-of-life care for up to 20 cancer patients and people with other chronic conditions who are not able to be cared for at home.

“Our palliative care relieves suffering by identifying, assessing, and treating physical, psycho-social, and spiritual problems,” said Sister Mercy Mathew Macheril, the clinic’s ministry coordinator. “We prepare these patients for a peaceful death, offering them spiritual nourishment and our prayerful support. We believe that they will be blessed with the comfort they deserve, and experience a greater sense of hope and peace.”

The sisters who staff **Assisi Nivas medical mission in Goreghat** serve an average of 35 patients each day from 25 villages in India’s most impoverished state (left). Critical health services are provided by a registered nurse at the dispensary that is open from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., seven days a week, and another sister, Dr. Alphy Thaikadan, visits monthly to diagnose and treat more complicated cases.



For more than a quarter century, our sisters have provided shelter, food, clothing, medical care, and loving companionship for destitute and abandoned women at **Asha Bhavan** in Bangalore. Some of the women have disabilities and have experienced neglect and even abuse; most of the 17 residents are elderly. They come to the center with nothing, but they receive life-changing care and daily assistance from our sisters. They live out their lives with dignity in a happy, peaceful environment.

Dignified Care: A Sacred Trust

Franciscan principles inform the care of our retired sisters

“We believe that each person is made in the image of God. Therefore, the end of all our efforts is a world in which the dignity of each person is respected.” This criterion for ministry in the School Sisters of St. Francis has guided the congregation’s treatment of others, and is also at the foundation for the community’s Philosophy of Care of Sisterhood.

Our sisters have ministered with and cared for aging persons from the community’s earliest days. We have founded hospitals and care homes, and our sisters have served in numerous roles as caregivers. Drawing on this rich experience, for more than half a century, our sisters have sought to provide the eldest members of our own community with opportunities to engage

in activities that “challenge their potential and fulfill their aspirations as persons and as religious women.”

At **Sacred Heart** in Milwaukee, Executive Director Cathleen Kelling notes that the center’s continuum of care allows the sisters to be as independent as possible at every life stage. “They enjoy the community atmosphere, watching over and tending to each other’s needs,” she said.

That love and devotion are also evident in the quality of care our sisters receive at **Our Lady of the Angels**, our co-sponsored convent in Greenfield, Wisconsin, that offers specialized assistance for sisters who can benefit from memory care services. Sisters receive health care services on site including primary care, therapy services, dental, optometry, podiatry, and lab work. They are also tremendously grateful to be able to continue participating with their sisters in the celebration of the Eucharist in the convent’s chapel.

Our congregation has been blessed that our donors have always been especially generous to our retired sisters, viewing their care as a sacred trust. We have also gratefully received magnanimous support from organizations like The Ryan Foundation and SOAR! (Support Our Aging Religious).

“Caring for the sisters means being attentive to those who have served in ministry for many years, and who continue to volunteer their services into their 80s and 90s,” said Sister Mary Diez, the congregation’s past president. “Our support of the sisters is an offering of gratitude, both for their past contributions and also for their current ministry of prayer and presence.”





Sister Inés with patients at Franciscan Oasis Rieti.



Sister Enelly with a patient at Santa Ana Clinic.

Stepping Up to Offer Healing

Sisters provide health and wholeness in Latin America

Honduras was the first country in Latin America in which the School Sisters of St. Francis ministered. The European sisters who arrived in 1932 found urgent needs related to health and hygiene issues, endless poverty, widespread malnutrition, scarcity of medicines, and a lack of basic education. They took action by staffing a Tegucigalpa hospital's operating room, emergency room, radiology, pharmacy, laboratory work, and by supervising the nurses.

In the nine decades since that inaugural mission, sisters ministering in Latin America have tended to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of the people with whom they minister in myriad ways. Our sisters have lived through revolutions, withstood threats of violence, and accompanied villagers through civil wars and into refugee camps. Sisters have confronted unjust systems and found creative ways to meet human needs amidst economic poverty.

Founded in 1962, **Clinic Santa Ana** serves the needs of the 25,000 residents of La Libertad, Honduras. It has grown in the past two decades from a small clinic into a fully furnished, 24-hour center that includes a pharmacy, laboratory, consulting and waiting rooms, and maternity ward. Generous support continues to be provided by parishioners at St. Luke Catholic Parish in Carol Stream, Illinois.

To care for people who were catastrophically impacted by the violence of Guatemala's 36-year civil war, our sisters founded **Franciscan Oasis Rieti Spirituality and Healing Center**. The center provides low-cost and no-cost natural remedies and physical, psychological, and spiritual healing to people from San Marcos and throughout Guatemala. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, our sisters found creative ways to deliver services and remedies to patients, but they are grateful to be able to return to the personalized, in-person care that their patients find so comforting.

Guided by Sister Joannes Klas and the late Sister Bernadette Kalscheur, parishioners at St. Patrick Church in Hudson, Wisconsin, have aligned with their twinning parish, **San Jose El Tesoro Parish** in Yalpemech, Guatemala, since 1998. On their frequent medical mission trips, St. Patrick parishioners run a clinic for villagers who rarely see government doctors. In addition to receiving medical care, patients also are given dental supplies, eyeglasses, basic medicines and vitamins. The parish has also generously funded scholarships for high school, vocational, and college students. Father John Gerritts, St. Patrick's pastor, observed, "The twinning relationship helps all of us realize that we are part of a universal Church."

Beauty as a Core Value

The visual arts are at the heart of our congregation's heritage

“The arts have been woven into the very fabric of the School Sisters of St. Francis from our earliest days,” Sister Marion Verhaalen wrote in *Alive* magazine in 2011. “The arts within the congregation were the heritage of Mother Alfons Schmid, mystic and lover of beauty in all forms.

“Living with the arts has embedded a core value in the heart of the congregation, thus becoming an essential component in our ministries in education, health care, social work, care of the elderly, pastoral ministry, and the arts.”

Author and historian Sister Barbaralie Stiefermann agrees that “the visual arts were already embedded in the founding of our community. Mother Alfons was a great lover and promoter of the arts. All through the years, artistic ability in an individual has been honored and enhanced.”

Early in the congregation's history, sisters were sent to study with gifted teachers around the world. Sisters Elisabeth Fichtner, Berchmans Schmidt and Johanna Endres were sent to Munich, Germany, to study at the Alte Pinakothek, one of the oldest and most prestigious art galleries in the world, Sister Barbaralie noted.

“Sister Lucinda Hubing went to the University of Notre Dame to study sculpture with the renowned Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrovic. Sister Helena Steffensmeier was featured on *CBS Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt*. Wouldn't these well-seasoned artists, and many others, attract any young aspiring artists to join the School Sisters of St. Francis?”

Sister Barbaralie recalls the feeling of awe she felt when she joined the community as a teenager. “I was deeply impressed to see the large paintings done by our sisters in two beautiful art parlors in the entrance of the building,” she recalled. “I was mesmerized watching sisters painting at their easels under the skylight. We were totally immersed in art as young sisters.”

Later in her ministry, when she became Alfons Gallery's director for more than a decade, Sister Barbaralie said she felt at home because of her previous exposure to the visual arts. “How fortunate I was to enter

into the lives of the many sister artists,” she said. “When I see all the paintings on our walls, I reflect on the lives of those sisters and give thanks for the trail of beauty they left behind for future generations to enjoy.”



The Wood Gatherer (after J. Bastien-Lepage),
Sister Elisabeth Fichtner

Embracing the Artistic Spirit

Sister Elaine Hirschenberger reflects on a welcome, transformative discovery

As a young sister, I was assigned to teach science in a junior high school, although I had absolutely no background in that field. It was a practice in the community at that time to assign sisters to teach where there was a need, whether those needs were well-matched to the sister's training or not. I struggled on weekends to learn enough science to teach the kids during the week.

That was a huge challenge — and, as it turned out, a gift — for me. When I completed that stressful year, I requested a different assignment from the principal. The only other opening at that school was for an art teacher. I thank God that the foundresses instilled a great appreciation in our sisters for the importance of the arts, and that art was a clear priority at that school.

The year I began teaching art was when my life took a radical turn spiritually, communally, and professionally. Following our General Chapter of 1966, as rapid change began within the order, I began a new career path, enrolling in several art classes first at the local community college and then at Northern Illinois University. Art was a joy for me, and I had a natural aptitude for it that grew stronger with instruction. I related very well and learned along with my art students, as I incorporated teaching tips from some of my artistically talented colleagues and classmates.

Three years later, I met Sister Dorothy Bock, who was a talented and prolific artist. She became my art mentor, a colleague in creativity, and a lifelong friend. Eventually, Sister Dorothy joined me at Driscoll High School in Addison, Illinois, where we taught art, English and drama together, directed plays, painted murals and stage sets, and created many multi-media presentations through our collaboration. We also began to envision a new creative ministry that eventually grew into Womanspace, which we launched in 1975.

Nurturing the growth of the Womanspace community in Rockford, Illinois, has been the most important creative work of my life, and I am grateful to so many sisters and community leaders for their belief in this ministry. Mentoring others and supporting the spirituality, life process, and creative development of thousands of Womanspace women and men continues to be my privilege. Womanspace is a recognized leader in Rockford's vibrant arts community. Our community's long history of support for the arts, and the way that Womanspace manifests that heritage, feels like a perfect match.



Gift, Presence, Symbol of Celebration, Expression of Faith

These pages offer the smallest of glimpses into the incredibly rich and varied visual artistic expression embraced by our sisters. We invite you to follow our Facebook page, where we share examples of our sisters' art each evening: www.facebook.com/schoolsistersofstfrancis



Sedes Sapientae,
Sister Helena Steffensmeier



White Daisies and Red Hydrangea,
Sister Gwen Floryance



Mandala about Jesus, Sister Lucinda Hubing



Flowers in a Vase, Sister M. Sancia Weis



The Good Shepherd,
Sister Marjmarie Zuiker



Purple Flowers, Sister Jane Elyse Russell



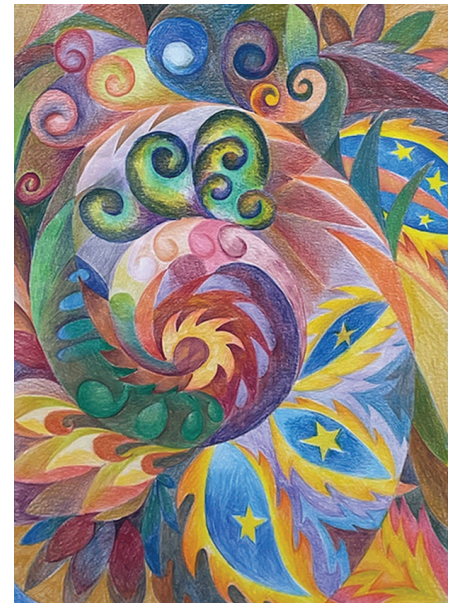
Zunil, Sister Patricia Michaelin Woeckner



The Peasant Setting, Sister Ambrosina Mayr



Transformation, Sister Dorothy Bock



Celebration, Sister Janet Petersen



Mountain Landscape, Sister Gloria Fewes



Orange Day Lillies, Sister Roberta Klesener



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Celebrate 150 Years of Ministry on April 28, 2024

We invite our supporters and mission partners to “save the date” and plan to join our sisters and associates for a Mass to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the founding of the School Sisters of St. Francis on Sunday, April 28, 2024. This anniversary liturgy will take place in our historic St. Joseph Chapel in Milwaukee.

Joining the celebration will be the leadership teams from our international congregation’s Latin American and European regions, and our North Indian, South Indian, and United States provinces. Immediately following the Mass, there will be an opportunity to meet and visit with these sisters at a festive reception.

We look forward to being able to mark 150 years of life-changing missions in the company of our friends, whose generosity makes our ministry possible! Watch for complete details about this historic occasion in the Spring 2024 issue of *Alive* magazine.

