

Sisters move into new motherhouse



The new Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse on French Road in Pittsford.

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

It was Jan. 30, one day after the Blessed Sacrament had been moved from the old Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse on East Avenue in Pittsford to the new motherhouse on nearby French Road. Sister Mary Anne Laurer, director of mission advancement for the congregation, sat in the new motherhouse cafeteria and recalled her order's old home.

"I think it served its purpose for the time it was needed," she said. "Now that I know this is where we are, and this is where the mission center is, I've kind of let go of it. The heart is here now."

Later that day, Sister Janice Morgan, president of the Sisters of St. Joseph, said she, too, had also let go of the old motherhouse during a final tour after everyone else had moved out.

"As I walked out, I prayed goodbye to the building, and I realized I had never been alone in the building in my whole life," she said. "The memories will always be there. The fun we had, the works we did, the training that we went through. Those are wonderful memories."

A veteran religious of 67 years' service said she was "euphoric" to be in her new home. Sister Francis Cecilia sat smiling away before the fireplace in a community room at the new motherhouse and noted that the old motherhouse on East Avenue was "adequate," but the new motherhouse was designed for a new era.

"This was planned to advance the ministries as well as to care for the people in every stage of health and age," the 87-year-old nun said.

Sister Cecilia was among more than 140 nuns and several priests who have moved into the new motherhouse over the past few weeks. Nazareth College officially took over the old motherhouse and its neighboring infirmary on Feb. 3.

The old facility had served the sisters since 1928, and was home to hundreds of nuns over the course of its history. Many, including Sister Cecilia, fondly remembered living there during their novitiates before being assigned to other regions of the diocese. She noted that she was the only girl in her family, and had never shared living space with so many other women.

"I had to get used to the fact that I wasn't the center of the universe," Sister Cecilia recalled with a smile.

Rob Enslin, Nazareth College spokesman, said that the college plans to renovate the infirmary as a residence hall by next fall, and expects to create an academic center in the old motherhouse. More than 150 Nazareth College students, mostly from the athletic department, served as volunteer movers on Jan. 18-19, helping the nuns and priests in their move, Enslin added.

The new motherhouse occupies 150,000 square feet, according to April Debes, congregation spokeswoman. It cost \$20 million to build, and was completed in January. Its construction was financed primarily by the sale of the old motherhouse for \$16 million, as well as financing by numerous private donors, she said. She added that the order also sold 70 acres of land to Nazareth and retained 60.

Debes said that the sisters had brought some items from the old motherhouse to place in the new, including several statues and stained-glass windows. Sister Cecilia said she had only brought a few items from the old motherhouse, the most cherished of which was a picture of her late brother, Father Robert J.D. English.

Debes and Sister Morgan said the congregation decided to build a new motherhouse rather than renovate the old one for several reasons. Renovation would have been far more

costly and would have meant moving the congregation's aged nuns in and out several times during the construction period. Meanwhile, with the order's declining number of members, maintaining the old motherhouse was simply impractical, Sister Morgan said.

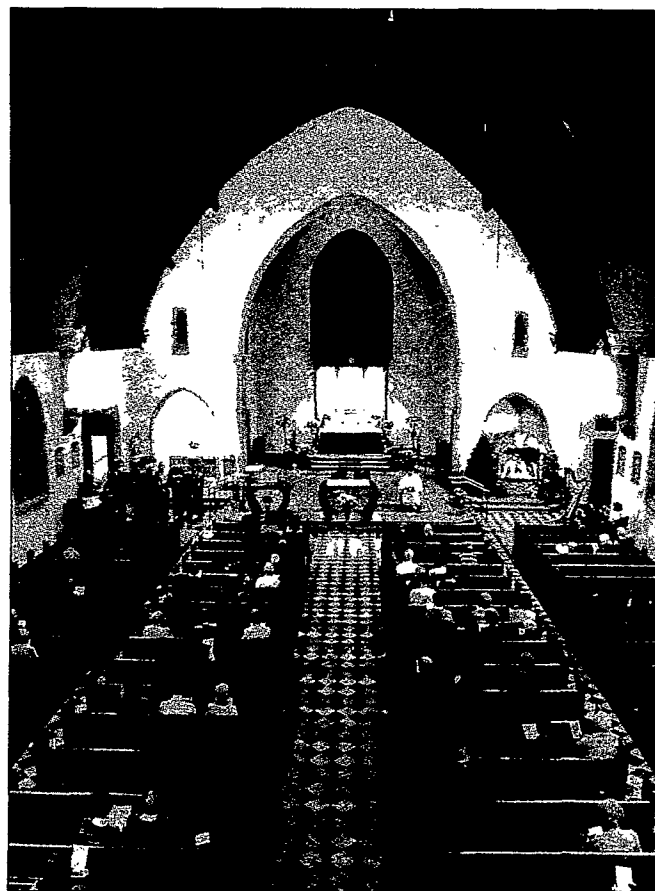
"The building got too big for us," she said. "What this (move) has done is free us up to maintain what is important . . . Our work is in ministry among the people."

The new motherhouse includes two wings, officials said. The east wing is intended as a health center and residence for members in need of various levels of care; the west wing houses sisters who are able to function independently. The motherhouse offices are centralized in the "core area" between the wings, a welcome change from the old motherhouse where offices were located on the far ends of the building, they said.

The east wing contains a ground-floor, enclosed garden for people with Alzheimer's disease, and meets New York state standards for a nursing home. Sister Morgan said the new motherhouse is designed to evolve into a nursing home should the congregation be unable to sustain the numbers necessary to maintain it as a motherhouse.

"Wherever the future takes us, we want to be ready for that future," she said.

Sister Janet Oakes, motherhouse coordinator, and Sister Mary Cumbo, assistant motherhouse coordina-



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

The Sisters of St. Joseph host a prayer service for peace at their motherhouse chapel at 7 p.m. on the first Tuesday of each month. This prayer service Jan. 7 was one of the final ones held at the old motherhouse chapel.

tor, both said they would miss the old motherhouse, but liked the new one.

"I minded very much leaving, but there was a need to do it," Sister Oakes said.

Sister Cumbo noted that the old motherhouse and infirmary were in separate buildings, and that the sisters are now enjoying being in the same structure. She added that she and the other sisters were impressed by how bright the new building is.

"Every bedroom window you can look out and see beautiful nature," Sister Cumbo said.

The coordinators noted that the new motherhouse was designed to be friendly to the congregation's aging members. For example, they said, the old motherhouse chapel had pews whereas the new motherhouse chapel has chairs with padded arms that enable the sisters to raise themselves more easily.

Overall, the sisters said everyone is beginning to grow fond of their new environment. Sister Oakes summed up the feelings of many of the veteran sisters as they settled into their new home.

"The building is different, but we're the same."