Rochester sisters reflect on sesquicentennial celebration

By Beatrice Ganley, SSJ

The events of June 20-25 are hardly current news. Yet for some Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester who attended the Sisters of St. Joseph Federation International gathering that week in St. Louis, Missouri, those events are still making news in their individual lives and in their congregation.

The event — which commemorated the 1836 arrival in St. Louis of six sisters from Lyons, France — was sponsored by the Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph, an organization comprised of the religious congregations that trace their roots to the foundation begun in Carondelet, Missouri, in 1856.

Recently, several members of the Rochester congregation met at their East Avenue motherhouse to reflect upon the St. Louis celebration.

Karen Dietz, who will become a novice this fall, was excited to be in touch with so many Sisters of St. Joseph, especially when she realized that she was meeting women from all over the world. "Even more than that," she commented, "I felt that through them I was also connected with the many persons who were a part of their lives.

"Also, it gave me a sense of hope about the future of religious life," she added. "I am much less afraid to take the second step in membership when I am received into the novitiate in August."

For Sisters Irma Coccia and Mary Jo Flynn, going back to where the first sisters landed was a very powerful experience. "Just think," said Sister Mary Jo, "in 1836, six (sisters) came; in 1986, 1,600 returned, and they represented 14,000 women, all of whom trace their origin back along the SSJ family tree to Carondelet in 1856."

The honored guests and speakers gave a truly international quality to the proceedings. The "French connection" was wellrepresented by Madame Irene Frondas, a direct descendant of the Fontbonne family of Marseilles, France. Mother St. John Fontbonne restored the religious community of St. Joseph after the French Revolution and founded 200 houses in France. She was the superior who sent the missionary sisters to the New World in 1836. Sisters of St. Joseph in Lyons, France, and Francois de Laboulaye, former French ambassador to the United States and president of the Franco-American Official Committee for the Celebration of the Statue of Liberty centennial.

At a deeper level, however, this international element and the sense of unity beneath the cultural barriers led to a deeper understanding of what it means to belong to one human family on this earth. Many of the delegates were deeply affected by this.

"I know I've been different since I've been home," said Sister Elizabeth Anne LeValley, superior of the Rochester congregation. "The presence of Dom Helder Camara (retired archbishop of Recife, Brazil) and what he represents forced me to think about conversion. Our charism of unity calls us to conversion. If each person truly is my brother or sister, and I support systems or allow policies that are causing them to suffer or to enjoy less of the fullness of life than what I have ... well then, what does that mean to me? What implications does it have?"

Several of the delegates spoke of Robert Mueller, chancellor of the International Council of the University of Peace, who has been associated with the United Nations since 1948. They felt that Mueller reinforced the prodding of Archbishop Camara by saying, "We can no longer concentrate on what is good for the United States, but must think in global terms ... What is good for the world is good for the United States."

Sister Katherine Popowich, who has served with Rochester Sisters of St. Joseph in Brazil for the past 20 years, was especially impressed with Clara Yanez, an SSJ from Peru who is now-living in exile in Argentina because of her work among the poor. Sister Clara told the delegates, "Latin America is a burning bush revealing to us that God is on the side of His people. Its voice, clamoring for justice, began to transform religious life in the same way that Moses was changed by his experience in the desert."

The sisters from Latin America narrated how their congregations were transformed through "reading the signs of the times and perceiving God's voice in the anguish, miseries and frustrations of our people. It

d level. Like Moses, we began to break with n, our security." It Sister Agnes Catherine, another Rochester

Also present were representatives from the

International gathering marks order's 150th year

By Sister Martha Mary McGaw-St. Louis (NC) — With peace signs and banners, 1,600 Sisters of St. Joseph marched to the Gateway Arch in St. Louis to celebrate their journey from France'to St. Louis 150 years ago.

The march was the highlight of the sisters' five-day, late June meeting. Delegates participated in lectures, liturgies, art exhibits and other "homecoming" events, including a boat ride on the Mississippi River. From the boat, they released balloons as they passed the order's motherhouse high above the river where the first nuns had arrived.

Representing the more than 13,000 other Sisters of St. Joseph, the sisters marched to the Galeway Arch to pray and hear speeches.

"I didn't know there were this many nuns anywhere," said one passer-by. "And these are all Sisters of St. Joseph."

Sisters from Canada and the United States were joined by delegates from Argentina, France, Japan, Mexico and Peru for the celebration, and speakers emphasized the sisters' role in promoting world peace and justice.

The first six Sisters of St. Joseph in the United States arrived on March 25, 1836, from Lyon, France, with few apparent advantages. They were all under 30, none could speak English, and one had worn the habit only one day.

Today, however, there are more than 15,000 sisters working in some 40 U.S.

dioceses, with 25 congregations in the United States and six in Canada.

was the eruption of the Spirit of God in our

lives, a true conversion at the congregational

The order's French roots were established when congregations began forming in 1648, helping the poor, educating the ignorant, caring for the sick, and performing other spiritual and corporal works of mercy. During the French Revolution, the government wanted to get rid of the sisters threatening to leave schools and hospitals with no staff in the process. Some of the women were murdered.

"They were ordinary women, but by being who they were they changed their environment and the world," said Sister Consuela DeBiase about those earlier members of her order. delegate to the St. Louis gathering, spoke of sensing an awareness of something being stirred up at these meetings, conferences and informal gatherings. She feels a greater appreciation of the SSJ charism of working for the unity of all people with one another and with God.

Already as a result of the St. Louis meeting, sisters have set up a January meeting at which the major superiors of the various congregations in the SSJ Federation will meet to talk about realizing some of the dreams planted in St. Louis. In Canada, the United States and Latin America, for example, congregations will explore the possibilities of greater interchange of personnel, ideas and resources among the members of the federation.

And the call to conversion? The sisters hope that this renewed sense of their history and the inspiration received from women religious in Third World countries will help them to discover what conversion means in their own contexts. Sister Jean Bellini, who has been working in Brazil for several years, commented that in a Third World situation, "it is sometimes easier to change, to assume the cause of the poor, because the contradictions are so blatant." C

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