



## **“I Will Sing of God’s Great Love Forever”**

*By Michael O’Loughlin, Marketing and Communications Director*

When COVID-19 struck in March 2020, the celebration of the Eucharist in St. Joseph Chapel was halted for the first time in over a century. After several months, sisters were gradually allowed in greater numbers to once again participate in Sunday, and then weekday, liturgies.

We continue to be challenged by virus variants, and St. Joseph Chapel once again had to implement more stringent attendance restrictions this week. But the community looks forward to the time when we can once again welcome friends of the congregation who have been eager to join us in chapel for events like Jubilee, Midnight Mass, and Candles of Love.

The music of the liturgy is an integral part of the celebration of the Eucharist. It has also been a focus of our congregation’s rich history for nearly 150 years. With that in mind, we invited some of our sisters to share their thoughts and feelings about the importance of being able to gather and raise their voices in song during these unprecedented times.

Sister Bernadette Luecker, the associate director of Music Ministry, recalls how she and the Chapel Singers were preparing for the Feast of St. Joseph in 2020 when the pandemic forced an end to public gatherings.

“Suddenly everything was cancelled. The loss of gathering as a community for a major celebration was very shocking,” she said. “Living through Holy Week without celebrating the liturgies of the Triduum together left me with a very empty feeling.”

Sister Bernadette said that coming back to worship as a community has been a series of small steps. “From sitting in pews marked with blue tape to using a one-time order of worship, we gradually moved to weekly orders of worship and the use of our hymnals.

“I missed working with the Chapel Singers and the Funeral Schola for the first 17 months of the pandemic,” she said. “When these groups could come together again to rehearse and sing for our liturgies, I was filled with joy.”



### **“Eucharist Without Walls”**

Of course, time away from the Mass is something none of us could have anticipated. “I never thought I would experience that in my lifetime,” said Sister Mary Louise Miller, music minister at Sacred Heart.

“At Sacred Heart, we were blessed to be able to use our ‘in-house’ TV channel to pray with video from chapel and to play Masses and other programs that were streamed on YouTube and other sources,” Sister Mary Louise recalled.

She said having the TV channel was an important lifeline at the height of the pandemic. “[The channel meant] the Eucharistic Presence could always be accessed for times of personal prayer. The liturgical symbols of Ordinary Time, Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter were present, and we could find ways to use them at Evening Prayer.”

“Using that channel, we began Franciscan Evening Prayer with three sisters leading from Sacred Heart’s chapel. Sisters were able to sing and pray from their rooms. This common sharing resulted in a renewed and new kind of bond in community. We became a community that was Eucharist without walls.”

The sisters at Sacred Heart rejoice at having the opportunity to have in-person Mass celebrated on four days of the week, but Sister Mary Louise said returning to Mass in chapel was a real challenge. “We needed to divide into groups – only 25 could come. Sanitizing, masks, social distancing, walkers, canes, and wheelchairs were all major issues.

“Music was not so much an issue for us,” she continued. “We used refrains and one verse of a hymn that most sisters would know by memory. Since we couldn’t use the hymnals in chapel, we gave each sister a copy of the seasonal missalette for use to reference the scriptures and a few hymns.”

## **“The Good Gift in Our Lives”**

Sister Christine Baker is an organist at St. Camillus Retirement Community’s chapel, and serves as a substitute organist at Clement Manor, our sponsored ministry in Greenfield. She said that since in-person Masses have resumed, she delights in the opportunity to accompany the cantor and congregation, and to use her organ skills and repertoire.



“I have felt very blessed over these years because of the availability of priests in the Milwaukee area, scheduled Masses, and a desire to share the Franciscan joy through music and worshipful experiences,” Sister Christine said. “These also are sources of strength, hope, and a commitment to the Eucharist – the Good Gift in our lives.”

Music is of vital importance to the congregation as well, and sisters said that being able to sing together again has been a joyful experience.

“In grade school, I learned that ‘singing is praying twice’,” said Sister Patricia Throener. “During the time of isolation and less social interaction, music and singing helped me connect with our sisters while at prayer and Mass.”

Sister Patricia feels that the sisters in Music Ministry help her praise and thank God through their special gift of music. She said Sister Mary Jane’s organ postludes “give me prayer time to enjoy the beauty of the chapel, and to thank God for all the sisters around me.”

Several other sisters agreed that music helps them feel united as well as joyful.

“I love that we, as a community, join together to sing our praise to God,” said Sister Kathleen Kunze. “The accompaniment helps hold us together no matter what voice God gave us.”

“It was very hard to watch Mass on TV and not being able to sing, since I had been doing that since I went on mission in 1949,” said Sister Claire Pink. Being able to gather again, Sister Claire notes, “I really appreciate all the planning that our musicians put into our liturgies.”

Sister Joselda Kuhle echoes that sentiment, saying, “I admire the joy and enthusiasm that Sisters Bernie and Mary Jane put into the music in St. Joseph Chapel.”

For Sister Bernadette, “even though I rarely see some of them outside of this time, singing and praying together has made me feel united with my sisters and our associates in the community.”

“Since we have limited social interaction due to the pandemic, our liturgical services have taken on even more importance for me,” said Sister Joan Brede. “I feel more ‘at one’ with the worshiping community, since it is one of the few times we can be together. The music, chosen and played by Sisters Bernadette and Mary Jane, enriches our united prayer. It has certainly helped me cope with the restrictions of the pandemic.”

Wherever and whenever we worship, we thank all those who plan, perform, and participate in our liturgical music. And we look forward with joyful hope to the day – may it be very soon – when we will all be able to gather and, in the words of Psalm 66, “Let all the earth cry out with joy to the Lord!”