

CONNECTIONS

Newsletter



February 2024

AN AFTERNOON AND CELEBRATION 150 YEARS IN THE MAKING

On Sunday, Nov. 7, the Sisters and many friends gathered at Nolan Catholic High School in Fort Worth to commemorate 150 years of the Sisters of Saint Mary of Namur in Texas. It was a historic day and marked by many special conversations, reunions and a genuine, palpable thankfulness for the things God has done through SSMN in the last 150 years.

Oblate Clarice Peninger gave the welcome and opening prayer. She recently reflected on the momentous day by saying, “The Catholic faith was seeded, watered and grown by the Sisters of Saint Mary in North Texas. I cannot begin to imagine that it could have survived without the careful tending by these Sisters. We are who they planted.”

The congregation sang “Gentle Woman,” led by Dr. Christina Alves and then **Sister Patricia Ridgley** delivered a warm welcome and history of SSMN in Texas. Dr. Dan Luby shared his memories and a word about the Sisters’ impact and the Union Choir of Holy Cross Catholic Church in Dallas performed. **Oblate Ann Smith** led a closing prayer and then the

congregation sang “Abba Father,” written by **Sr. Ginny Vissing**, together to officially end the program.

The Sisters would like to thank everyone who attended the event and celebrated by bringing household or nonperishable items for donations to those in need. The Sisters received bags and bags of items designated

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150TH CELEBRATION (CONT.)

for distribution in the community. In the months since, items have gone to: Redemption Tree Ministry to veterans and others experiencing homelessness; Southside Church of Christ (sack lunch and food pantry ministry); Migrant Services at Catholic Charities; Community Crossroads — First Presbyterian Church’s mission outreach center; Funky Town Fridge; St. Rita School Preschool — children’s sock drive.



(Above) Sr. Joan Markey and Alicia Birong; (L) Katherina Schlessler and Sr. Ginny Vissing



Sr. Rita Claire Davis



Pat Needham and Sr. Lupe Aranda



Oblate Clarice Peninger

150TH ANNIVERSARY PRAYER

God of the ages,
You have blessed the journey of the Sisters of
St. Mary in North Texas for some 150 years.
Creator of the winds and rain and soil,
You have brought them through trials and tribulation,
Joys and celebration, in their efforts to give their lives over to you,
And to your people.
God always living and breathing,
Thank you for the “little good” they set out to do,
And for your love and faithfulness to give them courage when the way
Was not clear.
Thank you for the fire of your sweet Holy Spirit which
Has moved them to touch countless lives
Since they stepped onto the dirt roads of Waco.
Continue to bless them and all their associates
And friends and collaborators, and hold them all
Close to you, ready to be sent out on continuing journeys.
We pray this with hearts full of thanksgiving
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Read the feature article
about the 150th Anniversary
published in the December
issue of *Fort Worth* magazine:



THROUGH PASSIONATE SERVICE, SISTER GABRIELA HELPS PEOPLE FIND THEIR CALLING



Sister Gabriela Martinez found the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur when she answered a call for teachers for the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) program at her church in Houston, TX. She had finished high school and was working from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm six days a week, having Sundays off. As she became acquainted with the Sisters of St. Mary through the CCD program, she developed an appreciation for religious life and began to feel a call within herself to be a Sister. She made her first vows in 1966.

Sister Gabriela has a passion for serving the Hispanic community. She trained with the Guadalupana Sisters in Morelia, Mexico, before she and **Sister Dorothy Powers** established a convent of four Sisters in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, where they served surrounding villages

for two years. Upon returning to Texas, she was asked to work in the Fort Worth Diocesan Lay Ministries Program. Together with two School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND) who provided the English portion of the program, Sister Gabriela and Sister Dorothy formed the Spanish component of the team. Through the years, she and the Lay Ministries team trained hundreds of lay ministers. For Sr. Gabriela, it was about helping people figure out their calling and how to follow it.

diocese established “The Gabriela Martinez Award in Hispanic Ministry” which was bestowed to someone each year during National Hispanic Month. Sister Gabriela was the first and the last recipient of the award, which has since been discontinued. In addition to her work with the Hispanic community, Sister Gabriela has served her Sisters as Provincial and Regional Superior (two six-year terms), Co-Director of International Formation in Belgium, and as a member of the General Council.

She taught that giving someone communion is not just a function or activity but a holy interaction between a communicant and the minister. When a minister takes communion to a sick person, they should know how to spend time with a sick person and not just dispense the Eucharist. Families need to be taught more than just familiarity with baptizing their children — they need to know how to nurture their children’s spirituality. In addition to teaching people how to be lay ministers, Sister Gabriela often ministers to people herself when she encounters them experiencing a problem or in crisis. The depth of her caring is shown over and over again.

In 2007, in recognition of her long-term work, the

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“COME AND SEE” CHANGED OBLATE REYNA CASTELAN’S LIFE

Reyna Castelan grew up in Mexico and came to the United States many years ago. While working at the Catholic Center under Father Bob Wilson, Father Mele, Bishop Delaney, Bishop Vann and others, she began a long-term relationship with the Sisters of St. Mary that eventually led to her becoming an Oblate. This is her story.

“What a journey I have had since I came to the U.S.! In 1989, working at the Catholic Center, I met **Sr. Gabriela Martinez** — bright eyes and her charming smile embracing me. I met more Sisters of Saint Mary and, though it wasn’t “flashy” like on the road to Damascus, little by little my life changed. In 1991, **Sr. Saint John Begnaud** volunteered me to “come and see Tarrant County AIDS Interfaith Network” where the people concerned with the welfare of persons with AIDS lived. I was part of their Board of Directors from 1991 to 1994 and in 1996 I became a volunteer. I did the AIDS Walk from 1992 to 2010.

Then in 1992, **Sr. Bernice Knapek** called me to “come and see where the Associates lived,” and I became an Associate. In 1996, **Sr. Frances Vuillemin** called me “to come and see where the prisoners lived” and I became a volunteer ministering to the inmates. In 1998, **Sr. Donna Ferguson** sent me to New York City “to go and see” and learn how to help priests, seminarians, and Sisters with their immigration processes so that they could come to work in the U.S., and later obtain their citizenship.

Sr. Cecile Faget showed me the way to “where the Oblates lived,” and in 2005 I became an Oblate. Then in 2010, **Sr. Gabriela Martinez**, asked me to “come and see where the Hispanic community in Arlington lived,” and I am still there.

In 2015 I was working at St. Joseph Parish in Arlington where I helped with the bulletin in Spanish and with



the Children’s Liturgy of the Word at the Sunday Spanish Mass. At the parish and diocesan level, I helped with presentations on prison ministry and the Catholic Social Teachings of the Church. I also continued as a prison volunteer at FCI Fort Worth. A happy addition has been attending the weekly Hebrew study group with Sr. Cecile Faget and **Oblate Clarice Peninger**, under the direction of Dr. Toni Craven.

In the last several years (2020 – 2024), I am still at St. Joseph Parish in Arlington where I help with the bulletin in Spanish and preparing the

liturgy for the Sunday Spanish Mass. I have also continued as a prison volunteer at FCI Fort Worth.

Many of the Sisters, if not all, have helped me with my emotional, mental, and spiritual growth — they are my inspiration to do what I do. To say I am very grateful to the Sisters of Saint Mary of Namur is an understatement. For their support, friendship and prayers sustain me, and their charism permeates the way I live, study, pray and work. Yes, my life has been blessed in ways I couldn’t imagine 35 years ago when I first encountered the Sisters of St. Mary.”

RETREATING TO PREPARE FOR ADVENT

It already seems like Advent was a long time ago, but it has only been a couple of months. The season of Advent can seem like a long time, too. Four weeks of waiting for Christmas and the birth of Christ can be a long wait even though, for most people, it is a very busy time. Being in touch with God during Advent is an important time to connect with the Lord, and the Sisters did so with a day of retreat.

The Sisters held the retreat, *The Spirituality of Waiting*, planned and



(L) Sr. Inés Díaz and Sr. Patricia Ridgley; (Above) Sr. Inés Díaz and Sr. Gabriela Martínez



led by **Sister Ginny Vissing** on the first Saturday of December. The Sisters, in silence, began the day in the Chapel, followed by a time of personal prayer. The retreat also consisted of two rituals. In one, **Sister Inés Díaz**, dressed in

purple, carried the Bible from person to person so that each Sister could touch the Bible with either her forehead or hand. In another special and solemn part of the retreat, the Sisters blessed each other.

SSMN CELEBRATES ROSEMARY HAYES, A BELOVED FRIEND

Rosemary Hayes started the Sisters of St. Mary Auxiliary soon after she first learned they didn't have one. That was about 20 years ago and the Sisters recently decided it was time to thank her in a formal way. Late last year, delicious food was ordered from Babe's Chicken and Infirmary staff member Lorena Rios baked and decorated a beautiful cake topped with fresh roses. Rosemary's daughter Jennifer, son-in-law David and her grandchildren, Bart (19), Hubbard (16) and Corbin Cate (14) attended.



Rosemary is responsible for raising the money and providing the Sisters with over \$1,000,000 worth of food, supplies and equipment over the years. She continues to come to OLV every Saturday afternoon to arrange small

vases of flowers for the Sisters' dining room tables.

Several Sisters stood up at the luncheon and expressed very kind words of love, gratitude and caring to Rosemary. She is appreciated, not only for the gifts she provides, but also for her sense of humor, compassion and hard work. The Sisters love her and are grateful to have her in their lives.



SISTER INÉS' JOURNEY TOOK HER FROM MEXICO TO TEXAS AND BACK AGAIN



Sr. Inés with Sr. Rita Claire and Hahn Vo

Just before Christmas, **Sister Inés** went to work at St. Jude's Catholic Church, a large parish in Mansfield, TX, as their Coordinator of Hispanic Ministry. She was so very excited to be working again that her face glowed.

A few months ago, Sister Inés Matilda Diaz Meneses returned to Fort Worth after having been away in Mexico for two and a half years. Her mother was ill and she went to visit her. As it turned out, her mother needed more than just a visit — she became sicker and required more and more help. Sister Inés stayed to provide personal care for her mother, and she stayed and stayed never expecting to be gone for so long. Sister Inés says that while caring for her mother she experienced the love and presence of God and relied on His help every day.

Sister Inés grew up in Mexico in a family that was not extremely religious, but they attended Mass every Sunday. As a teenager, Sister Inés dreamed

of marrying and having a family. She admits that at that time, she went to Mass on Sundays “to see the boys.” But God had another plan for her. At age 19 she entered the Missionary Catechists of the Sacred Heart and Immaculate Heart of Mary, a religious community based in Mexico City. As a member of that community, she spent time as a missionary in Spain and Bolivia as well as the United States. She arrived in

Fort Worth in 2005 and worked at Holy Name Parish and St. John the Apostle Parish. She also worked as the Director of Hispanic Ministry for the Diocese of Fort Worth.

As she became familiar with the Sisters of St. Mary, Sister Inés found them to be open and welcoming and she was attracted to their spirituality and prayer. In 2010, she transferred her vows and became a Sister of St. Mary.



(L-R) Sr. Ginny Vissing, Sr. Inés Diaz and friends

Former Student Spotlight: PAUL WOOD, BISHOP DUNNE CLASS OF 1972



Deacon Paul Wood

Deacon Paul Wood, Bishop Dunne class of 1972, describes his discussions with school counselor **Sister Josephine Stewart** as “the 2-by-4” that helped forgiveness and love for others penetrate “my thick skull.” He also fondly remembers **Sister Patricia Ridgley** as a model for doing the right thing: “Right should always prevail, but it is up to us to make that happen,” Paul recalls. In the Engaging Theology class with **Sister Miriam Nesmith**, Paul learned that she had witnessed and prayed during an exorcism. He was fascinated because he had long been convinced “that evil truly existed in and walked in the world.” Now, as a Deacon, Paul tries to “help people see evil and avoid it” and “know that God always walks with all of us.”

When Paul Wood entered Bishop Dunne, he was relieved that he already knew **Sister Donna Ferguson** from Saint James Elementary School. Years later, when she needed blood donors, Paul tested as a match, and much later,

when Paul entered the Diocese of Dallas Diaconate Formation Program, he asked for permission to have her as his Spiritual Director. Sister Donna remained Paul’s Spiritual Director until her death in 2008. Paul is a Deacon at Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Duncanville, Texas, where he and his wife, Diane, are parishioners. In 2014, The University of Dallas named a four-year scholarship in honor of Paul, who studied psychology and theology there.

Paul was an all-around athlete at Dunne, yet he describes his high school years as a struggle. This gave him the vocation to try to make high school an easier time for teenagers. As a result, he returned to Bishop Dunne to serve in many roles: baseball coach, theology and social studies teacher, facilities director, Dean of Students, Advancement Director, and Director of Technology. Now “retired,” Paul is in a graduate certificate program and still serves as a Deacon.



(L-R) Sr. Bernice Knapek, Bishop Dunne President Kate Daley, Deacon Paul Wood and Sr. Mary Meridian

LEADERSHIP TRANSITION OFFERS NEW OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN SSMN



Srs. Dorothy Powers & Charles Marie

It seems the Sisters of St. Mary are always embracing something new. This time, it is not a new ministry in the community or a new way of life, but an experiment with their leadership and a

joint venture with the Eastern Region (located in Buffalo, NY). You probably won’t notice anything different, but for one year they are combining their two regional councils into one council.

Sisters Charles Marie Serafino and **Dorothy Powers** will represent Texas on the five-person team and **Sister Patricia Brown** from Buffalo will serve as Superior.

Today, with Zoom as a tool, this new way of overseeing operations and addressing issues has the potential to be more efficient and help the Sisters



to become closer to one another and more unified as a Congregation. In a prayer service on January 1, the Sisters celebrated their transition in leadership by expressing gratitude to those leaving office and asked for God’s blessings and guidance for the new councilors and leader.

SISTER ROSEMARY DEPARTS FOR BUFFALO

Sister Rosemary Stanton recently said goodbye to her OLV Sisters before leaving for Buffalo, NY. She will live for a year with the Sisters at St. Mary's Center in New York. Before departing, the Sisters had a small party for her and then a final sendoff as she got in the car to be driven to DFW Airport.



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BIRTHDAYS TO REMEMBER

February 6 – Sister Yolanda Cruz

March 2 – Sister Inés Díaz

March 14 – Sister Rita Claire Davis

May 28 – Sister Lola Ulupano



Bishop Vann is a former Bishop of Fort Worth and he stopped in to see the Sisters while in town for Thanksgiving. Everyone shared a lively conversation in the dining room where they talked about their ministries and work together during the Bishop's time in Fort Worth. At the end of his visit, Bishop Vann gave a blessing and the Sisters also blessed him with their traditional song.



THE SISTERS OF SAINT MARY OF NAMUR
THE WESTERN REGION

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