

Order attentive to dignity of human person, reconciliation of all

By Sister Antonia Cooper, OSF

It was 1928 when a request was received by the superior general of the Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Child Jesus, based at Kloster Oberzell, Wurzburg Germany, to send sisters to the United States. The request came from the provincial of the Order of Friars Minor, Conventual in Rensselaer, N.Y., to staff their seminaries and friaries. In response, the first five sisters crossed the Atlantic and arrived after their 10-day voyage on April 9, 1929.

The community was founded on the Feast of Pentecost, May 27, 1855, by Antonia Werr, whose burning desire was to minister to “Women in Need,” and along

with four others, welcomed women who had been released from prison. The Mission Statement of the recent 2013 General Chapter, based in the founding Charism, is redefined and broadened for society today: As Franciscan Servants of the Holy Child Jesus, we live the Gospel. As God became vulnerable and powerless, so we allow ourselves to be touched by the realities of others’ lives. We uphold the dignity of every human being, giving women a voice and empowering them to begin anew.

In the years following the arrival of those first sisters, about 75 others were sent to minister in the newly formed Region of the Holy Family, based in New Jersey. The ministries of those early

pioneer sisters extended to 11 different stations of the Conventual and Capuchin Friars, in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Kansas; serving in various places that were opened over the years.

Of course cooking and laundry was far from the founding charism to women and girls in need. In the United States, this ministry took shape with single moms, mostly in their teens, to “protect their reputation” in the years from 1934 to 1976. St. Elizabeth’s Home, Yardville, served more than 4,000 girls and 5,000 infants. In the years that followed, this ministry came to an end with societal changes. During the 18 years which followed, the community then provided housing for 35 women who were being reintroduced into society from large institutions for the mentally handicapped, such as Totowa, as well as from private homes.

Villa Maria Nursing Home, North Plainfield, opened its doors in May 1938 to the elderly needing nursing care. Over the years, the buildings were expanded to better service the needs of the growing population. With the opening of Villa Maria, the regional headquarters was

established, expansion for the growing community took place, with additional space for the formation of the young members. From here sisters were sent out to be educated as nurses, administrators, social workers. A new ministry was opened in New York City as a new expression of the charism when sisters began working in Covenant House.

Over the years, the community has experienced expansion of its members and ministries. In more recent years, our corporate ministries have diminished with the loss of sisters and death. The remaining sisters continue to seek ways to live the charism, and these through hospitality and with personal contacts. Sisters volunteer in areas of their expertise. Spiritual direction and retreats is another area of ministry.

We continue to live out our Franciscan way of life as outlined in our Identity Statement of our 2014 Regional Chapter: As Franciscan Servants we live in the Truth and Simplicity of Christ, Attentive to the Dignity of the Human Person and The Reconciliation of all people.

Sister Antonia serves as Regional Minister and General Leadership Councilor



By Sister Mary Jo Burghduff

“Before you were born, I called you. Before I formed you in your mother’s womb, I chose you” (Jer 1: 4)

I was born and raised in Grand Rapids, Mich., into what some might call a “pious” family. Well, I’m not so sure about pious, but we definitely were church going folk; we lived only a block away. We prayed family rosary; I attended Catholic grade school and high school, and there were several religious among my forebears. My uncle was a Franciscan priest, and my mother had two cousins who were Sisters of Mercy and another who was a Dominican.

Even with all this, as a young girl I never really gave religious life a thought — at least not any serious thought. But God has a way of getting a person where he wants them to be. When I first felt the call I didn’t really feel it so much as a “call” it was more like a suggestion from God. I wasn’t sure. Actually, my thoughts had always gone in the direction of raising a large family. But if God was really calling me to religious life, who was I to say no?

Servants of the Holy Child Jesus:

Reflection by a Sister of Servants of the Holy Child Jesus

Seeing the Community’s tiny, little add in *The Sacred Heart Magazine*, I was totally taken by the name of the congregation, and by the picture of the Christ Child in the crib. What simplicity, what humility! God would take on our humanity so that we could share in his divinity. Through that attraction, God was leading me, guiding me. I only needed to have the courage.

So, gathering up what courage I could, and a few belongings, (the sort of things a nun might need, you know “Nun Stuff.” Black, of course) I kissed my family goodbye and boarded the train to New Jersey. Eventually I stood, a 17-year-old, pimple-faced kid, on the doorstep of Villa Maria in North Plainfield.

That was 53 years ago. But God continues to lead, to guide. Now, as I celebrate my Golden Jubilee, I look back on a wide variety of ministries and life experiences — nursing as an L.P.N. in Villa Maria, our home for the elderly; working with mothers and babies at Covenant House; receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology from Fordham University, Bronx, N.Y.; serving as associate director of the Office of the Mission Diocese of Metuchen — Holy Childhood Association; campus minister at Sacred Heart School, Vailsburg; teacher’s aid in Pre-K 2 at Our Lady of Czestochowa in Jersey City, and, most recently I spent six months caring for orphaned and abandoned children with our community in Mbongolwane, South Africa.

All that we are, all that we have, all that we do is gift from God. It is ours only to be grateful.



Called to the Priesthood?

Are you or do you know someone who is considering a vocation to the Priesthood?

The St. John Vianney House of Discernment will begin meetings this fall and winter to assist you on your journey.

The dates and topics of the meetings are:

- Oct. 26: “It was about four in the afternoon . . .” —*Hearing the Call*
- Nov. 23: Signs of a Vocation and Developing a Spiritual Plan of Life
- Dec. 29: Celibacy, Chastity, Charity and Cheerfulness
- Jan. 28: Q & A with Seminarians
- Feb. 29: Applications and the Admissions Process

Meetings are held from 7:30 to 9 p.m.

Please consider attending any or all of the sessions.

For more information and to RSUP, please contact the Office of Vocations:

E-mail: vocations@diometuchen.org • Phone: (732) 562-2457