

# 175 years later, SSND presence remains strong

Education is primary charism of School Sisters of Notre Dame

By Marilyn Jozwik

Special to your Catholic Herald

**MILWAUKEE** — Chances are that any middle-aged or older person who grew up Catholic in the Milwaukee Archdiocese either experienced Notre Dame sisters or knows someone who did.

Dozens of elementary schools in the area, as well as Messmer and now closed-Notre Dame high schools and Mount Mary College, have been staffed by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Thousands of students sat in the classrooms of the Notre Dame sisters and benefited from their commitment to education.

Today, as the SSND celebrate their 175th anniversary, their presence is still keenly felt in the Milwaukee Archdiocese with the sponsorship of Mount Mary College, Notre Dame Middle School, and the TYME Out Youth Center in Stone Bank. The SSND Milwaukee Province also sponsors Notre Dame High School in Talofolo, Guam. Besides these four sponsorships, the sisters have been involved in various ministries such as Rising Stars Tutoring, the Milwaukee Achiever Literacy Services, Sunseed Eco-Education Center in Mount Calvary, and the Milwaukee Safe Streets Initiative.

In 1833 Caroline Gerhardiner, who took the religious name of Mary Theresa of Jesus and was later beatified as Blessed Mother Theresa of Jesus, founded the order in Bavaria.

She dedicated the community to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to helping poor girls in rural areas. The sisters' ministry today is focused on education. The SSND North America Web site <ssnd.org> explains: "For us that means enabling persons to reach the fullness of their potential as individuals created in God's image and assisting them to direct their gifts toward building the earth...."

Sr. Mary Luke Baldwin, 85, who joined the order in 1945 after being impressed with the sisters she met as a student at Mount Mary College described how the order has changed. "One of the biggest changes is our living out of our vow of obedience: our commitment to unity and community is an ongoing experience and challenge of shared responsibility. This calls for participation in decision-making which is "discerning, reflective, prayerful, dialogic," she said.

Less than 15 years after its founding and successful establishment in Europe, the sisters were ready to move across the Atlantic. Almost single-handedly, one woman sowed the seeds that grew into a forest of SSND schools in the Milwaukee area in the 1800s.

In 1848 Mother Theresa appointed an energetic and creative colleague, Sr. Caroline Friess, to be in charge



**A School Sister of Notre Dame works with children in a school library in this photo taken during the 1950s.** (Submitted photo courtesy SSND archives)

of schools and business matters. Two years later, Sr. Caroline, a 26-year-old from Bavaria, was appointed vicar in North America and founded a motherhouse in Milwaukee.

Within weeks of her arrival in Milwaukee in December 1850, Sr. Caroline helped establish the first SSND parish school at what is today Old St. Mary's in downtown Milwaukee.

Several months later, a school was opened next to the motherhouse convent called St. Mary's Institute. The buildings dominated an entire block bounded by Milwaukee, Ogden, Jefferson and Knapp streets. Among the students were the daughters of Solomon Juneau, Milwaukee's founder and first mayor.

Sr. Caroline's passion for the SSND mission spread quickly throughout southeastern Wisconsin — and the nation. By the turn of the century, the SSND were teaching in more than 30 parish schools in the Milwaukee area.

Sr. Caroline traveled most of the year, from the Mississippi River to the East Coast, for the SSND. She survived train and boat accidents, including an explosion

on a Mississippi steamboat that killed all but 160 of 500 passengers. Undaunted, she worked feverishly to provide schools and orphanages for the children of immigrants, as well as Native Americans.

Typical of the early schools started by the sisters to serve immigrant children was St. Stanislaus, begun in 1868, on Milwaukee's Mitchell Street — the center of the Polish community. Among those early students were children of Kashube, fishermen from the Baltic seacoast in Poland who settled on nearby Jones Island. The children had to be ferried to the mainland before a school was built on the island.

SSND parish schools dotted the Milwaukee area, making it easy for Sr. Caroline to visit. "She would walk from the motherhouse all the way to SS. Peter and Paul," said Sr. Mary Luke, who wrote a history of Mother Caroline.

Upon Mother Caroline's death in 1892, the Milwaukee Sentinel wrote: "Her energy knew no limit and under her guidance schools were organized throughout the country, until now they number more than 200, with an attendance of 70,000 in 17 states and 29 dioceses ... Her good deeds and the charm of her personal character had made her beloved wherever she was known."

After Mother Caroline's death, the SSND continued to staff and organize Catholic schools the Milwaukee area. The high point came in the 1920s when the sisters began teaching at Messmer High School in Milwaukee. The school thrived for decades, becoming a leader in academics and athletics. In 1984, the archdiocese closed the school due to declining enrollment. It reopened that fall as an independent school.

"We still have our hearts there," said Sr. Mary Luke.

In 1929, the SSND moved St. Mary's Institute, which they had founded in Prairie du Chien, to Milwaukee and re-opened as Mount Mary College. In 1932, they began teaching at Notre Dame High School in Milwaukee (previously known as St. Stanislaus High School). The school closed in the 1980s.

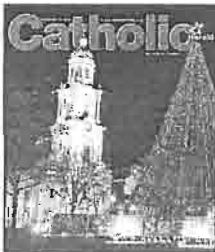
An article in the Chicago Tribune on Oct. 24, 1933, announcing the 100th anniversary of the order, mentioned special celebrations at the motherhouse at 1324 N. Milwaukee St., and the convent in Elm Grove as well as the schools that they staffed.

The order's growth locally matched its success throughout the nation and globally. Throughout the 20th century, provinces and missions were established, not only in North America, but also in Asia, Africa and South America.

In 1959, the 109-year-old, deteriorating motherhouse

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## On our cover



In this 2006 photo, the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist and the decorations in Cathedral Square glow, combining for one of the most festive sights of the Advent and Christmas seasons in downtown Milwaukee. (Catholic Herald photo by Stephen Olszewski)

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### Subscription Information

Phone: (414) 769-3500 — \$45 Non-parish members / \$38 Parish members

### Postmaster

Send address changes to: Catholic Herald, P.O. Box 070913, Milwaukee, WI 53207-0913 — Phone: (414) 769-3500

Published weekly, except first week in January and February, third week in June, first, third and fifth week in July, and second and fourth week in August by the Milwaukee Catholic Press Apostolate, 3501 S. Lake Dr., St. Francis, WI 53235-0913. ISSN 1094-589X USPS 093880 Periodical postage paid at Milwaukee, WI.

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on Milwaukee Street was closed and low-income housing called Convent Hill was built on the site. The motherhouse moved that year to Notre Dame of the Lake in Mequon at Highland Road and Lake Shore Drive. In 1983, the Mequon property was sold to Concordia University and the province offices were moved to Marshall Street in Milwaukee, not far from the original motherhouse. In 1997, the province offices were transferred to Notre Dame of Elm Grove. The campus in Elm Grove also is a retirement and assisted living residence for Milwaukee province SSNDs.

The SSND also has a long history serving inner city schools, especially in the 1960s, and as the sponsoring agency for Head Start programs at St. Michael, St. Francis and St. Boniface parishes. The sisters have also been involved with Spanish-speaking communities in Milwaukee and Waukesha.

Today, more than 3,700 sisters are serving in 36 countries. SSND works with the United Nations as an NGO (non-governmental organization), giving them an international platform for their mission. In the SSND jubilee booklet, Sr. Ann Scholz, director of the SSND UN-NGO office, said, "The School Sisters of Notre Dame are committed to ensuring that all people have the opportunity to develop their full potential as individuals created in God's image."



School Sister of Notre Dame Sara Jean Donegan, at left, a dentist and instructor in Marquette University's Dental School is pictured at work in the mid-1960s.

School Sister of Notre Dame Sara Jean Donegan, above, continues to serve as a dentist and instructor in Marquette University's Dental School, Milwaukee, in this 2005 photo. (Submitted photos courtesy SSND archives)

## Mother never gave up dream of religious life

Vows are gift from God, says Sr. Katie Frank

By Amy Guckeen

Catholic Herald Staff

**ST. FRANCIS** — Sr. Katie Frank always felt a call to religious life. There was only one problem — she wasn't Catholic.

Growing up in Cedarburg, Sr. Katie's plans to attend college changed when her father became ill. Unsure of what to do, her sister gave her the answer.

"Oh, Kathryn, you'd make a wonderful nun," Sr. Katie said recounting the conversation. "I said, 'I think so, too, except we're Lutheran!'"

Instead, Sr. Katie married, gave birth to a daughter and worked in a bank for 20 years. Becoming Catholic because she thought "it was really important if we wanted to have a family that we agree on religion," Sr. Katie still thought of life as a sister from time to time.

"Anytime I would hear about religious life I would've thought it would've been wonderful — I'm Catholic now," Sr. Katie said. "But I'm married."

Involved in her parish, St. Cecelia, Thiensville, now a part of Lumen Christi, Mequon, Sr. Katie taught CCD, belonged to the choir and served as an extraordinary minister of holy Communion. Going through her divorce, Sr. Katie leaned on the strong foundation she had in her faith when she found herself single again.

"It's been my faith. My trust in God is what has nurtured me, what has gotten me through the difficult

times in my life and it just sustains me," Sr. Katie said. "For me, it wasn't even a real difficult thing to leave the Lutheran church to become Catholic, because for me God was the same no matter what church I was in. I really didn't see it as a turning away from one and turning to another. It felt much more like a continuation of my faith journey."

Divorced, a mother and no college education, Sr. Katie knew that she wasn't exactly "sister" material. Nevertheless, she heard the call.

"I wasn't the poster child for religious life," Sr. Katie said. "But it just kept coming to me about religious life."

On retreat at the Redemptorist Retreat Center, Sr. Katie approached a sister there along with a sister who was the director of religious education at her parish. From there it began. Entering the School Sisters of Notre Dame at age 49, Sr. Katie will profess final vows this June.

"One of the things for me is that what the vows mean to me has deepened, not so much of what I'm giving up, but really seeing them as truly a gift from God," Sr. Katie said. "The vows really speak to the abundance of God and God's abundant love."

To her daughter, friends and family, the choice was

no surprise.

"The response was they weren't really surprised," Sr. Katie said. "I didn't have anyone go, 'Oh my goodness I can't believe this!' "It was like, 'Yeah. I can see that.'"

The choice to become a School Sister of Notre Dame stemmed from the order's mission, Sr. Katie said.

"What struck me was for the School Sisters of Notre Dame, education is by helping each person realize (her) full potential," Sr. Katie said.

Since entering the order, Sr. Katie received a degree in com-

munity education from UW-Milwaukee. She serves as associate director of St. Ann Place, an outreach to the homeless in West Palm Beach, Fla., which provides shower, food, clothing, laundry and other basic essentials. She remains a member of the Milwaukee province.

"I fell in love with the ministry," Sr. Katie said. "It felt so comfortable to me. You just know when you're doing something that you're suited for. I really get to work with people who are desperately poor and really are shunned by society and it has been wonderful. It really doesn't take a whole lot to become homeless. Unfortunately, we're seeing more and more people."

For more information  
on the Milwaukee Province of  
**School Sisters of Notre Dame**,  
visit  
<[www.ssnd-milw.org](http://www.ssnd-milw.org)>