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How to become a nun or support the sisters

What is a Sister of St. Joseph? A sister is a woman who takes permanent vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and who spends her life ministering to others to make God's love visible. Such a woman must progress through three stages before becoming "permanently professed."

1. An associate spends between one and two years living in community with other sisters while she continues her current work, schooling or ministry.

2. She becomes a novice who spends two years exploring the call to religious life.

3. She becomes a temporary professed sister who takes the three vows of permanent sisters for three to six years, and works full-time in ministry.

Men and women who would like to support the sisters in a special way, but who do not feel called to the vowed religious life, can become an SSJ "agrege," which comes from a French word meaning "companion on the road." Agregees participate in the prayer life of the sisters, workshops, special events and/or some form of volunteer service.

To learn more about becoming a Sister of St. Joseph or an agrege, call 716/586-1000, ext. 122, or e-mail ssjprav@aol.com. You can also learn about the sisters by visiting their Web site at <http://www.ssjvolunteers.org>.

Sisters

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No history of the Rochester Diocese is complete without reference to this order of women who have founded, or played a major role in the founding of, numerous institutions in the diocese, including Nazareth College, Nazareth Academy, Nazareth Hall, Aquinas Institute, St. Ann's Home and St. Joseph's Villa in Rochester, St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira; DeSales High School in Geneva, and numerous diocesan elementary schools. To this day, Sisters of St. Joseph can be found teaching in schools, working in hospitals and clinics, and putting their fingerprints on community service efforts ranging from a credit union in inner-city Rochester to missions in Brazil. They range in age from 28 to 98, and include cookie bakers and publicly known movers and shakers, and, despite their declining numbers, are optimistic about the future, according to their president, Sister Janice Morgan, SSJ.

"We can't always be thinking about what we want," she said when asked about how the sisters will cope with smaller numbers as the years go on. "I think we have to go on and think about what we have."

French bred

The Sisters of St. Joseph began in LePuy, France, as Christian women responding with love to the poverty, hunger and war that surrounded them. Whereas nuns at that time cloistered themselves away from the world, these sisters, inspired by Jesuit Father John Peter Medaille, SJ, and their bishop, endeavored to work among their neighbors. Not wearing habits, they adopted the garments of the poor as their uniform so they could work among their people as they felt St. Joseph had worked for God—in a hidden fashion.

They opened an orphan asylum, and began growing as an order, eventually suffering grave persecution at the hands of French revolutionaries in the 1790s, persecution that led to the order's disbandment. Nine sisters were actually beheaded by the government, and it was only after Napoleon and Pope Pius VII signed a concordat in 1801 that the order was allowed to reestablish itself formally.

When waves of European immigrants



Photo courtesy of SSJ Archives
Sister Benita Travis was received into the congregation in 1891 and died in 1904.



File photo

(From left) Sister Joseph Gilmery, Jeff Leahy, Sister Mary David as identified in original caption.

began reaching American shores, the Sisters of St. Joseph came with them. Fourteen years before the Diocese of Rochester was created, four sisters came to Canandaigua in 1854 at the request of Bishop John Timon, head of the Diocese of Buffalo, which then encompassed the current Rochester Diocese. In Canandaigua, the sisters founded a school and orphanage, a work that foreshadowed the prominent role the sisters would play in the lives of thousands of Catholic children in this diocese. Under Rochester's first diocesan leader, Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid, an avid advocate of Catholic schools, the Sisters of St. Joseph helped to open 23 Catholic schools between 1871 and 1891.

They also opened St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira, as well as several more schools well into the 1940s, including Nazareth College, which they turned over to lay caretakers in 1964. In the 1940s, the sisters opened a mission in Selma, Ala., and their hospital there—which treated blacks when other Southern hospitals didn't—gained national prominence in 1963 for taking in the beaten and bloodied victims of Alabama state police attacks during the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights march to Montgomery. President Lyndon B. Johnson and Rev. King himself later praised the sisters for their unprejudiced attention to those who were injured by police for marching on "Bloody Sunday."

Renewal and revamping

When the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council called for all religious congregations to renew themselves, the Sisters of St. Joseph made certain internal changes, particularly in the area of governance. The sisters adopted a consensus approach to decision-making after decades of utilizing a top-down authority structure in which decisions were made by a few SSJ



John Powell/Photo intern

Margaret Carnahan (left) and Loretta Scahill, members of the St. Ann's Community Bell Choir, take part in a ceremony Oct. 15 to dedicate St. Ann's Chapel to the Sisters of St. Joseph, who founded St. Ann's Community, Irondequoit.

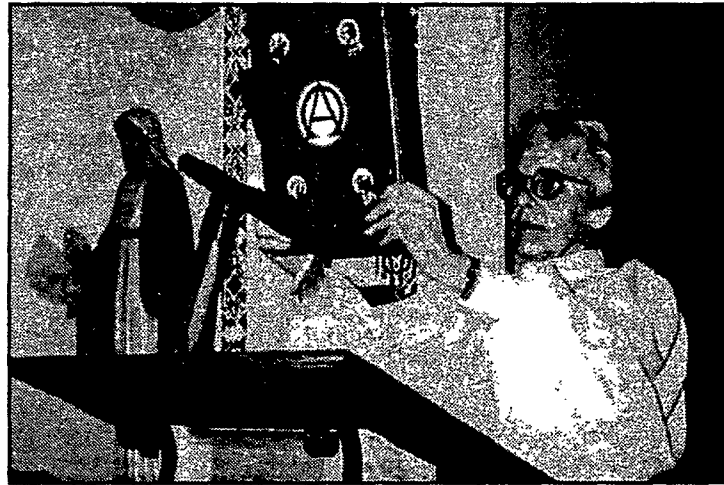


Photo courtesy of SSJ Archives

Sister Anne Michellé McGill, pastoral administrator, St. Gabriel Parish, Hammondsport

The idea for the sale came out of the sisters' 1997 strategic planning process in which the congregation reflected on its future and changes needed. The sisters are currently planning to build a new motherhouse on the remaining land on the back property off French Road. Sister Morgan joked that the sisters are going back to where they came from by relocating to "French" Road.

Indeed, the sisters

have come a long way from their origins in France where their first constitution called for them to "undertake all of which a woman is capable." A woman is capable of a lot when she is united with thousands of other women committed to bearing witness to Christ in the world, noted Sister Mary Anne Laurer, SSJ, the congregation's director of development.

"When I say 'I'm a Sister of St. Joseph, it says something different than when I say 'I'm Mary Anne.'"

She added that every sister is connected to the "communion of saints" in heaven, the sisters who have gone before them and touched thousands of people's lives, by teaching them, healing them and caring for them.

"I entered to do whatever needed to be done," she said. "I continue to remain open to that."

leaders for the congregation.

They also decided to maintain their education and health care ministries; and began expanding into pastoral and social justice work. Since Vatican II, some of the sisters' new diocesan initiatives have been in the areas of work with drug addicted newborns in need of foster care; home services for the elderly and homebound; and free hot meals, health and education programs and neighborhood support groups for low-income city residents. Sister Morgan added that the congregation is currently considering sponsoring a home for people who have had major surgeries and may need specific care afterward that would be difficult to get in their own homes.

Recent changes for the sisters have included the sale of half their land around their motherhouse to Nazareth College.

Events set for Sunday, Oct. 29

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester will celebrate the 350th anniversary of their order's founding in France on Sunday, Oct. 29. The order's 395 members, along with family, friends and acquaintances, will mark the day with the following events:

- 10:30 a.m.: Prayer and lighting of an 1868 oil lamp in front of the historic Saltenstall Street House in Canandaigua. The lamp was made the same year the Diocese of Rochester was founded. Canandaigua was the first community in the diocese to be served by the Sisters of St. Joseph. A horse-drawn carriage will travel from Saltenstall Street to Buffalo Street where a motorcade to Rochester will begin.

- 11:15 a.m.: The motorcade led by some of the sisters in a 1939 Ford Mercury car will travel along Routes 5 and 20, Route 64 and then Route 96 to the sisters' motherhouse and infirmary at 4095 East Ave., Rochester, where prayers will be offered.

- Noon: A bus will leave the motherhouse for Nazareth Academy, 1001 Lake Ave., Rochester.

- 12:15 p.m.: Banner carriers and walkers will assemble at the academy.

- 1 p.m.: Participants will begin to walk down Lake Avenue to Sacred Heart Cathedral, 296 Flower City Park, Rochester.

- 1:30 p.m.: Prelude music begins at the cathedral.

- 2 p.m.: Prayer service at the cathedral will consist of three parts. The first part will focus on the sisters' history in France and Rochester. The second part will include short testimonies from people who have been touched by the order's spirit. The last part will celebrate the future. All three parts will feature drama, dance and music.

- 3:15 p.m.: Reception in the Sacred Heart School Hall.

For information on the celebration, call Lanette Cypher at 716/586-1000, ext. 172.