

Alive

WITH THE CALL OF THE GOSPEL

School
Sisters
of  St. Francis



Assisi College Offers
New Beginnings

**2019–2020
Annual Report**

Sisters Respond
to the Coronavirus

Transformation at
**St. Joseph
Center**

“Heart Spaces”



“Inside” – oil by Sister Dorothy Bock

Between breathing in and breathing out,
between gathering and letting go
hide the spaces of the heart.

Discover these heart spaces –
in birds’ wings crackling in air
between the dawn and daylight;
in wind hovering between sun
and tall shaggy trees;
between autumn’s crumbling gold
and winter’s snow tufts blossoming.

Listen to heart spaces –
in waves breaking before they
push over burned beaches;
in unspoken, unheard words
hanging in air’s communion;
between an iron bell’s gong and
humming vibration into Zen stillness.

Open your heart spaces –
with rusty key in a lock
even before it turns;
in those terrifying shadows
becoming fond familiar shapes;
in a waiting embrace
already rushing to enfold;
in love-remembered faces
signed with healed wounds;
and in open hands outspread with
tiny, tender rose petals.

SISTER DOROTHY BOCK (1928–2018)
ARTIST, POET, EDUCATOR, VISIONARY LEADER
Her 2015 poetry collection, *I Come From Grace*,
can be purchased at womanspace-rockford.org

From Our Leadership

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FRONT COVER
Sister Lucy Kalapurackal of the School Sisters
of St. Francis' International Leadership Team
visits with a mother and child served by our
sisters' newest mission in Songea, Tanzania.
Sister Lucy traveled to Songea for the
dedication of Assisi Province's new
formation house in February 2020, before
the coronavirus pandemic outbreak.

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How much has changed since our last issue of *Alive* magazine six months ago! Our sisters around the world have been sharing their experiences during the pandemic with us, and all the members of our community have experienced some type of lockdown. During this challenging time, we have been heartened by your messages of care.



The most stringent restrictions have been experienced by our sisters in Central America, where no one can leave the house for more than an hour a day to get food. In Europe, there was a long period when the sisters living in the nursing home down the hill from our motherhouse could not receive visitors.

The economic impact of COVID-19 has been nearly as devastating as the disease itself. In India, millions of people already living in poverty quickly felt the impact of the loss of work. Many elderly villagers in remote areas rely on the financial support of family members who have migrated to the big cities for employment. When these workers lost their jobs and could no longer send money home, their elders were left with limited food and other essentials. Our sisters were among those who put together food packages and provided other necessities to those in need, all while providing compassionate care and prayerful support.

In carrying out our ministries, we have taken every precaution as we care for the elderly and vulnerable among us. However, our community has not remained unharmed. In the United States, four of our sisters living at Our Lady of the Angels memory care convent were found to have had COVID-19 in postmortem tests. A sister in Honduras remains hospitalized at this writing, but thankfully two sisters in India who were hospitalized have now recovered. We ask your prayers for all of them.

Even with so many significant challenges, our sisters' service to God's people continues, as you will read in this issue of *Alive* and our enclosed Annual Report. We deeply appreciate the continued love, prayers, and generous support we have received from our donors and friends during these difficult months. Please know that you remain in our sisters' thoughts and daily prayers. May God keep you and those you love safe and healthy until we are able to gather together again.

Gratefully yours in Christ,

Sisters Mary, Tresa Abraham, Barbara, and Lucy

International Leadership Team
School Sisters of St. Francis



Building for the Future

Renovations planned for St. Joseph Center motherhouse

For 130 years, St. Joseph Center on Milwaukee's Layton Boulevard has served as the international motherhouse of the School Sisters of St. Francis. From the 1940s to the 1960s, as many as 500 members of the community called it home.

"In those days, the laundry, kitchen, and housekeeping work was done by the sisters," recalled Sister Mary Diez, president of the congregation.

Today, only about a dozen retired sisters belong to St. Joseph Center's living group. "Now that we have fewer sisters working in full-time ministry, we see that St. Joseph Center can serve in a new role for our congregation."

In keeping with our community's tradition of responding to the needs of the times, the International Leadership Team last year announced plans to renovate St. Joseph Center by turning underutilized space into affordable housing units.

"By converting a section of the building into apartments for affordable housing, we will be meeting a critical need in Milwaukee's real estate market," Sister Mary said.

This renovation is the next step in an evolution that began a decade ago, when the congregation undertook a strategic visioning

process to consider the sisters' immediate and future housing needs. That process led to the development of the Maria Linden independent senior and assisted living rental apartments in St. Joseph Center's north wing, which opened in 2013. Sister Mary said the success of that 72-unit development, home to sisters and lay seniors who meet certain income guidelines, encouraged this new initiative.

"At Maria Linden, the budget is balanced by the rents that are paid," she noted. "We have envisioned this new renovation as its own corporation, responsible for the operation and management of the project. This renovation will sustain our property for the long term."

Two Phases

There will be two phases to the renovation: the "middle building," which was erected in 1890, and the south wing (St. Joseph Chapel building) that was built in 1917.

"The south wing of the motherhouse, the section that houses St. Joseph Chapel, is separate from the middle building," explained Michele Carlson, Executive Director of St. Joseph Center. "The biggest change planned for this section will be a new entrance to the south wing. We expect the renovation in that section to begin in early 2021, and renovations will take about four months."

Sister Joann Riesterer, a member of the renovation planning group, said the third and fourth floors of the south wing will be converted into a small convent for our sisters. “Also, restrooms on the second floor near the chapel will be expanded and renovated to accommodate larger groups of visitors,” she said.

Sister Catherine Ryan, the congregation’s treasurer, said the older, middle building of the motherhouse will be converted into 59 affordable apartments for seniors in the Milwaukee community. “Seniors who are 62 years and older, and who meet the income eligibility requirements, will be able to rent these apartments.”

This new housing development, named “Chapel Gardens,” will also include four family townhouses that will be developed in a separate building that is a few steps from the motherhouse. That building currently houses a child-care center, which will be relocating.

“Each townhome in our free-standing St. Jude Building will have three bedrooms and a separate entrance for each family,” Sister Catherine said. This renovation will take place at the same time as the renovation of the motherhouse’s middle building.”

A Major Undertaking

In total, the Chapel Gardens renovation will provide 63 housing units, with an estimated project cost of \$16 million. “We are currently finalizing the architectural plans and securing the funding related to the tax credits,” Sister Catherine said. “Construction will begin early in 2021 and we expect the construction will take a year.”

Sister Catherine said tax credits will pay for most of the renovation of the Chapel Gardens project. “We are working with our developers, General Capital, to raise the additional \$2 million we will

need through government and private grant programs.”

Dan Tretow, the congregation’s director of finance, explained that the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA) awards federal and state tax credits to create affordable housing units.

“With WHEDA programs, private investors agree to invest funds in housing projects in return for the right to claim the tax credits on their federal income tax returns over a ten-year period,” he said. In this way, the authority promotes development of affordable units for low- and moderate-income households. Developers may offer market-rate units as part of the mix of apartments.

Sister Catherine said the community will not receive tax credits for the south wing renovation. “The congregation intends to preserve the chapel for worship and prayer for the neighborhood community,” she explained. “We are seeking and will use non-government funds for that phase of the renovation project.”

“The two phases of this renovation of the motherhouse will help to meet Milwaukee’s need for affordable housing, and will also assure that our beautiful chapel will continue to be accessible to our neighborhood community,” said Pamela Mueller, director of the Office of Mission Advancement. “We are grateful for our donors who will join with us as partners to help build this community of new tenants, new friends, and community groups whose lives will be enriched and energized by this new ministry.”

To learn more about supporting the St. Joseph Center renovation project, please contact Pamela Mueller, Mission Advancement Director, at 414-385-5338 or pmueller@sssf.org.

Responding to the Needs of Our Time

Sisters rise to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic

The global COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic has had an impact on nearly every aspect of our lives this year. Its effects have been felt profoundly by the sisters of our worldwide congregation, and the people with whom we minister.

For Sister Rosalia Zachman, an 89-year-old resident of our St. Joseph Center motherhouse, the pandemic has, among other things, kept her from the Eucharist, which she has attended daily since her childhood. She is joyful that sisters at the motherhouse can once again attend Mass in St. Joseph Chapel on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“When I think of what we’re going through, compared to what other people are going through, I think we’re blessed,” Sister Rosalia said. “It’s true that we’re separated from each other—and yet we’re together.”

Whether they minister through their prayers and presence in retirement like Sister Rosalia, or as frontline workers in India, our sisters are responding in faith to the pandemic’s challenges by being sources of light and hope. The “From Our Leadership” column (page 3) shares some of the experiences of our sisters overseas. This article will focus on sisters in the United States.

Making Adjustments

When the pandemic arrived, Sister Michele Doyle, who leads adult religion classes at three parishes near her home in Ridgeland, Mississippi, was unable to teach or do her volunteer work serving meals to the needy. To stay motivated to

get to her to-do list, she said, “prayer gets prime time.”

In Arizona, Sister Joneen Keuler had to conduct her RCIA classes via Zoom video technology. “I’ve always looked forward to times of quiet and solitude,” she said, “but it isn’t as easy to move into that space and find it fruitful when it isn’t my choice.”

Sister Arlene Woelfel, a psychotherapist, serves at Casa Alexia, our sisters’ mission on the southwest border. She lives in El Paso, Texas, and ministers at a human rights center on the Juárez, Mexico, side of the border, accompanying families who have experienced trauma from forced disappearances and torture. The health crisis forced factories to close and lay off workers already straining to make ends meet.



Essential staff at Our Lady of the Angels Convent work around the clock to keep our sisters safe. SSSF PHOTOS

“When our office doors closed because of the health emergency, we continued to work from our homes, with lots of Zoom meetings and phone conversations,” Sister Arlene said. “Through my work with trauma cases, I have learned that the only thing that keeps me grounded and not overwhelmed is consistent, inner work with God. In this way, I have come to understand and accept my limits.”

Sister Sylvia Leonardi of Kenosha, Wisconsin, teaches 22 classes, from pre-school through fifth grade, at St. Joseph Catholic Academy, using video conferencing to help her students stay connected. Sister Sylvia acknowledged the need to uphold the spirit of a school community, saying, “Missing one another brings to light the experience of family achieved within the classroom. It is truly a time of growth, trust, and compassion.”

The pandemic’s arrival precluded most Catholics from attending Lenten, Holy Week, and Easter services. Sister Kathleen O’Brien, United States Provincial Coordinator, reflected on the unusual nature of that experience.

“During this Lent, as we face such an uncertain future, the Stations of the Cross have taken on a new meaning for me,” Sister Kathleen wrote. “None of us know the end of our trek through the coronavirus pandemic. It is not something we have chosen to face. But we do so trusting in God, knowing that we have our sisters and associates caring for us, praying for us, willing to help take up whatever cross we might have to bear. And of course, we have our brother Jesus, who will be with us every step of the way.”

Experiencing Loss

Our congregation has not been unscathed by the toll of the virus, which at this writing has claimed nearly 200,000 American lives. In April and early May, six sisters living at Our Lady of the Angels Convent (OLA), our co-sponsored memory care facility in Greenfield, Wisconsin,



The Seafood for Heroes project gave frontline staff at Sacred Heart (pictured) and Our Lady of the Angels dinners in gratitude for their work and sacrifices.

tested positive for COVID-19 in postmortem tests. The news of the sisters’ deaths attracted local and national media attention.

Jane Morgan, the administrator at OLA, emphasized that none of the sisters who passed away at the convent experienced any respiratory distress. She said that the sisters who died all had peaceful, dignified deaths, and most sisters who contracted the virus recovered. The staff work tirelessly to provide quality, loving care for the convent’s 44 residents. “People are working double shifts for weeks without any days off,” she said in May. “Our first concern is the health of our sisters.”

The selfless dedication of the frontline workers at our convents also gained national attention from the Napa Seafood Foundation. In May, essential staff at OLA and at Sacred Heart in Milwaukee welcomed a generous donation of delicious Red Lobster meals, made possible by the foundation’s “Seafood for Heroes” program. The program is a collaboration between the foundation and local restaurants to show appreciation for frontline healthcare workers.



More than \$30,000 was raised for global water projects through the “Sister Garden Beer Garden in a Box” drive-through fundraisers in July and August.

Sacred Heart’s executive director Cathy Kelling said this gift was an abundant blessing for essential workers. “Our frontline workers are risking their health and safety for the well-being of others. It is wonderful for staff to be recognized by others for the work and sacrifices they put forth each day, as well as for the challenges they face.”

The seafood delivery was one of many donations that the congregation has received in response to emergency needs during the pandemic. The United States Province has received substantial funding from foundation donors for the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE), and individuals and families have donated protective masks, hand sanitizers, and other supplies to the sisters in our living groups.

The spread of the pandemic prompted cancellations of many events in the Milwaukee area just as the community was about to hold its annual Joseph Bowls Supper fundraiser.

“We needed to cancel the gathering at the very last minute,” said Sister Kathy Chuston, Special Appeals Administrator. “But because of the generosity of so many of our friends and partners in mission, we were able to exceed our revenue goal of \$15,000, even without physically

holding the event. We provided much-needed funds to Casa Alexia, and Sisters Program South in Milwaukee.”

The Mission Advancement Office’s summer beer gardens, which raise funds for sisters’ global water projects, were reimaged as socially distanced, drive-through events in July and August. More than \$30,000 was raised from patrons who purchased a half gallon of beer or root beer along with pretzels, spicy mustard, and souvenir pint glasses. Live music was streamed so that supporters could enjoy a true beer garden experience from home.

Pam Mueller, Director of Mission Advancement, said the congregation also received generous support on Giving Tuesday Now on May 5, a global day of giving and unity organized in response to the pandemic.

In response to the loss of our sisters, and the attendant media attention, Sister Mary Diez, President of our international congregation, and Sister Kathleen O’Brien co-authored a column for *America* magazine that focused on women religious’ leadership in overcoming this crisis.

“Our sisters around the world hold in prayer everyone who is making kindness and compassion their priorities to ease the burdens of this pandemic,” they wrote. “We also ask for your prayers—for our sisters, for those with whom we minister, and for those who are entrusted with the care of the most vulnerable. Perhaps the experience of this pandemic will lead all of us to look again at how we deal with pain and loss. May it bring transformation, and a world where the needs of all are seen as the responsibility of all.”

Prayerfully consider making a tax-deductible donation today to support our retired sisters and help our congregation care for those who are impacted by COVID-19. Use the enclosed envelope or donate online at www.sssf.org.

Reaching Out with Caring Hearts

Sisters Program South's outreach team delivers help where it is needed most

Street outreach has been an essential component of the Benedict Center Sisters Program South Collaborative since the inception of this faith-based partnership five years ago. The initiative, of which the School Sisters of St. Francis are a founding partner, has helped hundreds of women in the street-based sex trade, including women victimized by sex trafficking on Milwaukee's south side.

"Our outreach teams have become a trusted presence in our community with a client population that traditionally has deep hesitation to trust," said Jeanne Geraci, executive director of the Benedict Center. "The dedicated staff meet our clients on the street, respond to their calls, and invite them to the Drop-In Center for further assistance with basic needs, case management, and counseling."

The six team members include an outreach specialist, two case managers, two counselors, and a housing navigation case manager. "Outreach preparation begins about 9 a.m. each day," Geraci explained. "Staff prepare meals and hygiene bags, adding educational materials to each. They stock the van with essentials that women may need: underwear, socks, first aid supplies, bus tickets."

On an average day, Geraci said, the team will have 25 conversations with women. Common interactions include checking on a woman's health and wellness, providing access to information, and crisis intervention.

"We discuss where women are staying or sleeping to assess the need for housing help," Geraci said. "We have also been giving women in our program a cell phone so that they have a way of connecting with our staff for assistance."

Sisters Program outreach team members Genene and Pang offer assistance to one of the program's clients.

BENEDICT CENTER PHOTO

Two crises—COVID-19 and the opioid epidemic—have added to the challenges the Sisters Program South team faces.

"Our clients do not have the luxury of isolating or social distancing, as many are homeless or housing insecure," Geraci explained. "We responded by keeping our outreach going while many other programs temporarily closed."

"The opioid crisis has also created a high level of desperation in the community," she said. "We share that pain collectively, and support each other through the tough times."

Geraci said the outreach team's "sense of accomplishment comes from feeling that in some, small way, they connected with each client or made some positive difference in a client's life that day. Our staff provides a caring lifeline, both of compassion and of needed resources. The women we serve know they will be valued and supported, and that we are ready to assist in a multitude of ways when *they* are ready."

To read more about the mission and impact of Sisters Program South, visit our website: www.sssf.org/SSSF/Media-Room.htm.



Inspired to Succeed

Sisters are preparing young women to overcome life's obstacles

At Assisi Women's College in Kanjikode, India, the School Sisters of St. Francis are meeting some of the most pressing needs faced by underprivileged young women in that industrial city. The school was founded a decade ago and provides a vital service through its unique combination of business education instruction and spiritual mentoring.

Many of the 140 students enrolled at the college have been raised in difficult, economically disadvantaged circumstances in which illiteracy, drug addiction, and even suicide are not uncommon. Thanks to our sisters' initiative, these women are being prepared for a far brighter future.

Seven instructors teach more than a dozen courses, ranging from English language acquisition and research methodology to accounting and marketing. By the time they graduate, students are well equipped to work in the world of commerce as accountants, bank and marketing firm employees, computer assistants, and as other professionals.

"Our main focus is in preparing the girls to become self sufficient," said Sister Rosebell Ponthakkan, who leads the school. She has seen many students rise from poverty and flourish after completing their education on full scholarships thanks to generous benefactors.

One such beneficiary is Roshini Narayanan (right), who graduated this year and has begun a wonderful job that allows her to financially support her parents, both of whom are too sick to work. Her father is primarily bedridden following years of tuberculosis, and now suffers from kidney stones and severe side effects from medication.

"Her family's small, thatched hut, covered with an old tarpaulin and palm leaves, had always leaked," Sister Rosebell recalled. A flood in 2018 damaged all their belongings, and then, last year, their home caught fire while the family slept. "By God's grace, everyone managed to get out, but they were severely injured," Sister continued. "The Assisi Province of the School Sisters of St. Francis provided assistance to help the family get their life back on track."

Praveena, another student, thought her life was a lost cause when her parents and brother all died of HIV-AIDS. Shunned by her community because of the stigma of her family's medical history, she was rejected by several educational institutions. Assisi Women's College offered her admission and showed compassion by praying for her family. The sisters' acts of charity and



Roshini Narayanan and her father.



Students with their Principal, Sister Marion Vallachira.



Students at prayer with Sister Marion.

merciful love set an example in Praveena's local community.

The college lacks many conveniences and niceties, but the sisters make sure that all students have the resources they need to learn and succeed. They and their students are grateful for all gifts received from generous donors, and the impact of those blessings is tremendous. The recent acquisition of new benches and desks enables 40 students—who previously had unsteady classroom furniture—to concentrate and perform better in their studies.

An even more basic need was met with the gift of a new water system that gives students and faculty access to clean drinking water.

“We depend on water from borewells in our area,” Sister Rosebell explained. “But that water has excessive calcium, which results in gastritis, itching, and dental issues.” Landslides and floods in monsoon season exacerbate the problem of contamination from chemical dumping and sewage treatment facility runoff. For these reasons, “having the water purifier is a great blessing in accessing pure and clean water for drinking and cooking,” Sister Rosebell said.

In addition to providing academic instruction, the sisters at Assisi Women's College are ever

mindful of sharing the richness of prayer with the young women. Each morning, the sisters and students recite the Rosary together. The spiritual practices and mental health support provided by the faculty and staff help alleviate the despair and frustration that can weigh on students because of the many life challenges they already have had to face. “We offer our constant companionship to them,” Sister Rosebell said.

Sister emphasized that our sisters' own abundant strength of faith comes from God's dependability and the generosity of others.

“We express our sincere gratitude for people's willingness to assist,” Sister Rosebell said. “Our students and their parents are thankful for the prayers, love, and all the gifts, which help our students face the future with confidence. It is said, ‘God loves a cheerful giver.’ May God continue to bless you all!”

**We invite you to prayerfully
make a tax-deductible donation
to help our sisters empower
young women living on the
margins around the world.
Please use the enclosed
envelope or donate
online at www.sssf.org.**



Lives Shaped by Gratitude

Sisters' timely influence transformed Dan Walker's future

"I know the sisters use their money efficiently. Their money goes a long way to helping others, like their support of women subject to abuse, and their support of immigrants at the Texas-Mexican border."

EUNICE WALKER

Dan and Eunice Walker, longtime supporters of the School Sisters of St. Francis, are vibrant, generous, enthusiastic individuals that exude gratitude to God for their many blessings.

"Life wasn't always easy for me," Dan said recently, reflecting on his teenage years. "I was raised in a lower-middle-class family. We couldn't afford to pay for a private high school education, so I decided to get a job and pay my way through school.

"I was struggling through a lot of personal pain and anger when I came to St. Joseph High School in Kenosha, Wisconsin," Dan recalled. "The sisters displayed an attitude of acceptance that helped me to believe in myself. Thanks to the sisters I met at St. Joe's, my life turned out so much better than it should have."

Dan credits his teachers for helping him develop his writing and speaking skills. "I had some of the best teachers anyone could have," he said. "Sister Mina [Sister Viola Marie] Schaub held me to very high standards. Sister Marie Catherine Fink taught English and forensics, and Sister Christopher McNaney was my debate coach. These are just a few of the wonderful sisters who taught me."

With the sisters' help, Dan learned to do extemporaneous speaking so well that he won first place in the Chicago Catholic Forensic League three years in a row. Thanks to high achievement as a National Merit Finalist, he received numerous college scholarship offers upon graduation and chose to attend the University of Wisconsin at Madison.



“The credit goes to the sisters who held me to high standards that stayed with me throughout my life,” Dan said. “Because of their guidance, I developed a strong work ethic and was motivated to always do my best.”

While in college, Dan met Eunice, whom he calls “the most emotionally intelligent person I know.” They have three adult children and nine grandchildren.

Eunice earned her bachelor’s degree in pharmaceutical science and worked her entire career for the Wheaton Franciscan Sisters. She started as a pharmacy assistant at St. Michael Hospital in Milwaukee and later became director there. When that hospital closed, she served as pharmacy director for several other hospitals in the Milwaukee area until she retired in 2016.

Dan became a signing assessor and residential and commercial property assessor in several Milwaukee County suburbs.

“Thanks to the sisters, I learned to be well prepared in all my duties, making sure my work was absolutely defensible,” he said. “Fairness is important to me. I viewed my task as keeping a level playing field, making sure that no one is assessed more or less than his or her fair share.

“My gratitude to God is huge,” Dan said, “especially for my wife and children, an excellent education, and a job I really like.”

Dan said that more than half of their charitable donations go to the School Sisters of St. Francis because he knows “the money is well spent.”

“I know the sisters use their money efficiently,” Eunice added. “Their money goes a long way to helping others, like their support of women subject to abuse, and their support of immigrants at the Texas-Mexican border.

“The sisters in India who work among the poorest of the poor are especially admired,” Eunice added. “We are honored to be part of this ministry through our donations.”

Dan recalled that in college, while working at the Oscar Meyer food processing plant, workers used to say that they “used every part of the pig except the ‘squeal.’

“As I look over my life, I can see that God has had a purpose for everything. Or to say it another way, ‘God uses everything but the squeal!’”

“Dan and Eunice are true partners in our mission,” said Pamela Mueller, director of the Office of Mission Advancement. “Their faithful support of our sisters goes beyond the generous financial support they share with our community. Dan and Eunice pray for and walk with our sisters as they serve others around the world. We are so blessed to have them as partners!”



We invite you to make a gift of gratitude for our sisters' loving lives of ministry and service. You may use the enclosed envelope or make a donation on our website, www.sssf.org.



Where Water is Gold and Lessons Abundant: Assisi Farm

Local villagers assist the sisters in caring for livestock and crops at Assisi Farm.

Assisi Farm is a verdant little haven in the hot and arid Tamil Nadu region of southern India. Five cows, two buffaloes, a few goats, and some chickens and rabbits roam near the coconut trees that are its main source of income. Mangoes and vegetables also grow there, cultivated by local workers and Sister Ann Celine Alapattukunnel.

Sister Ann Celine runs the farm for the School Sisters of St. Francis. Purchased by the sisters in 1981 to support the small Assisi Hospital (now a clinic) nearby, the 36-acre tract also supports the families who work there. The farm thrives as long as there is adequate water. When monsoon season ends and irrigation begins in January, the holding ponds and borewell become the farm's exclusive water source. By March, as temperatures soar over 100 degrees, water becomes scarce.

"This area is very, very hot," Sister Ann Celine said. "Once you're out on the farm in the sun, you get very tired. There is very little shade from the coconut and mango trees, and no air conditioning."

An Unexpected Ministry

Running a farm was not part of the original plan when sisters from our congregation arrived in Kanjikode to serve its desperately poor inhabitants. They focused on supplying the most urgently needed services, including health care, and by 1978, they had built the only hospital in town. The sisters did everything from delivering babies to treating heart attack patients, and cared for children with polio in a special wing.

The challenge the sisters faced, though, was that these patients could not afford to pay for their medical services.

"The people were so needy, we did not know how to meet the expenses of the hospital or the payment for the doctors, especially in the surgical and gynecological departments," Sister Ann Celine recalled. "By the grace of God, an offer came to us to get a farm."

Assisi Farm – once a hardscrabble home to a few struggling coconut trees – became a reliable, if unexpected, source of support for Assisi Clinic.

“A lot of work needed to be done, especially with ponds, borewells, plumbing, and repair work,” Sister Ann Celine said. “God really provided the means and people to help. Eventually, the existing coconut trees bore more fruit, and we were able to plant. Soon, we could sell coconuts, and the money could be used for the maintenance of the hospital.”

Life on the Farm

Sister Ann Celine lives with three other sisters at St. Joseph Convent about ten minutes from the farm.

“I supervise and sometimes work alongside the workers,” she says. “Our most important source of income is our coconut plants, but we also raise other fruits like guava, papaya, zapota and avocado, and we have vegetables like tomato, bitter melon, and eggplant.”

The workers include the families who live on the farm as well as day laborers. “Local people work here for daily wages, which is a great help for their livelihood,” Sister Ann Celine said.

“Life on the farm is always a blessing but at the same time a great challenge. The plants, especially the coconuts, require a lot of water. And wild animals can destroy the plants, so we are working to complete the fencing—a dire need for the farm.”

The Gift of Water

Thanks to a new irrigation holding pond, made possible through generous donor support, the coconuts are receiving the water they need. Completed this past January, the new pond has filled with rainwater and is stocked with fish, which provides another commodity for the farm. As the dry season approaches, its water will be used for irrigation.

Donor gifts also made possible the construction of a second pond and a borewell drilled into an underground aquifer. These projects will

A new holding pond stores water so it can be used for irrigation in the dry season.

enhance irrigation and supply more, clean drinking water to both humans and animals.

Like many other projects, however, the construction was put on hold by the outbreak of COVID-19 when authorities closed the border between the convent, located in one state, and the farm, located in another.

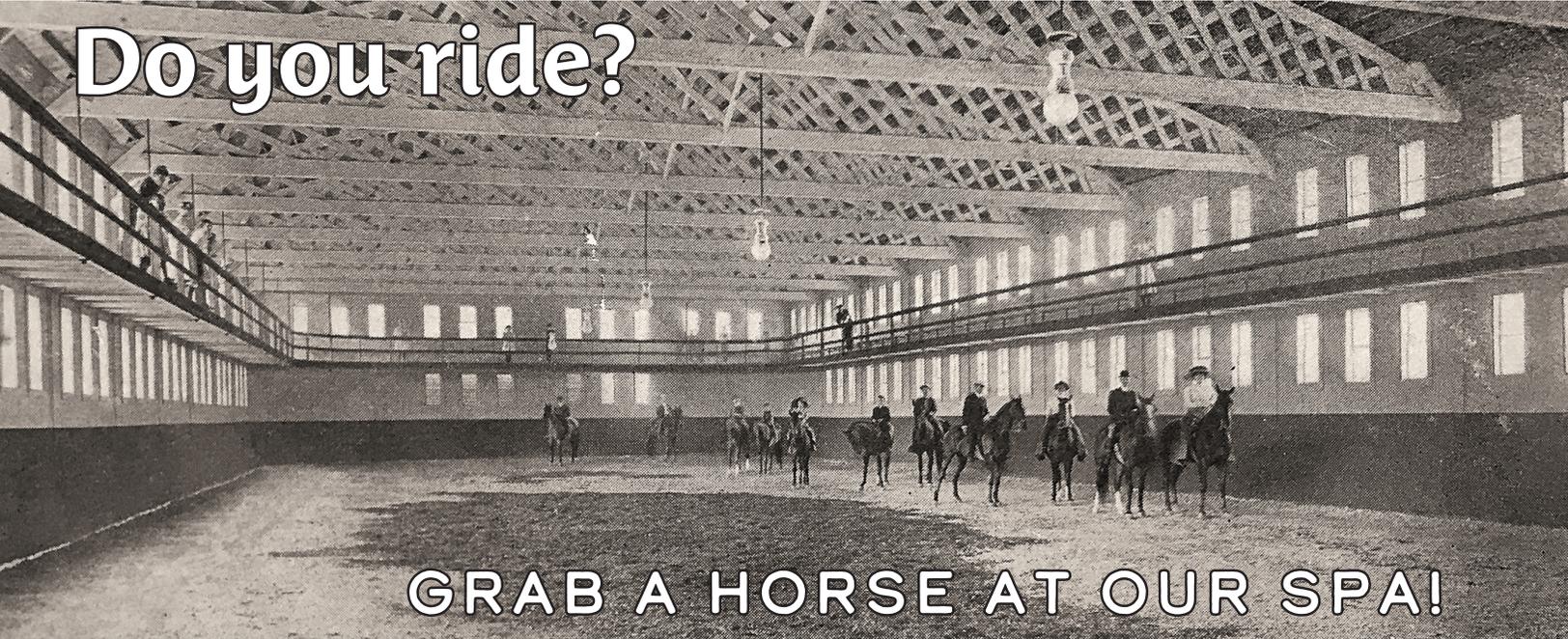
“We couldn’t get to the farm,” Sister Ann Celine says. “I had to manage operations by phone. We hope and pray that we can complete the projects by the end of this year because they are so needed.”

Sister Ann Celine appreciates how much donors’ generosity has helped the people, animals, and plants on Assisi Farm. Even when the land is baking in the heat, water helps ensure their survival.

“To our supporters: I cherish and value all the prayers and financial support you have given,” she said. “It is amazing. We pray for you. May you have peace, and may God bless each and every one of you.”

We invite you to read Sister Ann Celine’s vocation story and more details of daily life at Assisi Farm on our website:
www.sssf.org/SSSF/Media-Room.htm.





Do you ride?

GRAB A HORSE AT OUR SPA!

Archives are full of fun surprises, such as this circa 1911 image of the horse track at our sisters' Sacred Heart Sanitarium in Milwaukee!

This picture was found in our Archives during a research visit with author Sister Barbaralie Stiefermann, who is writing a new book on the sanitarium's history. To continue to attract wealthy clients, the sanitarium's buildings and equipment were frequently being enhanced and advertised.

This image appears in a brochure describing the latest improvements in spa therapy. The athletic facilities are described in this way:

One block west of our park is our indoor athletic field 60 x 180 feet, 30 feet high. It is connected with the Sanitarium by a tunnel, has a suspended running track and a tanbark floor for horseback riding. Adjoining is kept a fine stable of Kentucky saddle horses. The sisters knew that to keep potential clients interested, reporting on the latest amenities and treatments was paramount to the success of any high-end resort spa like the Sacred Heart Sanitarium.

Interested in making your own discoveries about our sisters and history? Visit the Archive's new web page to learn more about our services: <https://www.sssf.org/SSSF/Get-To-Know-Us/Archives.htm>.