

It's What We Do

A collection of stories about the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand, Indiana | 2014



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Welcome to the fourth annual edition of *It's What We Do*, devoted to how the sisters are touching the souls, hearts, and minds of those they serve.

You'll read how one sister deftly shows that racism still exists. How another spreads the word about Gospel messages as only a Benedictine sister can. And feel the reaction at an assisted living center as six sisters perk up the residents' day with a rousing musical performance.

See how one sister gets students to care about a required math class. And take a photo trip to our mission in Peru to view how our sisters assist many in need, including one who has worked tirelessly – and voluntarily – for 50 years.

You'll hear how the Women of the Rule group plays a key role in the sisters' mission, and has plenty of fun along the way. Plus you can listen in as others tell how the sisters have helped them in their lives.

So please enjoy your time with this issue. To keep up regularly with what the sisters are doing, please visit our website, www.thedome.org.



On the cover: Sister Brenda Engleman plays the harmonica as part of a six-sister musical performance for the residents of an assisted living facility.

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“Sister makes me do what I’m supposed to do”

By Greg Eckerle

Some of the white students in Sister Anna Corrine O'Connor's theology class once said racism didn't exist anymore. So Sister Anna calmly asked a black student, one of their friends, if she ever experienced racism. Yes, she responded, and proceeded to share aloud for the first time harsh details that made the white students squirm a little, but more importantly, pay attention to the real experience of racism, and change their minds about it.

On other class days, students will learn eye-opening details about poverty in their midst, or about how much they'd have to sacrifice if they lived on minimum wage. Or they'll learn about age discrimination. Or bullying, disabilities, and gender inequality. It's all part of the open atmosphere Sister Anna has created in the riveting social justice discussions in her theology classes at Presentation Academy, a Catholic college-preparatory high school for girls in downtown Louisville, Kentucky.

But Sister Anna's teaching does more than change minds. She motivates students to take action on social justice issues. A recent class started with a prayer that referenced Jesus carrying the cross. Sister Anna noted that 17% of Guatemalan children work instead of going

to school, a heavy cross for them to bear. She asked students if they knew anyone carrying a cross, then made a point of the importance of being nice to people. She punctuated it by requiring students to write down something they would do that day to show compassion. Students later talked about helping their moms clean the house, or just offering a compliment to someone stressed out.

Sister Anna has been teaching theology and social justice at Presentation Academy for 18 years. The school has a widely diverse group of students, from all economic levels and backgrounds. Many have lived through the issues being discussed. Some girls talk in class about a parent in prison, or a dad not paying child support, or ugly words heard about their race. Their testimonials change opinions like no textbook can, as Sister Anna well knows.

She often talks about the simple lifestyle of Benedictine sisters, and points out all the added personal possessions since the 1950s that some people think they now have to have. She recalls one student

Above: Sister Anna talks about a theology class assignment at Presentation Academy in Louisville.

“She’s such a sweet, caring person, and also very inquisitive, so she always wanted us to be inquisitive.”

saying she had a closet full of shoes she didn’t need, and promptly donated them to some needy teenagers. When some students see that Sister Anna doesn’t have the latest electronic device, and doesn’t wear the latest trend in clothing, she thinks “it helps them feel a greater sense of who they are, and that it’s OK.”

“We have some really honest, open discussions,” says Sister Anna. “There’s always somebody who converts after talking about an issue. That’s very rewarding for me. I’ve always been interested in justice. I used to want to convert the whole world. Now, if just one girl is impacted, I’m happy, because I think one person can make a difference. And it happens every semester.”

The students’ willingness to share personal experiences in Sister Anna’s class is a testimony to her Benedictine community’s emphasis on hospitality and being non-judgmental. It creates an environment where sensitive topics can be talked out.

“Other teachers tell me they don’t hear about that stuff,” she says. “I think the way we talk about it allows them to speak up. I feel happy about that. It gives them a chance to share something that sort of makes them feel strange, but then they find out it’s going on with other people, too, and it’s OK, they realize they can survive it and go on.” Parents tell her such discussions have been therapeutic for their children.

Jacqueline Back, the school’s director of admissions, was a student of Sister Anna’s 13 years ago. “She’s such a sweet, caring person, and also very inquisitive,” says Jacqueline, “so she always wanted us to be inquisitive. We had really good discussions in her class. It was nice to talk about everyone’s point of view, and seeing viewpoints we might not have been exposed to. It was great to be surrounded by people different from you, that grew up a lot different than you, and hearing about other people’s daily life.” Those perspectives would have gone unheard if not for Sister Anna’s open, honest discussions.

But her caring touch reaches outside the classroom, too.

Megan Hayes, a 2014 graduate, formed a bond with Sister Anna in freshman theology class that led to weekly discussions throughout her four school years. “She always has an ear for you,” says Megan. “You sit there and cry, she’ll listen, she’ll pat your back. She has a way of making you feel better. She guides you and makes you think about yourself. But you make the decision. She was really good at nurturing us to think for ourselves. She’s one of my biggest mentors.” Megan credits Sister Anna with helping her build better relationships with her father and brother after some rocky times.

Sister Anna’s theology class naturally covers spirituality and faith topics as well. In one session, she shared that “Jesus’ parables were very unique, as there is nothing to be compared with them,” and “what is said in the Gospels has been proven to be what Jesus taught, that’s what you need to know.” Later, laughter filled the room as students excitedly played a Jeopardy game with categories of Ancient Testimony about Jesus, The Gospels, The Historical Jesus, Reliability of Gospels, Vocabulary, The Church and Martyrs. Correct questions elicited happy shrieks and high fives from team members. Two famous quotes that resonated through the classroom were “No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus,” and “His personality pulsates in every word.”

A student and Sister Anna solve a computer issue.



“She makes sure everyone has their eyes opened to the teachings of the Catholic Church on social justice.”



Student Megan Hayes: “I just love (Sister Anna) so much. She’s so nice.”

Sister Anna believes the class helps the students in their faith life. “We talk about images of God and praying,” she says. “They talk about how that is helpful to them in their own prayer life, and in their understanding of God. We’ve done lectio divina, and they’ve really liked that.” Rebecca Mercer, the school’s director of student leadership, notes that Sister Anna gets to know all the girls on a personal level, which helps them on their faith journey.

Principal Barbara Wine says, “Sister Anna really helps our students who struggle in school. She will spend a lot of extra time with them, and comes up with different ways to teach all different learning styles. She also makes sure that everyone has their eyes opened to what the teachings of the Catholic Church are on social justice.”

But Principal Wine also highly appreciates Sister Anna’s volunteer spirit. “She sees a need before I ask somebody to do it. She’ll volunteer to do it for me. She’s done that all the years she’s been here.” So she routinely helps others carry a cross, just as she asks her students to do.

The school’s learning differences coordinator, Mary Wardrip, focuses on Sister Anna’s positive, but tough, nature. “Sister rarely has a discipline issue in her class. But she cares about her students, that’s what matters, and it shows. Sister’s strength is she reaches out to others. She gives a lot, and looks for a way to help.”

Mary most remembers a comment made by her daughter, who had Sister Anna as a theology teacher 10 years ago. “She said, ‘Sister’s hard on me, she makes me do what I’m supposed to do.’ I just said, ‘Yep, that’s why you’re in there.’” Mary laughs. “Yeah, she’s tough as nails, but in a loving way. That’s good, very good.” ■



Sister Anna leads a discussion on social justice issues in her theology class.



Driving Gospel messages home to healthcare leaders

By Greg Eckerle

Sister Karen Joseph was genuinely apprehensive about the reaction she'd get to her presentations last year at the bi-annual spiritual renewal for the leadership team of the Benedictine Health System.

She shouldn't have worried. She said the audience was very responsive, expressive, interactive, and really "down-to-earth." Just like Sister Karen is. Because, ironically, that's how attendees described her, too.

Benedictine Health System (BHS) is a nationally recognized mission-based health care system providing a broad range of housing and health services to aging adults. It has over 40 long-term senior care facilities throughout several states in the upper Midwest.

The system brought in nearly 70 of its top leaders for a three-day spiritual renewal called "Charting our Course, the Gospel as Guide," in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. It's little wonder that several of the Benedictine Sisters connected with the system who are familiar with Sister Karen's speaking presence highly recommended her to be the retreat leader. Because they know she lives with the Gospel as her guide.

Sister Karen gave four one-hour presentations during the three-day renewal. She encouraged the leaders to be continually aware and mindful of living in the present moment (otherwise you'll miss God, because that's where God is), to remain faithful amidst all of life's difficulties, and to be salt, to be light, and to be fully alive. She particularly challenged the audience to stay focused on what gives them life, and to be a "beacon in the reign of God."

Comments on participants' evaluation forms proved that Sister Karen struck a chord:

"Amazing messages by Sister Karen. I really feel a part of something bigger than myself."

"Her messages were easy to understand, and may it guide our days."

"Sister Karen gave us lots of appropriate food for thought and renewal. This is so refreshing."

"Her great message: Awareness. Awareness. Awareness."

"Sister Karen is relevant, charismatic, meaningful, humble."

Above: Sister Karen Joseph speaks at a spiritual renewal in Minnesota.

Becky Urbanski, BHS senior vice president, mission, marketing and education, said, "The renewal is a commitment to help our key leaders at our facilities, those that are providing the service for our residents and their families, so they can go back with a new perspective. We want people to remember we are part of a greater call, that we are called to do this work, and that it's bigger than ourselves. The retreat leader can make or break it. Sister Karen's down-to-earth style really resonated with our folks. She had really good practical guidance for people to think about. Sometimes health care administrators can have short attention spans, but they were fully engaged."

Becky quickly listed her favorite messages from Sister Karen's talks. Being aware of who we are and who we are not. The gift of the moment. God moments in the here and now. The reminder that we're here to make God visible on earth. And to live with passion, joy, and hope.

Sister Lisa Maurer, BHS mission integration director, said, "Sister Karen did a beautiful job about how to be Benedictine and bringing it into everyday life. She gave very personal examples that spoke directly to the heart. People appreciated her authentic portrayal of how to live out the Rule of Benedict in our life. Many commented how real she was, how she just gave of herself to us, and how she was very approachable."

Many in the audience told Sister Karen how nice it was to have a woman speaking, too. One participant advised her she had already developed a Powerpoint presentation of the main points to give to her entire group when she returned home. Others mentioned to her how practical the advice was. "Well, this is the practical stuff of the Gospel," Sister Karen chuckled.

Sister Karen wanted her messages to be practical enough to fit into the lives and work of the BHS leaders.

"Their ministries give them perfect opportunities to be salt and light for the world, with the effect they have on everybody's lives they touch, especially in the healing ministry they're in," she said. "The atmosphere they create in the workplace can make such a difference if they're thinking 'I want to be salt, be light, and fully alive.' They have enormous impact. And what a rippling effect it has, when they act this out, when they live with the Gospel as their guide."

Sister Karen said she was "shocked" to receive a note after the renewal that read, "I wanted to extend my gratitude for the wonderful spiritual retreat. Your teaching style was incredible. God has given you great gifts to share."

Although her insides were churning about her presentations, Sister Karen said others told her she seemed very calm. She smiles, a bit in wonder. "It's the grace of God. I always pray before I start talking, telling myself to get out of the way, and asking God to take over, to say whatever you want, and that I'm just here as your vehicle."

It's safe to say the BHS group feels she drove the messages home quite well. ■

Sister Karen Joseph addresses nearly 70 Benedictine Health System leaders.



California monk: Sister Anita ‘inspiring’

By Greg Eckerle

Sister Anita Louise Lowe’s deep love and understanding of the liturgy enlightened the entire Abbey of New Clairvaux, a Cistercian monastery of 20 monks in Vina, California.

Over five days, she presented 11 hours of class on the Liturgy of the Hours, the Eucharist, and the Liturgical Year. Attending were an international array of eight monks, from Vietnam, China, El Salvador, Canada, and California.

And they’re hoping she’ll return again to delve further into the subject matter. Because they know an expert when they see one. Sister Anita, whose regular ministry is director of liturgy and vocations co-director for the Ferdinand Benedictines, has a Masters of Arts degree in theology, with a concentration in liturgical studies, from Notre Dame University.

Sister Anita also gave a one-hour talk, “Preferring Nothing to the Work of God: Spirituality of the Liturgy of the Hours,” to the whole Cistercian abbey. She noted that the monastery’s abbot told her afterward ‘it was just what we needed to hear.’

That presentation focused on rekindling the Liturgy of the Hours, the daily prayer of Christians, as the “strong moment” of one’s day. Sister Anita is an advocate of making the Liturgy of the Hours primary, no matter what else we’re called to do during the day. “If we do that, there’s a sense the rest will fall in place,” she says.

“It is from this communal prayer that the rest of our day takes shape. The words may resonate in our hearts and minds throughout the day, calling once more to mind Christ’s presence at all times.”

She told the Cistercians that St. Benedict’s desire was for monks to be active participants in the liturgy, not passive spectators. Through her class, she facilitated that feeling within the monks.

One monk, Brother Gueric, said an important learning from the class for him was “how the various liturgical hours are really ‘moments of encounter’ with Christ. Sister Anita helped broaden my perception on liturgy. She helped me see that liturgy is primarily God’s work. We are merely called to participate in this work. That shift in my perception has stayed with me each time I go to church now. It frees my heart to sing God’s praise.”

He also talked of how “we are transformed by this encounter” with Christ by participating in the liturgy. It “fills those who participate with

abundant life . . . bringing the faithful into the very heart of Christ’s mystical body.”

Another monk, Brother Luis, noted, “The most important thing I learned from Sister Anita’s class is that liturgy is the point of contact between God and His people, wherein we become transformed and divinized. If this nugget of learning doesn’t get someone excited about liturgical prayer, nothing will.

“Our participation in liturgy changes us and moves us toward God.

“From the class I got a renewed sense of appreciation for the Opus Dei and, thus, for my vocation as a monk. Sister Anita’s personal conviction and enthusiasm about God and faith life is inspiring to me. Sister Anita means a lot to us. We want her back next year!”

For Sister Anita, a goal was for the monks “to understand liturgy is not just what we do, but that it’s God’s action on us, with the goal of helping us to become more of that person we were made to be, in the image of God.” Consider that mission accomplished.

She said her long love of the liturgy, just in understanding what it’s about and why we do it, has been deepened by the classroom experience, both as a student at Notre Dame and as a presenter in California.

“It was sort of funny,” Sister Anita says, laughing. “At the Cistercian abbey, it was the first time I’ve ever been called a professor. It was nice to hear.”

The monks agreed it was nice to hear her, too. ■



Above: Sister Anita Louise Lowe with her liturgy class of Cistercian monks in Vina, California.

Sisters' music enlivens assisted living center

By Greg Eckerle



Sisters (from left) Ann Francis Hillenbrand, Rose Wildeman, Brenda Engleman, Anita Louise Lowe, Mary Louise Uebelhor, and Karlene Sensmeier play a tune for the residents of Brookside Village, an assisted living center in Jasper, Indiana.

One dear, kindly senior resident of Brookside Village, an assisted living healthcare center in Jasper, Indiana, scooted forward in her wheelchair and handed over two \$1 bills.

"Can you give this to the nuns?" she asked, as sweet as could be. It was an offering for the volunteer musical performance at the facility by a six-member Combo group from the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand.

Over 40 Brookside residents enjoyed the recent concert, the sisters' fifth at the facility in the past few years. Included in the performing group were Sisters Brenda Engleman, Karlene Sensmeier, Anita Louise Lowe, Rose Wildeman, Ann Francis Hillenbrand, and Mary Louise Uebelhor. Another member, Sister Mary Frances Schafer, was unable to attend.

"The performance seems to lift up the residents' spirits," says Sister Brenda. "It's a good time for them and for us sisters, too. We just have fun for an hour. It's rewarding to us, just feeling we have touched their lives."

Audience comments confirm the benefits of the lively, upbeat music – "Thank you for making my day, I feel so much better." "This helps me forget about my problems."

Brenda Poselwait, Brookside's director of activities, said the day after the performance, "I really enjoyed last night. The residents are still talking about it. The therapy department was telling me this morning they were talking about it, too, that they really enjoyed it. Comments made were that they were so good, and were so funny.

"I think they are wonderful. Just to think that they are spiritual, yet they take the time out to bring joy to other people with their talents and their music. The sister (Rose Wildeman) playing the saxophone, that really amazed me. It's just different. And they have fun."

Poselwait, always searching for new activities for the center, had contacted Sister Brenda several years ago to set up the group's first appearance at Brookside. But better yet, that introduction has turned into something even more meaningful for Poselwait and Sister Brenda.

"Sister Brenda and I have contacted each other a lot," she says. "I've gone through some things, including an operation. We have prayed for each other a lot. Sister Brenda always says, 'I will pray for you.' I've developed a strong spiritual connection with her." ■



Sister solves math's “hardest task imaginable”

By Greg Eckerle

Sister Mary Cheryl Uebelhor says “as kids, when we played school, I was always the teacher, and it was always my first love.”

In real schools, she always loved math. “Algebra was interesting, like solving a puzzle,” she says. “You read a problem, write an equation, and solve it.” Her voice jumps with excitement from the mere description, and her smile reflects the great satisfaction she derives from a lifetime of puzzle-solving.

But such joy is not in the equation for students in the lower-level math classes she teaches at Brescia University in Owensboro, Kentucky.

The enduring puzzle she solves there is how to motivate many students who are scared silly about required math courses, who feel destined to fail, or simply hate it all.

Chris Tiaht, who heads Brescia's mathematics department, says, “In her gentle way, she nurtures these students, often reversing their negative attitudes towards math. That is the hardest task imaginable, and sister excels at it. She often goes unnoticed in this capacity, but I consider that a great compliment. Even a little friction could cause a significant uproar, but her courses always run smoothly and without complaint.

“Students describe her as very thorough, systematic, and patient. She is demanding, but cares about the success of everyone in her classes.”

Sister Mary Cheryl admits her students aren't enthusiastic about math. “We just plug along.” Yet she excels at that, too. At age 74, she is one of the oldest teachers on campus, but still loves her ministry. Student feedback proves she's as effective as ever.

Student evaluations of a recent calculus class gave her a score of 3.84 out of a possible 4.0. So no complicated equation is needed to know she's good; it's simple arithmetic.

One student wrote, “This is the most beneficial math class I've ever taken. Sister (Mary) Cheryl is clear and concise with definite requirements. Her no-nonsense attitude facilitates learning. I think she has a good approach to teaching the course. I would have her again as a professor.” Others stated: “Loved the class.” “Goes at the perfect pace for me.”

So it's little wonder the university clamored to get her back in 1999 after she had an earlier Brescia teaching stint from 1990 to 1992. In the interim, she was president of the sisters' former Marian Heights Academy in Ferdinand. When Bob Cinnamond, the head of Brescia's math department in 1999, read in an area newspaper that Sister Mary Cheryl was leaving as the academy president, he quickly called to see if she would be interested in returning to teach.

Above: Sister Mary Cheryl Uebelhor explains the solution to a math problem in her class at Brescia University in Owensboro, Kentucky.

"That's pretty nice, being asked back," she says. "You don't have to go out job hunting."

Bob, who became the department head in 1983 and still teaches there part-time as an adjunct professor, says he's worked with many brilliant teachers at Brescia, but many didn't have the gift to teach well. Not like Sister Mary Cheryl.

"I recommended her in 1999 because she was the best teacher for the job," says Bob. "She impressed me as very organized, and very thorough in her class presentations. She has incredible patience with students. Her approach to teaching is very logical and easy for students to understand."

"I was also impressed by her dedication in helping students. Students would line up to get help from her. She is ready to help them any time. When other teachers are 'busy' with other tasks, Sister is always there to help those in need. She has a beautiful gift of helping students."

And sometimes that help goes beyond explaining a math equation. As a Benedictine, being a good listener is second nature. So when students reveal reasons for missing class, or for struggling to keep up, personal travails often spill out. Some are single mothers with daycare challenges. One had lost his job and was living in his car with a pregnant girlfriend.

"I let them know I care about them, and I'm open to helping them," says Sister Mary Cheryl. "And they do feel pretty open when they come to talk, and sharing what's going on in their life."

She was pleasantly surprised when students she had taught at St. Benedict College and Forest Park High School 30 to 40 years ago sent her congratulatory cards when learning of her golden jubilee as a sister in 2009. They told her how much they enjoyed and appreciated her math classes.

Sister Mary Cheryl treasures those times when the initially scared-to-death students leave her class saying, "Oh, it wasn't so bad, I was dreading this, but I finally understood it."

Her patience, explanations, and motivational steps are key parts to the equation solving that ongoing challenge.

"I show them ways that they need this knowledge. Good practical examples are explaining the interest you have to pay on home mortgages, or the interest you have to pay back on credit card balances you don't pay off. They're just amazed at those figures."

And then they figure they better learn it. An equation that pays off in dollars and cents is always worth solving. ■



Sister Mary Cheryl Uebelhor outlines the steps to solve a math problem.

How our sisters serve in Peru

*Photos by
Sister Rosa Lee Koch*



Sister Romaine Kuntz checks a woman's blood pressure at her health clinic in the remote village of Santo Domingo.

Sister Romaine Kuntz tends to a leg sore.



Sister Arcelia Lopez Chumacero, in training to be a nurse, practices CPR in a nursing institute in Morropon.



Sister Nolberta Ramirez Jimenez works with children as a teacher's aide in a Morropon school.



Sister Felicita Renteria Navarro greets the fathers and students attending a Father's Day program at Saint Rita's Parochial School in Morropon.



Sister Irma Pena Coello serves food to students after school in Santo Domingo before they begin their long walk home, some up to three hours one way. Sister Irma also works full time at the local parish.



Sister Magna Lucia Castillo, as part of a parish communications team, gives an hour reflection over the radio on the Sunday evening of Pentecost in Santo Domingo. She spoke on how the Holy Spirit lives in each of us and decides how to guide us in our faith and our work. The radio broadcasts are a way to get spirituality to the people, many of whom live too far away to walk to church.



Sister Magna Lucia Castillo gives a reflection to high school students in Santo Domingo. She teaches religion to all the school's students.

Sister Mary Leah Baehl (at right) and a helper bake cookies that are sold at Sister Mary Leah's small store in Morropon. The store's profit helps pay expenses at an old folks' home that Sister Mary Leah runs.



Sister Maria Montalban Chavez, principal of Saint Rita's Parochial School in Morropon, teaches students songs and how to pray the rosary.



Sister Mary Leah Baehl checks on a patient in the old folks' home she runs in Morropon.



Sister Nolberta Ramirez Jimenez delivers communion to blind people's homes in the town of La Huaquilla every Thursday. The net keeps mosquitoes away. The townspeople are very appreciative of her weekly trips.



Sister Rosa Lee Koch (standing) of the Ferdinand Benedictines speaks to teachers at a gathering for her at Saint Rita's Parochial School in Morropon. Sister Rosa Lee was one of the original Ferdinand sisters that formed the mission in Peru in 1969. She was one of the founders of the school, which started with 60 high school girls. It has grown to over 900 boys and girls, kindergarten through high school. Sister Rosa Lee, who recently visited the Peru mission, was a teacher and assistant principal at the school. She moved from Peru in 1984. "It's very fulfilling to see the work and all the people our sisters are touching," says Sister Rosa Lee. "The sisters impress me highly. They take on more than they really have to do. And they're very attentive to their Benedictine life."



Our sisters in Peru: (kneeling in front) Sister Magna Lucia, and from left to right, Sisters Irma, Romaine, Felicita, Maria, Arcelia, Nolberta, and Mary Leah.

‘Sister who cures’ also hammers nails and fixes lamps

By Greg Eckerle

Sister Romaine Kuntz isn't sure why she was picked as one of the six Ferdinand Benedictines to open a mission in Guatemala in 1965.

"I guess it was a sign of God," she says. As usual, it was a great choice – she's fast approaching a milestone of 50 years of operating a health clinic in a foreign country, the last 45 in the remote village of Santo Domingo, high in the mountains of Peru.

When she left Indiana for Guatemala at age 27 in 1965, she knew absolutely no Spanish and had zero health care training. But she grew up as a farm girl in the rural town of Fulda, Indiana, so she knew a lot about self-sufficiency and learning on the fly.

In the beginning, she carried a Spanish-English dictionary and attended language classes. Then came the life-changer: the late Sister Mary Janet VanHorn, a registered nurse, spotted Sister Romaine's potential for the health care ministry because of her listening skills and sensitivity to people. They went to work together in a hospital in Guatemala City, and later in a dispensary clinic Sister Mary Janet opened in Coban, Guatemala. Sister Romaine, after the thorough training, ventured out on her own, first working as a nurse for local landowners, then working for the sick out of a small clinic established by a local priest.

In late 1968, Sister Romaine was one of six Benedictines in Guatemala who heeded the Church's call to establish a mission in Morropon, Peru. Noting the lack of a reliable health care service in the small village of Santo Domingo, 25 miles away up into the mountains, Sister Romaine established a health clinic there, and remains to this day. It was a humble beginning – two sisters lived in a small dwelling, with an outhouse, that they shared with two teenage students.

Sister Romaine operated the health clinic alone, but was supported in the first couple of years by free medicine she could dispense from the Diocese of Evansville. Later, she began making monthly 7-hour round trips to buy medicine to re-sell to the local people, a practice she continues today. She prices the medicine just barely above her cost,



so she can continue to buy future medicine, and to be able to provide drugs free for those simply unable to pay. Sister Romaine is a virtual one-stop shop, as she diagnoses and administers to the sick, almost like a doctor, nurse and pharmacist rolled into one. Plus the necessity of being a business manager and an accountant.

But maybe the most incredible fact is she's willingly done this, for nearly 50 years, as a pure volunteer. She's never been paid for her ministry work. Asked why she does it, she says simply, "I just see the need."

Tough conditions in the early years were no problem for a farm girl. "We were ambitious, and young, and energetic," she says, laughing. She used to deliver medicine to other tiny villages so hidden away that there were no roads, only a path suitable for a horse, or a determined walker. So she rode a horse to dispense medicine in the outskirts for a few years, until the horse was stolen. So then she simply walked to make her rounds every Thursday, leaving about 9:00, returning around 4:00. Her age no longer permits her to make such housecalls, so she dispenses medicine out of her small health clinic in a convent built by the parish in the early 1970s. She also lives there with two other sisters, thankfully with indoor plumbing and eventually, with electricity, after a few years of kerosene lamps.

Sister Romaine conducts glucose tests for diabetes, blood pressure checks, administers injections for pain, much of it for rheumatism and arthritis, provides antibiotics for infections and bad colds, bandages burns and clears out excess earwax. It's no wonder the locals have endearingly called her the "sister who cures" ever since she arrived.

Above: Sister Romaine administers a shot to a Peruvian woman in the 1970s during one of her trips to an outlying village. At her side is her dog, Nika.



Sister Romaine will celebrate her 50th year of voluntarily providing health care in a foreign country in February 2015. Here she stands by her medicine shelves in Santa Domingo, Peru.

And even though there are now two other pharmacists in Santa Domingo, a town of 500, the locals often say 'go to the sister because she has good medicine.' Part of that is their belief that Sister Romaine's medicine is more effective because she replenishes her supply monthly. Plus her pricing is much lower, as the others often price their drugs two to three times of cost. And there's the trust factor. She's been there so long she knows everybody, and her position of being a woman religious is well respected. Her supplier also recognizes her good works, sometimes donating items for her ministry.

"The most enjoyable part of my ministry is just being with the people, and seeing them get well," says Sister Romaine. "But it's tough when I can't provide the services they need."

She treats a lot of burns because fire is such an integral part of daily life. Most do not have electricity, so starting a fire right on the ground or floor, for cooking or warmth, is routine. "And we have a lot epilepsy here," she says. "They fall into the fire. It's just terrible, and so painful, those burns."

She often flushes insects out of people's ears, and delights when they exclaim, "I can hear!" Says Sister Romaine, "That just makes me feel so good."

Her clinic is open in the mornings on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday, generally serving about 40 people each day. That normally takes a huge dose of patience, as she will stay until the last person is served, sometimes as late as 2:00. And invariably there will be a knock on the door during her evening meal.

Not all customers have money to spare, so payment sometimes comes in the form of two or three eggs, fruit, or corn on the cob, or potatoes, or even a live chicken. "That all helps with our food bill, even the chicken," says Sister Romaine, chuckling. "We tie the chicken up, butcher it, and prepare it for eating." This farm girl is not squeamish. She knows how to live without modern conveniences. That includes electricians, plumbers and carpenters. She can take apart a non-functioning lamp, re-work the wires and bring it back to life. And the sisters built a table and foot stools for use in the clinic. "I'm very good at hammering a nail and sawing wood," she says, grinning as big as the outdoors.

Sister Romaine feels the long-time Benedictine presence, with the three in her village and with the five associated sisters in the larger town of Morropon down the mountain, has helped generate vocations from Santo Domingo. The Ferdinand sisters were the first women religious in the area. Currently, four of the eight Benedictine sisters in Peru are natives of Santo Domingo. Several other natives are members of other religious communities.

Sometimes, villagers will come to Sister Romaine to discuss troubling personal situations. Some turn into spiritual conversations. There's a level of trust and comfort with her that leaves no topic off limits.

Sister Romaine also makes a trip to Morropon once a month, to visit her fellow community Benedictines there, and to aid some other patients. One is a boy with cancer she's been seeing for years. She has long raised money to pay for the boy's 14-hour bus trips, with his mother, for cancer check-ups in Lima. Two patients are epileptics. "I get their medicine, because they're very poor, and the medicine is very expensive," she says. At times, Sister Romaine has held epileptics while they are having seizures, to keep them from falling.

They couldn't have been in more loving arms. ■



Sister Romaine rides a horse to make house calls to deliver medicine in the mountains of Peru in the early 1970s.

Good times for good causes

By Greg Eckerle

It's said laughter is good for your spiritual life. The Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand took that to heart at the recent Women of the Rule awards luncheon at the monastery, as one-liners came fast and furious.

Sure, the sisters are adept at praying. But don't kid yourself. They know how to have fun, too.

Women of the Rule, a philanthropy circle affiliated with the sisters, had gathered to vote on its annual grants to various proposals presented by the sisters.

The group of 75 women is dedicated to making a difference in the world by financially supporting the mission and ministries of the sisters. For a \$1,000 membership, women can cast a vote on the award proposals at the luncheon. And enjoy various programs and activities throughout the year.

It didn't take long for the quips to begin at the lunch.

The first request was for \$8,000 to convert a deteriorating section of a rocked pathway in the outdoor Grotto into an aggregate walkway. It was submitted by Sisters Mary Carmel Spayd and Mary Carmen Spayd, twin biological sisters who are well-known for working diligently on the monastery grounds, at the age of 89.

Sister Mary Carmen first made sure the audience knew she was the younger of the twins, by 45 minutes, and then cracked, "If you approve this project, Mother Mary will smile on you." You gotta love it.

After the laughter died down, Women of the Rule member Kelly Clauss, master of ceremonies, noted that "all of you have seen these two lovely women out in the weather, no matter the weather, just working in a tireless way to keep these beautiful grounds up." In announcing the winners later, Carolyn Fuhs, another Women of the Rule member, talked about often seeing the twins tending to flowers and pulling weeds, and even, incredulously, seeing them on a ladder cutting limbs out of a tree. Carolyn said their project would be fully funded and joked, "Mother Mary now is going to smile on all of us." When accepting the award, Sister Mary Carmel, to instant laughter, just deadpanned, "Our sweat and blood paid off."



Carolyn Fuhs (far left) and Sister Kathy Bilskie (seated, at right) enjoy Sister Mary Carmel's quip about "sweat and blood" paying off after her and Sister Mary Carmen's project received \$8,000.

Vocations co-directors Sisters Anita Louise Lowe and Teresa Gunter then asked for \$17,755 to fund a new marketing effort to attract women to enter the community. Sister Teresa said, "We are trying to invite women to live this life in a way that they have never dreamed. The way that you (Women of the Rule) back us is vital. A lot of us pray for vocations. It's utmost." In announcing later that the entire amount had been chosen to be funded, Carolyn said, "This is going to make a huge difference in a lot of ladies' lives. We've got to bring new ladies in, and I don't think you could have picked two better young women to represent you (than) Sister T and Sister Anita."

Sister Kathy Bilskie then requested \$9,200 for new dining room tables and chairs for Hildegard Health Center, the monastery's nursing facility for sisters. She added to the light-hearted air with, "I have bosses, too, the ladies that live in Hildegard. I'm supposed to start out by saying, thank you for what you've done in the past and they will continue to pray for you no matter what you do today." When announcing this project was fully funded, Carolyn said, "This one is sweet and dear to me. Those women are just wonderful. You can read to them, take them out on walks. If you can volunteer, you need to come, because what they give you is just unreal. It's just amazing. You'll leave here feeling like you've never felt before."

Sister Teresa Gunter (far left) explains vocations' new marketing approach.



Another proposal fully funded was the Sister Barbara C. Schmitz request for \$5,000 for new audio-visual equipment for the monastery's dining room and St. Gertrude Hall. Also allocated was \$817 for iPads for general use, a request of Sister Kim Mandelkow.

Prior to the voting, Sister Barbara Lynn Schmitz, prioress, jokingly reassured the women that contrary to what they might think, they can all go to Heaven no matter what they vote for.

In a more serious vein, Carolyn shared, "As always, we are so grateful to all of the sisters here at St. Benedict. They touch each and every one of our lives in many ways, as they go out into the community. We are happy as Women of the Rule to be able to help them in their different missions."

In closing remarks, Sue Ellspermann, a Women of the Rule charter member, and also Indiana's lieutenant governor, said of the sisters, "We love your mission work, we love what you do, we love who you are and how you do it. It's a real pleasure to be involved."

In her opening welcome to the Women of the Rule, Sister Barbara Lynn said, "What a wonderful group of women to be associated with. We love you dearly. You have become such a vital part of our lives. It's just amazing when you walk spiritually with someone else, with your hopes, your dreams, and all that you're about in life, it really bonds you, doesn't it? We're able to say yes, we are changing the world. You've touched the lives of so many this past year. You make things happen. We honor that and are appreciative."

The group awarded \$40,772.16 to the sisters' various proposals this year. And had a lot of fun doing it.

For more information about Women of the Rule, or if you are interested in joining, contact Sister Barbara C. Schmitz at bcschmitz@thedome.org or at 812-367-1411. ■



Carolyn Fuhs of the Women of the Rule hugs Sister Mary Carmel Spayd after announcing her project request was fully funded at the group's annual awards luncheon.



How Centering Prayer changes hearts

By Greg Eckerle

At the end of the recent Centering Prayer program presented by Sisters Kathy Bilskie and Celeste Boda, attendee Bob Leszczynski told the group that the prayer practice “truly changes your heart.”

For Bob, the journey began innocently enough in 2007 when he and his wife, who live in Fort Wayne, Indiana, traveled to southern Indiana to enjoy the fall foliage colors and visit some wineries. They happened upon the Monastery Immaculate Conception in Ferdinand. Bob wandered into the “For Heaven’s Sake” gift shop and bought a book on Centering Prayer.

He soon became a serious practitioner of the prayer form, which not only changed his heart, but changed his life.

The sisters’ program he recently attended at Kordes Center in Ferdinand “gave me a few good tips on the practice, but it mostly confirmed I am on the right track.” And Bob’s success easily confirmed what the sisters said about the benefits of Centering Prayer to the group of nine.

Centering Prayer is a silent prayer method that prepares us to receive the gift of God’s presence. Sister Kathy said the prayer’s center is consenting “to God’s presence and action in the heart and soul.” It’s about forging a deeper relationship with God. “God, in unconditional love, takes the initiative and calls us to this form of prayer,” she said. “God loves you so much, that God wants to be closer and closer to you. This is one way. It’s not the only way.”

Sister Celeste noted that, through Centering Prayer’s silence and solitude, one can grow in self-knowledge and face what is painful in their life. “You need that to let it go, to let God heal it,” she said. “God is with us all the time, we just have to finally sit down and let God speak. That’s where Centering Prayer assists us, to arrive at that quiet, where we can hear God. It becomes a way of being with God.

“Why would you not want to do this? It’s the opening up of what seems impossible to us, but remember all things are possible with God. We can’t do it, but God will. We just simply have to consent.”

Which is what Bob finally did when he began practicing Centering Prayer after his 2007 trip to the Ferdinand monastery. “My life-changing realization came prior to Easter (in 2008),” says Bob. “I had struggled with certain temptations all my life that I would try to control and pray about, but that I could not make go away. Sometimes I fell down and I’d recommit myself, and I thought the cycle would go on forever. During Centering Prayer, I did not pray for anything, I just tried to listen to God. I can’t say I directly heard God ever, though there were some interesting experiences. I almost always felt refreshed after each period. One day I realized I was no longer tempted by those

Above: Sister Kathy Bilskie talks about the benefits of Centering Prayer during a recent program at Kordes Center.

Sister Celeste Boda emphasizes a point on Centering Prayer.



things I fought all my life. I now feel a freedom to do God's will without being pulled away. The big block in my life has completely gone away. I will add that many of the small sins, being upset at people, saying or doing things I regret later, have vastly diminished. I think Centering Prayer has led me to be more patient and less judgmental. It allows us to listen to God, to perceive God's will, love, and compassion."

Sister Kathy, who says that Centering Prayer is not new, that the Gospel talks about the "stillness prayer," feels that it can lead to a personal transformation, just as Bob described. "If you open yourself to the presence of God, and try to let God be God, and not taking control yourself, you can be transformed. It's work. It's a movement beyond conversation with Christ, to communion with Christ. We put our thoughts out, and let God heal. We believe God is with us in the quiet, and we believe this develops our relationship. We then learn how to carry that out through service to others."

Consenting to God's action is the heart and soul of Centering Prayer, says Sister Celeste. "The reason we can do this is because God's presence is already alive within us. We're simply sitting in God's love. The transformative process isn't ours, it's God. We're just surrendering. It's just a stillness, and letting God do the work. Over time, Centering Prayer has its effect. You may notice situations don't make you angry like they used to. A greater understanding of human needs emerges, and leads you to respond with acts of mercy and compassion."

Which sounds eerily like what Bob has experienced the past few years.

"I came to accept all those around me as they are creations from God, as I am," says Bob. "Others have their daily struggles I cannot know. I now see that if someone cuts me off in traffic or does something that offends me, it's not about me. It rarely upsets me anymore, they (have) crosses to carry that I cannot see. I accept others as they are."

"My heart was changed, eliminating the temptations, and to be free to do God's will." ■

"Over time, Centering Prayer has its effect. You may notice situations don't make you angry like they used to."



School honors sisters as ‘Distinguished Family’

By Greg Eckerle

The Sisters of St. Benedict have had a string of teachers, principals, librarians and tutors serving at Holy Family School in Jasper, Indiana, for over 40 years.

Collectively, it's easy to see why they're considered as another family of the parish. And the parish duly honored them, naming the sisters as the 2014 Holy Family Distinguished Family Award winner as part of its Catholic Schools Week activities.

Thirteen of the 21 sisters who served Holy Family School attended a special Mass for the award winner, along with all the students, teachers and administrators for the K-8 school.

During the Mass, Father John Boeglin told the congregation, "I'm very proud to be taught by sisters, also. Almost all my teachers were Benedictines. This is a big deal. We're so proud of the Benedictine sisters who were able to come here today. This is really awesome.

"May God really bless you for all your efforts. Boys and girls, these people are witnesses to serve Jesus, and they're happy people. As teachers, when you help somebody learn and grow, not only academically, but you grow with Jesus, too, and that's what the sisters did, and I thank them for that service."

Each of the sisters was introduced and many shared pleasant memories with the crowd.

Sister Mary Beth Maier, who taught English at the school from 1974 to 1987, said, "I can't go anywhere in Jasper without being recognized by one of my students, or their parents, or their brothers and sisters. And I always have that warm feeling of just being accepted here."

Sister Susan Ann Necas, currently serving at the school as a music teacher, said, "This has been probably one of the happiest years of my life. I love the students and staff."

Sister Elnora Shilder, a 26-year librarian, said, "I enjoyed very much teaching the children and reading to them. I read to the first and second grade, and kindergarten, every time they came to the library."

Holy Family principal Sally Sternberg presented the award during the Mass. She told the audience of a teacher who said she was blessed to have worked alongside the sisters, noting they live lives dedicated to God and share the Gospel through their daily interactions with students, colleagues and parents. Sternberg, smiling, also shared a note from a former student who wrote of the sisters, "They were very strict in the classroom but at the same time very compassionate in their teaching. There were those moments of humor, too. I will never be able to look at Kermit the Frog the same way (Sternberg displayed a stuffed Kermit toy on the podium) without thinking of Sister Mary Beth Maier, my eighth grade teacher. She used Kermit the Frog as a teaching aid, and if you were not paying attention in class, Kermit would opt to pay you a visit." Sternberg, grinning, noted that "before eighth grade, this student didn't know that frogs could fly."

Above: The sisters who attended the Holy Family Mass honoring the 21 Benedictines for serving at the school were (front row, from left) Sisters Mary Leon Kiesel, Laura Marie Schmitt, Mary Beth Maier, Benita Biever, Elnora Shidler, Lorraine DeVault, and Mary Karen Hill, and (back row, from left) Geneva Stumler, Louise Laroche, Jolinda Nass, Susan Necas, Marilyn Schroering, and Leona Schlachter.



Holy Family School fourth grade students gather around Sister Benita Biever (seated) after her brisk harmonica performance. She is holding a token of appreciation presented by the children, a cross they made, accompanied by Bible verses by each of their signed names. Each classroom gave a gift to the sisters for “the outstanding work they have done in forming our children and adults in the person of Jesus Christ.” Standing next to Sister Benita is Sister Mary Beth Maier.

After the Mass, the sisters divided up and visited each classroom, addressing the students and also fielding questions. Ironically, a fourth grade student asked Sister Mary Beth what discipline was like when she taught. “It wasn’t bad at all after that first year,” Sister Mary Beth recalled. “The pastor said he wanted discipline. They kind of needed it, so that’s what we worked on that first year. But Kermit (the students giggle), Kermit was the way we relieved a little tension. We became lighter when Kermit would fly around.” She smiled. Kermit had helped her bridge the generations, and the fourth graders peppered her with more questions. What made you want to become a nun? “I had Benedictine sisters as teachers. I admired them very much. I liked to pray, I wanted to pray like they prayed. I wanted to live a happy life like I saw them living.”

Meeting children in the same classroom with Sister Mary Beth was Sister Benita Biever. Sister Benita wrapped up a 40-year career as a teacher in various Catholic elementary schools at Holy Family in 1980. A sister for over 75 years, she showed she still knows how to connect with today’s students. She just pulled out her harmonica and belted out one rousing tune after another. The lively performance, which included “You Are My Sunshine” and “Oh Where Oh Where Has My Little One Gone?” had the kids entranced, smiling, moving to the music, and clapping. Yet another teaching moment for the sisters.

In her concluding remarks at the Mass, Sternberg thanked the sisters for their guidance, their discipline with compassion, their humor and loving spirit. “Thank you for the faith that you instilled in those you

taught and who are now passing on our faith to the children. Thank you for your dedication and service to Holy Family School. You continue to be a great example to students and parents of how to live a life dedicated to Jesus and service to others.”

In her article about the award that appeared on the National Catholic Educational Association website, Sternberg wrote, “. . . Holy Family School has been blessed to have the continual presence of the sisters . . . they have challenged students to grow in their faith, strive for academic excellence, and to live out the Gospel message through service to the parish, local and global communities . . . “

In speaking for the sisters at the end of the Mass, Sister Louise Laroche, who taught 25 years at the school, said, “We’re so proud and honored to be here today, to have the privilege of serving you . . . and it’s such a joy and honor to have my two families here today, so that my school family can meet the family that nourishes and supports me . . . and also that my sisters, that you can meet my other family, my wonderful students, friends, colleagues, parents, and grandparents.”

Ferdinand Benedictines who served at Holy Family are Sisters Lorraine DeVault, Mary Karen Hill, Elnora Shidler, Mary Beth Maier, Mary Claude Croteau, Sarah Kares Becker, Aloysius Gutgsell, Jolinda Nass, Benita Biever, Geneva Stumler, Estelle Knapp, Mary Hilary Fehribach, Jan Youart, Leona Schlachter, Laura Marie Schmitt, Marilyn Schroering, Mary Leon Kiesel, Stephanie Seng, Mary Carol Kinghorn, Louise Laroche, and Susan Necas. ■

Learning to heal

By Laura Reckelhoff

Trish Beddoe volunteered to be the first to lie on the table during the Compassionate Healing seminar at Kordes Center. Presenters Sister Anita Louise Lowe and Sister Michelle Mohr gave instruction for her to breath, concentrating on breathing in God's light and love and breathing out all bad feelings.

The sisters then stood at Beddoe's head and feet, placing their hands under her head and around the ball of each foot. After a few minutes Sisters Anita Louise and Michelle moved to Beddoe's side, placing their hands on her shoulders and hands, then again moving back to her head and feet.

After this compassionate healing touch, Beddoe said she had a "feeling of overall well being."

She was really excited when she found out she later got to lie on the table again when all class participants took turns rotating between lying on the table and practicing the healing touch.

The practice was the afternoon culmination of a morning spent learning about the history of healing in scripture and in the Benedictine tradition. What compassionate healing really means and other types of energy healing were also discussed.

Sister Anita Louise stated a few times, "Anyone can be a compassionate healer."

Compassion implies involvement in a situation. It is about making yourself available to others.

Healing refers to a state of balance, wholeness, and harmony. It can take place on the physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual level.

Theresa Bauer later told Sister Michelle, "You put people at ease with the information in the morning." At the end of the day, Bauer was at ease with being a compassionate healer, saying, "This, to me, seems so uncomplicated." ■



Sister Anita Louise Lowe and Sister Michelle Mohr lead the seminar.

Monastery Immaculate Conception
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How you can be part of what we do to help others

- Visit Monastery Immaculate Conception – for Mass, a tour, community prayer, or a peaceful stroll on our grounds.
- Explore and renew your faith at a program hosted by our Spirituality Ministry.
- Volunteer your time and talents.
- Consider becoming an Oblate.
- Ask for our prayers. It's what we do, at least three times a day.
- Visit our gift shop, For Heaven's Sake, either in person or online (forheavensake.org). Our monastery-baked cookies are always available there.
- Or support our ministries with a gift.

However you wish to take part, we welcome you to our community with joy. Because hospitality is another thing that we do.