

SSJs have served 150 years

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

A Dec. 5 liturgy and reception at St. Mary's Church in Canandaigua will mark the 150th anniversary of service to the Diocese of Rochester by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

But the day's festivities won't be all about looking backward, according to Sister Barbara Staropoli, congregation vice president, who wanted to make clear that the Sisters of St. Joseph are still alive and well.

"I don't want people to just celebrate a cold day in 1854," she said. "We have no signs in our congregation, except for demographics, that we're slowing down."

The congregation currently numbers more than 330 sisters in the diocese, according to Sister Janice Morgan, congregational president, who added that about 30,000 Sisters of St. Joseph serve the church throughout the world.

Locally, the congregation also has 100 lay associates who are called agregés or companions, she said. Meanwhile, Michelle Hahn, 25, and Laura Bishop, 31, will take the first step toward becoming Sisters of St. Joseph by becoming candidates

Dec. 8.

At their peak membership level in the late 1960s, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester had about 1,000 members, according to Sister Jeanne Agnes Michaud, the librarian and retired archivist for the sisters.

Sisters of St. Joseph have, in one way or another, touched the lives of countless people in the Diocese of Rochester. Members of the congregation have taught thousands of children and adults; extended medical care to patients; and ministered to infants in foster care to inmates in prison.

Sister Morgan said she joined the congregation in order to deepen her relationship with God and others.

"Being a Sister of St. Joseph gives me that freedom to be able to reach out, to be of service to others," she said.

Sister Morgan also noted that the Dec. 5 St. Mary's celebration is also to include Sisters of St. Joseph from the Buffalo Diocese because both congregations originated with four sisters who traveled to Canandaigua from St. Louis in December 1854 at the request of Bishop John Timon of

the Buffalo Diocese, which then included Canandaigua and all the other territory that later became the Diocese of Rochester.

According to a history provided by Kathy Urbanic, the congregation's archivist, the Sisters of St. Joseph first made their presence known in the City of Rochester in 1864, when they opened St. Mary's Boys' Orphan Asylum on South Avenue for children orphaned by the Civil War.

After the founding of the Rochester Diocese in 1868, subsequent decades saw the sisters establishing and/or serving at such institutions as Nazareth Academy in Rochester; St. Ann's Home for the Aged in Rochester; St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira; and St. Bernard's Seminary in Rochester. The sisters also staffed 55 Catholic schools throughout the diocese.

In 1924, the congregation founded Nazareth College of Rochester, which graduated its first class in 1928. The order also began serving Elmira Catholic High School in 1930, and staffed a new Rochester-area Catholic orphanage, St. Joseph's Villa, in 1944.

The order's other achievements over the years include the establishment of a mission in Selma, Ala., which eventually included the now-defunct hospital, Good Samaritan. The hospital made history in 1965 when it was one of only two hospitals in Selma willing to treat civil-rights protesters who had been battered by police at a bridge on "Bloody Sunday."

The Sisters of St. Joseph also established a ministry in Brazil, which marked its 40th anniversary in July with simultaneous celebrations at the SSJ motherhouse in Pittsford and at the sisters' mission in Brazil. The SSJ mission in Brazil comprises eight sisters from the Rochester Diocese as well as four native Brazilian sisters. It serves 15 communities and provides pastoral care, pastoral training of lay Catholics, health care and education.

And in recent years, the sisters



Photo courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph

Mother Agnes Spencer led the original community of Sisters of St. Joseph in Canandaigua.

have branched out into new ministries, including Daystar, which assists special-needs children up to age 3 through its foster-care and child-care programs. The sisters have also returned to South Avenue, site of their first Rochester ministry, where they currently sponsor St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center. The center serves low-income people, providing free primary medical care, counseling, social-service advocacy and high-school-equivalency tutoring. Among other recent endeavors of the Sisters of St. Joseph are prison ministry, migrant education and spirituality work.

Although the congregation doesn't have as many members as it once did, congregation officials expressed confidence that women are still being called to the vowed religious life, and that their order will adjust to the changing times. Sister Staropoli noted that the Sisters of St. Joseph recovered from the turmoil of the French Revolution to become a thriving order. Sister Michaud, meanwhile, observed that "we just have to be patient enough to see how it turns out."

"I don't really look back at the past except to really enjoy it," she added.

DECEMBER

15 OPEN HOUSE AT STELLA MARIS Come and enjoy the beauty of the Christmas season at our house! 2:00 - 5:00 p.m. No admission; donations are appreciated.

16 A DAY OF MY OWN This day is offered on the third Thursday of each month as an opportunity for you just come and "be". Offering: \$12 includes lunch.

17-19 ADVENT RETREAT WEEKEND What better way to prepare for the Christmas Feast than some time for prayer, reflection and relaxation. The weekend will be facilitated by Sister Mary Ellen Curtin, CSJ, retreat facilitator and spiritual director. Friday evening 6:00 (dinner) to Sunday morning. Offering: \$110

JANUARY

11-12 LET PEACE BEGIN WITH ME -Thirty-Hour Retreat looking at the simple ways of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clare as "do-ers" of peace. Tuesday 10:00 a.m. - Wednesday 4:00 p.m. Offering: \$65 (includes meals and materials)

Stella Maris

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