



T E N N E S S E E

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Photo by Rick Musacchio

Sister Maris Stella Mogan, left, and Sister Mary Gemma Marlowe exchange a sign of peace during Mass at the Sisters of Mercy convent on Pennington Bend Road in Nashville. The Sisters of Mercy first arrived in Nashville in 1866 and went on to teach in Catholic schools from one end of the state to the other. They also were involved in a host of other ministries, including health care and serving the poor. Although at one time the largest community of women religious in Tennessee, the Mercy Sisters today have 34 sisters living and serving in the three dioceses of the state, including many who are retired.



A sister's story

Since the days when the Diocese of Nashville was still considered the frontier, women religious have worked side by side with priests and lay people to build and nurture Catholic culture in Tennessee.

Whether they were teaching children the faith in isolated rural schoolhouses or gritty inner-city neighborhoods, caring for the sick and the elderly, feeding and clothing the poor and the hungry, women religious have had – and continue to have – a lasting impact on the diocese and its people.

As the diocese heads toward the 175th anniversary of its founding next July, the *Tennessee Register* is looking at various aspects of life in the diocese. This month's installment in the continuing series is about the women religious who have served in the diocese. To learn more, see the stories and photographs on pages 10-15. For other articles in the series on the 175th anniversary, visit www.dioceseofnashville.com. ☩

Donation funds work on Ryan chapel, fieldhouse

FROM STAFF REPORTS

Nashville businessman and philanthropist Jim Carell has opened his checkbook yet again to help a Catholic school.

After donating millions of dollars for the athletic complex and football stadium at Father Ryan High School, the athletic complex and a locker room renovation at Pope John Paul II High School, the new gymnasium at Christ the King School, and the nursing program at Aquinas College, among other projects, Carell is donating

\$3.5 million to Father Ryan to help pay for the renovation of the school's chapel and an expansion of its athletic fieldhouse.

"We are extremely grateful to Mr. Carell for this generous gift, another example of his commitment to Catholic education for this community," said Jim McIntyre, president of Father Ryan. "We are also grateful for all our donors and for the support of Bishop David Choby (a 1965 graduate of Ryan) in this exciting and challenging endeavor."

Carell's donation is a challenge gift for the project and several families have

pledged additional funds, McIntyre said. He is still seeking additional donors for the project, which is estimated to cost a total of more than \$4 million, McIntyre added.

The renovations to the St. James Chapel, named in honor the late Bishop James Niedergeses, a Ryan alumnus, include roof repair to protect the interior, new lighting to showcase the building at night, and interior enhancements.

"Our Catholic faith is the reason for our very existence, and this work reflects that," McIntyre said. "The renovation of

the chapel makes complete the most important building at Father Ryan and communicates to all our students and families its central role in our mission."

Work on the chapel will begin this fall and is expected to be completed by early January 2012.

The chapel has had problems with leaks virtually since Ryan opened its campus on Norwood Drive in the early 1990s.

The goal of the chapel renovation is to make it "not only air and water tight but congruent with the rest of the campus,"

Continued on next page

Women religious leave lasting impact on diocese

ANDY TELLI

When Richard Miles, O.P., was installed as bishop of the brand new Diocese of Nashville, his sprawling diocese had no parishes, no priests, and precious few Catholics. Traveling on horseback from one corner of Tennessee to the other, he set about the task of building a diocese. In 1842 he brought to Nashville six Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Ky., to help him.

The sisters established an academy for girls, "which flowered into almost instant success," wrote Thomas Stritch in his book *"The Catholic Church in Tennessee: The Sesquicentennial Story."*

As the years turned to decades and eventually more than a century, more religious sisters followed the Sisters of Charity to Tennessee: Dominicans, Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of St. Joseph Carondelet, Franciscans, Precious Blood Sisters, Good Shepherd Sisters, Ursuline Sisters, Daughters of Charity, Little Sisters of the Poor, Blessed Sacrament Sisters, Poor Clare Nuns, Sisters of Notre Dame, Sisters of the Immaculate Heart, School Sisters of St. Francis, Salvatorian Sisters, Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Sisters for Christian Community, Sisters of Divine Providence and Sacred Heart Sisters from Mexico.

They came to educate children, to care for the sick, to tend to the elderly, to serve the poor. They opened hospitals and orphanages and schools. They have served in poor urban neighborhoods, wealthy suburbs and quiet farming communities. They have braved war, bankruptcy and disease to follow their charism. Their ministry has touched Catholics in every corner of the state.

"They really practiced what they preached," Father Philip Breen, pastor of St. Ann Church in Nashville, recalled of the Sisters of Mercy who were his teachers as a child at Christ the King School.

Although some orders are long gone from the diocese and the state, their legacy endures as they continue to help shape Catholic culture in Middle Tennessee.

No single community of women religious encompasses the experience of all women religious in the Diocese of Nashville across nearly 175 years, but several are representative, including the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia Congregation, Sisters of Mercy, Daughters of Charity and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Here are some of their stories.

Dominicans

Bishop James Whelan, O.P., the second bishop of Nashville, wanted to open a Catholic school in the city, so he turned to his fellow Dominicans at St. Mary Convent in Somerset, Ohio for help.

In August 1860, the community sent four sisters to Nashville – Sister Columba Dittoe, Sister Philomena McDonough, Sister Lucy Harper and Sister Frances Walsh – who established St. Cecilia Academy and a new congregation.

Both the school and the congregation took root on a hill overlooking downtown Nashville on property known as Mount Vernon Gardens. One hundred and fifty-one years later, they are flourishing.

The Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia Congregation, known across the coun-



Bishop William Adrian breaks ground for the new Dominican campus schools on Harding Road in 1956.



This photo, taken in 1860, is the oldest known photograph of the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia Congregation. The Dominican Sisters are one of the longest serving religious orders in the Diocese of Nashville.

try and around the world as the Nashville Dominicans, now have 274 sisters and 16 postulants, the largest number ever. The sisters teach in schools across the United States and in Sydney, Australia, and – new this year – Vancouver, British Columbia.

"All that we're about is taking the Lord wherever we can. That's what we're all about. That's what the church is about," said Mother Ann Marie Karlovic, O.P., the prioress general of the congregation.

But in the early days, there were grave doubts that the small community would survive.

By the spring of 1861, St. Cecilia Academy was full with young women from Nashville and beyond. The sisters decided to move ahead with construction of a new building, but the Civil War began later that summer and financial hardships for the sisters and their school soon followed.

In 1867, the school, convent and all the sisters' personal property were sold at public auction to repay the congrega-

tion's debts. Nashville Bishop Patrick Feehan stepped in to save them, buying everything, assuming the sisters' debt and remortgaging the property.

It took nearly two decades for the congregation to put its finances on sound footing.

In the meantime, the congregation's ministry was expanding. In 1864, they took charge of St. Mary's Orphan Asylum in Nashville. In 1876, they branched out to Chattanooga to assume responsibility for Notre Dame School. The growing congregation soon after began to take responsibility for more parochial schools, such as the former St. John School in the Edgefield neighborhood of Nashville, St. Mary's in Clarksville, St. Mary's in Jackson, Assumption School in Nashville, Sacred Heart, St. Joseph and Nativity in Memphis, and Winchester Academy in Winchester, Tenn.

In the early 20th century, the Nashville Dominicans began to venture outside Tennessee to operate schools in Monmouth, Ill., Virginia, Chicago and Cincinnati.

Over the years the Dominicans expanded to other schools across the country, and bought property on Harding Road in West Nashville, which became the site of the Dominican Campus, home to Overbrook School, the relocated St. Cecilia Academy and Aquinas College.

Through the 1980s, most of the sisters in the congregation were natives of Tennessee, women who had been taught by earlier generations of Nashville Dominicans.

Before she joined the congregation, Mother Ann Marie was taught by the Dominicans at the old St. Thomas High School in Memphis.

"I guess it was their joy," that attracted Mother Ann Marie to the Dominicans, she said. "They were joyful. The Christian life is joyful, because it's from Christ."

After the Second Vatican Council, the Dominicans' numbers began to dwindle, but, unexpectedly, that trend began to reverse itself in the late 1980s, Mother Ann Marie said.

"Young women just began to appear from different places," Mother Ann Marie said. "We didn't really teach in those places. It was just an interesting blessing."

Today, Dominican sisters come from every region of the country, as well as Canada, Australia and, this year for the first time, Ireland.

As their numbers began to climb, so did the requests from bishops for the Dominicans to come to their dioceses to run schools.

"It's actually impossible to meet all the requests," Mother Ann Marie said. "We don't have some sort of plan of where we'll go next," she said. Instead the congregation keeps a file of the requests and when they have sisters available who would be a good fit, "that's where we go next."

Currently, the congregation operates schools in the dioceses of Nashville,

Knoxville, Memphis, Arlington, Va., Birmingham, Ala., Charleston, S.C., Joliet, Ill., Lafayette, Ind., Providence, R.I., and Richmond, Va., as well as the archdioceses of Atlanta, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Denver, New Orleans, St. Louis, St. Paul and Minneapolis, Washington, D.C., Sydney, Australia, and Vancouver.

To accommodate the congregation's growth, the Dominicans completed a \$45 million expansion and renovation of their motherhouse in 2006. This year, the sisters have added furniture in the chapel to make room for the still expanding numbers, Mother Ann Marie said.

"There is always room for new life," she said of welcoming new sisters each year. "It helps us to remember our own call. ... It calls us back into the love we had at first, to the ideals we had at first."

Sisters of Mercy

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Bishop Feehan invited the Sisters of Mercy to his diocese to open its first parish school. From that first school, St. Mary School in downtown Nashville near the state Capitol, the Mercy Sisters fanned out across the state, teaching in nearly every corner of the diocese.

But the Mercy Sisters did not confine themselves to education. Throughout their long history in Tennessee, they have met needs wherever they presented themselves, serving in parishes as pastoral associates, operating hospitals, ministering to prisoners, caring for young mothers and AIDS patients.

"There were a lot of needs," said Sister Suzanne Stalm, RSM. "We were blessed to have sisters to fulfill them."

The common thread running through all these ministries is compassion, said Sister Suzanne. "Mercy and hospitality," added Sister Judith Coode, RSM.

Compassion, mercy and hospitality have been at the core of the Mercy Sisters' mission since they there founded by Mother Catherine McAuley in Dublin in 1831.

Besides the typical vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, "we take a

fourth vow of service," said Sister Judith. The recipient of their service is "always the poor, the sick and the uneducated," she added.

In Tennessee, the Mercy Sisters started with schools.

Six sisters from the community in Providence, R.I., answered Bishop Feehan's invitation and arrived in Nashville on Halloween in 1866, and went to work at St. Mary's School just a few days later. The school was quickly bustling, and in 1867 the school was moved to a new, three-story building on Vine Street and had an enrollment of 400. The following year, Bishop Feehan purchased the Campbell Mansion for the sisters to open their second school, St. Bernard Academy, which is still operating today as an independent Catholic school.

Not only were the energetic Mercy Sisters attracting students to their schools, they were attracting more women to their order, including Bishop Feehan's sister Alice. Over the years,

more and more Tennessee women joined the Mercy Sisters, which established a new community with its motherhouse in Nashville.

As the number of Mercy Sisters in Tennessee grew, so did the number of schools where they taught. Since their arrival in Tennessee, they have taught at schools in Memphis, Jackson, Dayton, McEwen, Elizabethton, Knoxville, Loretto, Lawrenceburg, Johnson City, Columbia, Kingsport, Springfield, Alcoa, and several schools in Nashville, including their own St. Bernard Academy, the old St. Joseph, which was located where the Nashville Electric Service building now stands, St. Patrick, the former Cathedral School, St. Ann, Christ the King, St. Edward and Holy Rosary.

And where the sisters served, they found young women inspired by their mission to serve.

Sister Suzanne was an eighth grader in Memphis in the early 1960s when she and her mother visited Immaculate Conception High School, which was run by the Mercy Sisters, to enroll her. It was the first time she met the school's principal Sister Adrian Mulloy, RSM, who died in 2010.

"She didn't walk, she floated," Sister Suzanne said. "She was the most beautiful person I'd ever seen."

While a student at Immaculate Conception, Sister Suzanne met Mercy Sisters "who were really interested in me."

After graduating from Immaculate Conception in 1965, Sister Suzanne joined the community. "I entered the community because I love God and I wanted to serve other people. I've been in the community 45 years. That is not the reason that I stayed," Sister Suzanne said. "The reason I stayed is because I became aware of how much God loves me."

Father Breen has similar recollections of the Sisters of Mercy who taught him at Christ the King School. "The dedication of the sisters was absolutely outstanding. They really cared for the kids," he said. "They went out of their way to help. They were teachers, but they also were pastorally oriented."

"We felt like we were somebody," Father Breen added. "They made us feel

like we were the children of God."

At their peak, there were about 120 Mercy Sisters in Tennessee, the largest community in the state at the time. But, like other communities of women religious, their numbers started to fall in the 1970s. The Mercy Sisters no longer operate any parish schools in the state and sold their flagship school, St. Bernard Academy, an all-girls high school. But the school continues to operate today as an elementary school that maintains the Mercy mission, as does Immaculate Conception in Memphis, also now under lay leadership, Sister Judith noted.

"We made a deliberate effort to share our charism with the lay teachers in our schools so they could carry it on after we left," Sister Judith said.

And sisters have moved on to other ministries, such as working in parishes, working with the poor, working in hospitals. They have established a retreat ministry at the Mercy Convent on Pennington Bend Road in Nashville, and the 17 retired sisters who live there, continue a ministry of prayer, said Sister Judith, the coordinator of community life at the convent. Sister Judith said she receives calls every day from people asking the sisters to pray for them, which the sisters are happy to do.

Though retired, Sister Judith said, "They're still sisters."

Daughters of Charity

The Daughters of Charity didn't come to Nashville to be teachers. They were invited by Bishop Thomas Byrne to realize his dream of opening a Catholic hospital.

But when they arrived in 1898 to open Saint Thomas Hospital, they brought with them not only their skill in administering hospitals, but their mission to serve the poor and their knack for organizing lay people to join them in that mission.

Their legacy continues to leave a deep imprint on the community through Saint Thomas, ranked as one of the top hospitals in the country, their work serving the poor through Catholic Charities' North Nashville Outreach, and the Nashville Chapter of the Ladies of Charity, which for more than 100 years has put the Catholic mission of helping the needy into action.

"Every community has a different charism," said Sister Sally Lessnau, D.C., the sister servant, or local superior, of the community of Daughters in Nashville. "Ours is to seek out the poor where we find them, to serve those no one else is serving."

The Daughters were founded in 1633 by St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac to serve the poor of Paris. Their mission quickly expanded to include educating children and caring for the sick, all ministries the Daughters have devoted themselves to in Nashville since their arrival.

Saint Thomas Hospital provides about \$40 million a year in charity care, and the hospital operates several clinics and programs to provide health care to the poor and the homeless.

Since its founding in 1981, the Daughters

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Mother Mary Clare McMahan, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy in Tennessee, is pictured above at St. Bernard Convent in Nashville. Bishop Thomas Byrne's residence, left, was later used as a convent for the Sisters of Mercy in the early 20th century. The Sisters of Mercy arrived in Nashville in 1866, and have been a continuous presence in schools and other social justice ministries since then.

Life of women religious is 'transforming into something new'

ANDY TELLI

The Second Vatican Council was a fulcrum of change for the Catholic Church. It was no different for women religious.

The charge of the council was renewal, and council fathers urged orders to examine the life of their communities in light of the spirit and vision of their founders. From this common starting point, women religious found themselves following different paths. Nearly 50 years later, women religious are still assessing where they stand and where they are headed.

"We don't know where the future will take us, but the Sisters of Mercy are a community like many other communities in the United States," said Sister Suzanne Stalm, RSM, coordinator of the retreat ministry at the Mercy Convent on Pennington Bend Road in Nashville. "Leadership made the best decisions they could make at the time. Today, we try to make the (best) decisions we can. We pray for discernment. The rest is left up to God."

Process of renewal

The process of renewal in the wake of Vatican II led some religious orders to new ways to organize their communities, new ministries, new forms of dress and a new outlook on their relationships with each other, the people they served and the church. For others the process of renewal became a reaffirmation of their traditions.

"We need to change our understanding of religious life," said Sister Sandra Smithson, a School Sister of St. Francis who established the Project Reflect educational enrichment program and the Smithson Craighead Academy charter school after returning to her hometown of Nashville. "Baptism calls everyone to religious life. Whether they're called to vows is up to them."

The profession of religious vows is not a sacrament, said Sister Suzanne. "The sacrament connected to our vocation is baptism."

"We really have the same call as people who are not religious," she added. "We take vows but we're not clergy. We are lay people."

For the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia Congregation in Nashville, the process of renewal after Vatican II focused on "going back to your heritage, to your founder, to your charism, that which is really life-giving," said Mother Ann Marie Karlovic, O.P. "We wanted to be faithful to our charism, to deepen our religious life, to deepen our prayer life."

While the Sisters of Mercy, the School Sisters of St. Francis and other orders embraced the changes that came with renewal, the Dominicans saw it as an opportunity to hold fast to their traditions, such as the traditional habit and the emphasis on living and praying as a community.

In the years since Vatican II, vocations for most communities of women religious dropped significantly. But the Dominicans and others like them have defied those trends and are actually growing.

From 1965 to 2011, the number of religious sisters in the United States has fallen 69 percent, from 179,954 to 55,944. However, the Nashville Dominicans are one of the few congregations whose membership has been exploding in recent years. They currently have 274 sisters and 16 postulants, the largest number in the



Sister Mary Thomas, O.P., principal of St. Cecilia Academy, talks to student ambassadors about their role at last year's Founders Day, part of the Dominicans Sisters' 150th anniversary celebration.

Tennessee Register file photo by Andy Telli



Sister Sandra Smithson, SSSF, hugs a student at Smithson Craighead Academy, Metro Nashville's first public charter school, which she founded in 2003 with her sister, Mary Craighead. Sister Sandra was educated by St. Katharine Drexel's Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, and has dedicated her life and ministry to educating at-risk children.

Tennessee Register file photo by Theresa Laurence

congregation's 151-year history, Mother Ann Marie said.

According to recent studies, a large majority of women joining religious orders today are looking for the characteristics of communities like the Dominicans.

"The most successful institutes in terms

of attracting and retaining new members at this time are those that follow a more traditional style of religious life in which members live together in community and participate in daily Eucharist, pray the Divine Office, and engage in devotional practices together. They also wear a re-

ligious habit, work together in common apostolates, and are explicit about their fidelity to the Church and the teachings of the Magisterium," wrote Sister Mary E. Bendyna, RSM, and Mary Gautier of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University in their 2009 study "Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference."

"The young people have high ideals, they want to give themselves totally to the Lord," Mother Ann Marie said.

"A real Christian lifestyle is radical," she said, whether living it as a married person, a single person, a priest or religious. "That's what these women are looking for," Mother Ann Marie said of the sisters who come to the Dominicans from every corner of the country and beyond. "They want to give of themselves. They want to live in a radical way."

'A privileged class'

Others don't see the traditional habit or living in large communities as necessary for the radical Christian lifestyle. In fact, they argue, those things can make it harder to live out their order's charism.

"We had become a privileged class because of this clerical dress," Sister Sandra said. "Christ said don't be like the Pharisees dressing to receive the honor of men. That habit makes us receive the honor of men. Let me tell you something, it does."

For the Sisters of Mercy, the decision to modify the habit was born of the order's foundation, Sister Suzanne explained.

When Catherine McAuley founded the order in 1831, the sisters wore the dress of the day, and the Mercy Sisters wanted to get back to the spirit of the order's beginnings, said Sister Judith Coode, RSM, the coordinator of community life at the Mercy Convent in Nashville.

But the ultimate decision about the habit was left to the individual sisters; some chose to continue to wear a veil, others to dress as a lay person and at least one sister kept wearing the traditional

habit, Sister Suzanne said. "We returned to the dress of the day in stages. Look around the Mercy Convent and you'll see the stages," she said with a smile.

In her study, Gautier found a generational difference on the question of the habit. The new sisters in the Vatican II Generation, born between 1943 and 1960, were less likely to think the habit was important than the Millennial Generation, born in 1982 or later.

The younger sisters didn't grow up with women religious wearing the habit, so it has a different connotation and a different attraction, Gautier said.

Older sisters saw the habit as a negative, she said, because they wanted to be in solidarity with the laity.

"Today, I appreciate not standing out. We are laity," said Sister Suzanne, who entered the Mercy Sisters in 1965, just a year before the community adopted the modified habit.

But Mother Ann Marie doesn't see the habit as a barrier between the sisters and lay people, rather it's a reminder to both the sister who wears it and those she encounters that everyone is called to live a life dedicated to God. "Our lives complement each other," she said. "We kind of call each other to fidelity."

A similar dynamic was at work over the question of living in community.

"Living in community is part of the gift of religious life," Mother Ann Marie said. "We develop and grow through our social interaction with each other. ... You grow because there's a sacrifice as well as a gift when you live in community."

Sister Judith, who grew up in a large Nashville Catholic family, enjoys living with a larger group of her religious sisters - 17 live at the Mercy Convent. But for the Mercy sisters working in parish ministry, "because it's so all encompassing, there is a necessity in living close, particularly as Nashville has grown," said Sister Suzanne. "I'm not sure our spiritual relationship with God depends on place."



Tennessee Register file photo by Theresa Laurence
Sister Sherry Barrett, DC, visits with a patient and her newborn at Baptist Hospital. Sister Sherry is the first Daughter of Charity to work at Baptist since St. Thomas Health Services acquired the hospital in 2002. She provides translation services and a comforting presence to Hispanic patients, primarily those in the labor and delivery unit.

Statistical illusion

The drop in numbers of women religious may be a bit of a statistical illusion, Sister Suzanne said. Membership in religious orders peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, so the current numbers are more of a return to the historical average, she said.

Part of the reason for that peak in vocations has its roots in the history of Catholic culture in the United States,

Gautier said.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the majority of American Catholics were clustered in immigrant communities and ethnic enclaves in the Northeast and Midwest, Gautier said. "All your neighbors were Catholic, you went to Catholic schools and you didn't associate with anyone who wasn't Catholic." Also, she added, there weren't as many opportunities for women as there are today.

In that kind of environment, there was a lot of prestige to becoming a woman religious or priest, Gautier said.

But as the Catholic population became more assimilated into the broader American culture, they began to move out of the Catholic enclaves "that were so protective and so nurturing of Catholic culture."

And the prestige of a life in the church has diminished, Gautier said. "Research now shows parents are very likely to discourage young people from a vocation."

"What we have is just a transformation in Catholic culture and Catholic life. It appears to be in decline because we're comparing it to a peak time," Gautier said. "It's not that religious life is going away, it's transforming into something new."

'A wonderful time'

There is still a role for women's religious orders, said Sister Sandra, if people understand that role is one of service. "The word sister is there because now the whole world is my family."

Belonging to a community relieves women of certain responsibilities so they can be more fully in service to the greater community around them, she added.

The decline in vocations can be a hopeful sign if it means "the whole church will accept its role as a priestly people," Sister Sandra said.

"There is a real need for the life of consecration in today's world," Mother Ann Marie said. It's a reminder that "God has to come first in everybody's life."

"Every religious community has its own charism, that's the beauty of the different communities and orders," Mother Ann Marie said.

Although much of the news about the church seems to be bad, she said, "everything is not so bad. ... The church is alive and well and filled with the Holy Spirit. There is great good that is happening. It is a wonderful time actually." ✦



Tennessee Register file photo by Rick Musacchio
Sister Mary Diana, O.P., leads a choir of Dominican sisters during a Mass celebrating the new chapel and a major renovation to the order's Motherhouse in 2006. The Nashville-based Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia Congregation are among the fastest growing religious orders in the country.

50 years as Daughter of Charity 'an exciting adventure'

ANDY TELLI

When Sister Sally Lessnau, D.C., joined the Daughters of Charity 50 years ago, she wanted to work with the poor, not be a teacher. "What happened? I've spent half my life as a teacher," she said with a laugh.

Sister Sally, who works as a caseworker at Catholic Charities North Nashville Outreach program, marked her golden jubilee as a Daughter on Aug. 11. On Aug. 13, she, the four other Daughters working in Nashville and friends of the order celebrated the jubilee with a Mass celebrated by Father Al Merz, OFM, and by going out to dinner afterwards.

Sister Sally grew up in Detroit and as a child read about the Daughters carrying pots of soup through the streets of Paris to

feed the poor. "That's the kind of sister I want to be," she decided, and after graduating from high school in 1960 she entered the order as a postulant. She was accepted as a Daughter in 1961.

Her first assignment was as a teacher at a large Catholic elementary school in Youngstown, Ohio. But she found a way to serve the poor by working in jail ministry during the school year and spending her summers working with migrant workers in Michigan and Washington, D.C., inner city youth.

After 12 years in Youngstown, Sister Sally was assigned to a small school in Gulfport, Miss. While there she would hear other sisters talking about their work in parishes. "That's where I wanted to be," she said.

Her wish was granted and her next assignment was in Hunting-

burg, Ind., where she worked in a parish running a catechetical program for 500 students and working with the parish food pantry.

She returned to Mississippi, first to work as a pastoral assistant in a small parish and with the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and later at the Sacred Heart Southern Mission in Walls, Miss., working with the poor. "I loved it."

In 1998, she came to Nashville to teach at St. Vincent de Paul School, and in 2004 left that assignment to join the staff at North Nashville Outreach.

"I am grateful to God for 50 golden years as a Daughter of Charity and for many years of service to the needy as a teacher, pastoral assistant, (director of religious education) and a social service worker," Sister Sally said. "It's been an exciting adventure!" ♣



Photo by Andy Telli

Sister Sally Lessnau, D.C., is a caseworker at North Nashville Outreach, which has a food pantry, clothes, bus passes and some financial assistance to help the poor. She recently celebrated the 50th jubilee of her joining the Daughters of Charity.

Sister Judith Coode retiring as Mercy community life coordinator

Bishop David Choby will celebrate a Mass on Monday, Aug. 29, to mark the upcoming retirement of Sister Judith Coode, RSM, the community life coordinator for the Sisters of Mercy in Nashville.

The Mass will be at 4 p.m. at the Sisters of Mercy convent on Pennington Bend Road.

A native of Nashville and a graduate of the old Cathedral School, where she was taught by the Sisters of Mercy, Sister Judith joined the order in 1955. She served as an elementary school educator for 32 years at St. Joseph School and Blessed Sacrament School, both in Memphis, St. Joseph School

in Knoxville, Holy Rosary Academy in Donelson and St. Bernard Academy in Nashville. She also served as principal at St. Ann School in Nashville.

In 1994, she was appointed administrator of the Mercy Convent, which today is home to 17 retired sisters.

In 2009, she was appointed community life coordinator.

Her retirement will be effective at the end of August, but she plans to continue to help at the convent. Succeeding Sister Judith as community life coordinator will be Sister Beth Higgins, RSM, who will move from Cincinnati to Nashville. ♣

Photo by Rick Musacchio

Sister Judith Coode, RSM, talks with other Sisters of Mercy before a recent weekday Mass at their Pennington Bend Road convent in Nashville.



Sisters of Mercy open convent doors for retreats of all kinds

THERESA LAURENCE

The Nashville-based Sisters of Mercy didn't set out to establish a retreat ministry when they moved to their Pennington Bend convent in 1991. But after a few years, people started calling and asking about retreats, and the sisters graciously answered the call.

For almost a decade, retreats were an informal ministry of the Sisters, but in 2006, "we decided to make it formal," said retreat coordinator Sister Suzanne Stalm, RSM.

Sister Suzanne coordinates and leads retreats, and helps groups with the details of their stay. A website showcases their facilities and outlines retreat options and prices.

The Pennington Bend facility, which also serves as a retirement home for 17 Sisters of Mercy, is one of about 15 Mercy retreat centers around the country. Groups of up to 30 can be accommodated for a day

retreat at Pennington Bend, and a maximum of 17 can participate in overnight retreats. A chapel, conference room, library, and nine wooded acres are also available to retreat participants.

"It's a wonderfully quiet place," said Sister Kathleen Flood, O.P., who has led retreats at the Mercy convent. "It invites someone to go easily into a deeper place," she said.

The Sisters of Mercy open the doors of their Pennington Bend convent to 1,000 people annually. "The sisters in this house are following very directly in the footsteps of Catherine McAuley," said Sister Suzanne.

Mother Catherine McAuley, who founded the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin in 1831, began with a single house, open to the poor and needy. "Her focus was compassion and hospitality," Sister Suzanne said, and that is what the Mercy Sisters at Pennington Bend continue to offer to their guests today.

The convent hosts many types of retreats, from silent, individual retreats to priests' assemblies and parish RCIA retreats. It is also not limited to specifically Catholic groups. The Hope Clinic for Women, a non-profit pregnancy support organization, will hold an upcoming retreat there.

Over the last two-and-a-half years, Kasey Hitt has led many retreats for members of the Mt. Juliet based Providence United Methodist Church. She plans six silent retreats a year at the Mercy convent, from about seven to 15 people each time. "Their kindness, welcoming presence and gracious spirit at the facility is so inviting," Hitt said of the Sisters.

"Silent retreats can be a scary prospect for people and they offer a safe and beautiful place" to experience that, she added.

Hitt, who received spiritual direction from a Sister of Mercy when she lived in Seattle, learned about the Pennington Bend convent before

moving to Nashville several years ago. When she first proposed the idea to her Methodist congregation of holding retreats at a convent, "people were curious," she said. But it is a good opportunity to "break down some stereotypes," she said.

"Now it's just become part of our church culture" to hold retreats at the Mercy convent, Hitt said, and she almost always receives glowingly positive feedback from retreat participants. "As long as they open their doors for us, we'll be there," she said.

The next scheduled retreat at the Sisters of Mercy convent, "Finding God in All Things," will be presented by Sister Wanda Smith, RSM. It begins at 7 p.m. Friday, Sept. 9, and closes at 3:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 10. The fee is \$50 for an overnight stay and \$10 for commuters. For more information or to register call Sister Suzanne Stalm at (615) 885-1863. More information is also available at www.mercyretreats.org. ♣

Women religious leave lasting impact on diocese

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ters have run the North Nashville Outreach program, which provides assistance with rent, utilities, food, clothing, lunches for the homeless, bus passes so people can get to and from jobs, and other services.

In working with the poor, the Daughters always try to treat people "with great respect," Sister Sally said.

The Daughters first opened Saint Thomas in the former home of Judge J.M. Dickinson on Hayes Street on Easter Monday, April 11, 1898. The first patient was Mrs. W.I. Feasall, the wife of a Baptist minister. The minister said he didn't like Catholics but had heard the Catholic sisters "took good care of the sick."

The hospital's reputation quickly grew and the medical staff was soon urging the Daughters to build a new facility, which opened in January 1902.

The Daughters soon after arriving also involved themselves in prison ministry and organizing a chapter of the Ladies of Charity, which was founded in 1910. The founding of the Ladies of Charity by St. Vincent and St. Louise actually came before that of the Daughters, and they have worked arm in arm as part of the Vincentian family for nearly 400 years, Sister Sally said.

The Daughters have also been involved in education in the diocese. Sister Sally came to Nashville in 1998 with Sister Joanne Cozzi, D.C., to work at St. Vincent de Paul School. As principal, Sister Joanne led a renovation of the school's building and a resurgence in enrollment until she left in 2004 to take a new assignment.

Saint Thomas moved to its current location on Harding Road in 1975. Since its opening in 1898, Saint Thomas has grown from a 26-bed hospital in a converted mansion to the current 541-bed

facility with more than 1,800 employees and 750 physicians on staff. The hospital is part of Saint Thomas Health Services that also includes Baptist Hospital and the Center for Spinal Surgery in Nashville, Middle Tennessee Medical Center in Murfreesboro and Hickman Community Hospital in Centerville.

Because of declining numbers, the Daughters relinquished their role as the chief administrator of their hospitals, and in 1994, John Tighe became the first lay person to be named chief executive officer of Saint Thomas.

Today, the Daughters have five sisters living and working in Nashville.

The future of the Daughters is to make a connection with lay people, inspiring and organizing them to carry on the mission of the order, Sister Sally said. And that's all part of the vision of the order's founders, St. Vincent and St. Louise, she added.

Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament

St. Katherine Drexel and the order she founded, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, literally had to sneak into Nashville.

She was a wealthy heiress and a devout Catholic who in 1890 founded her order to serve blacks and American Indians. Bishop Byrne heard of her order and invited her to come to Nashville to open a school in Holy Family Parish, which he had established in South Nashville to serve the black Catholic community.

Bishop Byrne was anxious to open a school because the Nashville City Council was preparing to replace the city's black high schools with common schools and industrial training. He wrote to St. Katherine: "I feel that if amongst our Colored People, we find individuals gifted with capabilities, with those sterling qualities which constitute character, our Holy Mother, the Church, who fosters and develops the intellect only that it give God



A Daughter of Charity and a nurse care for a newborn baby at St. Thomas Hospital in this undated photo. The Daughters of Charity came to Nashville in 1897 to provide care for the sick. At first they worked out of a converted mansion, known as the St. Thomas Sanitarium, and today operate a 541-bed hospital on Harding Road.

more glory and be of benefit to others, should also concede this privilege to the Negro - this higher education."

St. Katherine came to Nashville to examine property for the new school on Eighth Avenue where the Nashville Rescue Mission is now located, and she and Bishop Byrne viewed the property from a curtained carriage so their plan to buy it would remain a secret.

Once word of the purchase and the intended use of the property leaked out, the previous owner offered to buy it back. But St. Katherine and Bishop Byrne stood firm and in 1905 Immaculate Mother Academy opened with an enrollment of 28 girls.

The school flourished with 100 students by the end of the first year. New buildings were added, boys were added and eventually the lower grades were split off to form Holy Family School.

The Blessed Sacrament Sisters later opened St. Vincent de Paul School in North Nashville to serve the black community. They remained at Immaculate Mother and Holy Family until 1954 when the schools were closed and the students were allowed to transfer to Father Ryan High School and Cathedral School. The sisters left St. Vincent in the 1970s.

Scores of Nashvillians still remember the Blessed Sacrament sisters who were their teachers, including Sister Sandra Smithson, a School Sister of St. Francis,

who attended St. Vincent.

"We weren't shortchanged in the education those sisters provided," said Sister Sandra, who established the Project Reflect educational enrichment program and Smithson Craighead Academy charter school. "They cared about us. And we knew they cared about us. We felt it."

The Blessed Sacrament sisters had high expectations for their students, Sister Sandra said. "They didn't buy into any of that, 'poor little black kids can't really do that.' They believed they had a role in making sure each child actualized their potential completely."

Their attitude was "God has gifted you and you have an obligation to use it. I'm going to make sure you do," Sister Sandra said. "They never took anything less than our best. ... They demanded top notch everything."

After studying under the Blessed Sacrament sisters at St. Vincent and later Immaculate Mother, she went on to Xavier University in New Orleans, which also was founded by St. Katherine Drexel.

"I loved every minute of it," Sister Sandra said of her years with the Blessed Sacrament sisters. "It was a wonderful, wonderful experience with those sisters."

"The church hasn't had any ministry with the black community," she added, "that comes anywhere near what Katherine Drexel did with those schools." ♣



St. Katharine Drexel is pictured in an undated photo with children at Xavier Prep School in New Orleans. She and her order, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, founded several schools in the Diocese of Nashville to serve black students, including St. Vincent de Paul School, which operated from 1933-2009.