

140 Years of Light and Life: A Celebratory Love Fest

When Pope Francis declared this the Year of Consecrated Life, we thought, *How fortuitous! We're also celebrating our 140th anniversary!* Two celebrations turned into three with the addition of the new National Catholic Sisters Week in March. We realized we needed a celebration strategy that would commemorate all three celebrations at once.

An online request from the communications directors of area religious communities pointed the way. The "Thank a Nun" program asked readers to share memories of Sisters who had made a difference. The response was tremendous.

In fact, reader replies form the basis of this commemorative issue of *Connecting Point*, with memories from alumnae, oblates and friends alongside memories from the Sisters themselves. In effect, the memories collected here are love letters, from and to the people who have helped make the celebrations meaningful to us. *Enjoy!*



Sister Liguori sprang to her feet, weaving to keep her footing.

Miracle on the Mississippi

Marie Monier was 87 years old when she shared her memory about Sister Liguori Degnan, OSB. The story had taken place in 1908 when Marie was a young teacher at St. Mary's Academy. It was discovered in the archives recently as we continue to celebrate our 140th anniversary. It has been edited for style and length.

It was late November, 1908. Sister Liguori, Sister Mercedes and I were delegated to attend a two-day teachers' institute in Carthage, Ill. We were to return to Nauvoo on Sunday, but a heavy wind and rainstorm struck the county, and Mother Ottilia phoned us to wait till Monday morning and meet a bevy of young ladies returning from Thanksgiving vacation at Montrose, Iowa as they were landing from a train from the north. We were to cross the river back into Illinois together.

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Miracle on the Mississippi cont'd. from page 1

We left Carthage on Monday at 11:00 a.m. The wind was howling. When we drove across the "Big Bridge," over the Mississippi River to Keokuk, Iowa, a man seated nearby said, "Just look at those waves! Did you ever see them so high? I never saw anything like this before. I would not cross the river today for love or money."

Reaching Montrose, we met the students and climbed aboard the skiff that had been sent for us. Utter silence prevailed. We took our assigned seats. It was terribly rough. When we were approximately one-third of the way across, the boat pitched madly about. Great foamy waves splashed overboard. Water had to be dipped out continuously, while control of the engine required so much attention.



The pilot desperately and hopelessly jumped from dipping to driving, holding his breath, despairing, holding onto his dipping pan, and doing his best to no avail.

The boat rocked, tipped, leaned over, and almost overturned two or three times. The girls stood it for a little while, then started screaming, crying, and throwing themselves into each other's laps.

Suddenly a monstrous wave hit the boat. Sister Ligouri sprang to her feet, weaving to keep her footing. She grasped the crucifix at the end of her Rosary and holding it high above her head, said in a most entreat-ing voice, "Oh my Crucified Redeemer! Help us deliver these girls in safety."

Instantly, I mean instantly, the waves flattened out in a strip about 25 feet wide, and stayed that way the rest of the crossing, while they kept raging all the time everywhere else. I was sitting near to the pilot and heard him mutter, "Gracious, what happened? It's all over now. It's the worst I was ever in."

Although the pilot had not seen or heard Sr. Ligouri's appeal, the rest of us had. No one spoke. With hearts in our throats, many of us tip-toed to the chapel when we reached the Academy.

Tales from the Front: An Experience that Changed Me

As much as any life has been changed by a Sister, Sisters' lives - and hearts - have been changed by their ministries. Here are a few of the examples they shared.

Sister Helen Carey, OSB

Be grateful for your sins. They are carriers of grace. - Anthony de Mello, SJ

"I was just 25 years old when I met Andrew. He was a difficult 12-year-old boy who was very disruptive in class. He interrupted everyone. He threw things. He dropped things on the floor.

"I finally told him the next time he chewed gum I was going to take it out of his mouth and put it in his hair. He came to school the next day, chewing gum. I put out my hand and he spit his gum into it. I tried to rub it into his hair, but he had greased it so much that it wouldn't stick.



Sr. Helen Carey

"Not long after that, Andrew splashed green ink on another student. It was all over his shirt and face. I told Andrew he would need to stay after school. It was a beautiful day, and I knew he had plans that would upset him to break. I hoped it would make an impression.

"When I finally let him leave, Andrew stormed out of the room and slammed the door. I looked out the window and watched him ride his bike through every puddle.

"That night, as I was getting dinner – the Sisters lived on the top floor of the school – I answered a knock at the door. There was Andrew. He gave me a bouquet of beautiful lilacs.

"Andrew forgave me and asked my forgiveness with those flowers. We never tangled again."

Sister Catherine Maloney, OSB

Part of doing something is listening. - Madeleine L'Engle

"I served as a hospital chaplain for years. Many stories stand out for me, but Elaine's story maybe most of all. She was a 40-year-old mother who was struggling with cancer. She spent a lot of time in the hospital. I got to know her and her husband, John, pretty well.

"The final time she was admitted, it was clear that she was dying. She slipped into a semi-conscious state. I took John aside and asked him if I should go get their girls. They were in high school. John seemed dazed. He nodded. I prayed I could get the girls back in time to see their mom. Thank God, I did. They sat on the bed, holding her hands and kissing her and telling her they loved her.

"Elaine died peacefully shortly after that, with her girls next to her on the bed. I was so privileged to be there.

"In my ministry as a chaplain, people often told me that I had done or said the right thing. That's the Holy Spirit."



Sr. Catherine Maloney

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Tales from the Front cont'd. from page 3

Sister Sheila McGrath, OSB

Our concern must be to live while we're alive. - Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

"I was the first woman to serve as chaplain at Moline Lutheran Hospital. As you can imagine, I had many meaningful experiences. These two men taught me something about my own life.

"Bill was a lovely young man who had sickle cell anemia. He had been coming in since his teens. Doctors weren't able to manage symptoms of sickle cell very well back then, so he was in a lot of pain.

"Bill would be admitted for a couple of weeks at a time. But he was always upbeat. He'd catch me up on the soap opera, 'All My Children.' He was very sick, but he always made my day.

"Jack was another frequent patient. He had leukemia. What a gentle soul, always with a smile. His concern was for his family, never himself.

"Neither man seemed to fear death. They were concerned with living, and with the wellbeing of others. I realized that if they could continue to live a fruitful life, then I could, too."



Sr. Sheila McGrath



Sr. Marlene Miller

Sister Marlene Miller, OSB

I'm gonna tattoo that on my heart. - Gregory Boyle, SJ

"I was dean of women at our boarding academy (in Nauvoo, Ill.) The hardest thing I ever had to do was tell a student a member of her family had died. It happened several times and it was always heartbreaking.

"It changed me. The student was no longer just a high school kid with ordinary teenage angst. She was facing grief and loss and change. It deepened my love for her and for our mission.

"Our mission was about a lot more than just academics. It was about giving our students a strong sense of themselves as women. It was about helping them understand that they could act independently and confidently in the world. And it was about helping them develop strength to face the hard times that would come in their lives.

"The experience also deepened my faith. We couldn't have done what we did alone. There was a great faith dimension to everything we did."

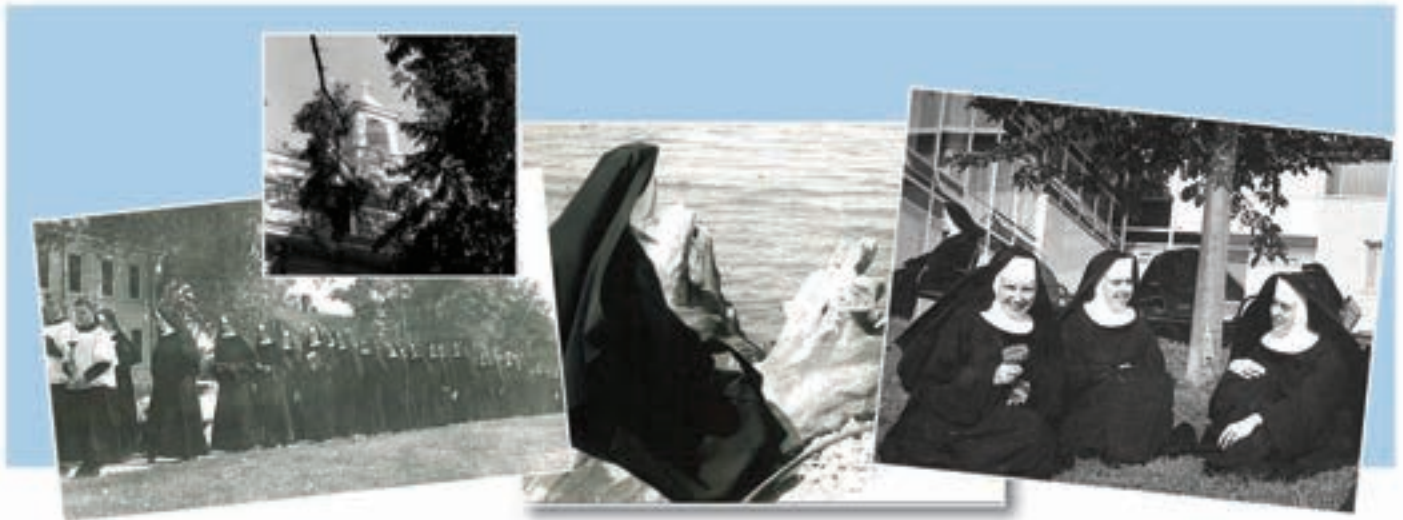
Sister Rita Cain, OSB

God is the person you're talking to, the one right in front of you. - Leon Dufour, SJ

"We had a meeting once where we were supposed to share what we liked best about the others in the group. One person was very hard to be around. What good thing would I be able to say about her when it came to me? How was she 'good for me and my life'?"



Sr. Rita Cain



“When it was my turn, I suddenly thought of something wonderful. I’m grateful for the experience, because it’s helped me remember that everyone is good for me in some way.”

Sister Charlotte Sonneville, OSB

By this they will know that you are my disciples. - Jesus

“After the Second Vatican Council, the Benedictine Sisters made the decision to change from our habits to lay dress. We took our habits apart, made them into suits and all changed on the same day.

“It was so exciting. Scary too. It almost sounds childish now. But we took off something that had helped define us to the world.

“The habit had been a sign of my commitment. It forced me to refocus on who I was: authentic, committed and faith-filled in my service to Christ as a Sister, without the external covering.

“As Jesus said, ‘By this they will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’”



Sr. Charlotte Sonneville

Sister Stefanie MacDonald, OSB

Where did you fail to bother? Where could you have been more loving?

- James Martin, SJ

“I hadn’t been teaching kindergarten all that long when I met a student who stumped me. Justin just couldn’t learn his letters, even though he seemed like a bright kid. No matter how hard I tried, he failed test after test.



Sr. Stefanie MacDonald

“Toward the end of the year, I gave the students a standard written exam. When I saw Justin’s paper, I was floored. He aced it. I realized he had learned his letters perfectly, and could write them but couldn’t verbalize them. His parents immediately responded, getting him the help he needed. His mom recently told me he is doing well

in high school.

“Justin opened my eyes. Thanks to that little boy, I am more sensitive to children’s learning styles. I take the time and make the effort to teach and assess in a variety of ways. You never know which way will work the best for anyone. And everyone is worth the effort.”

Memories from Alumnae, Oblates and Friends

Josephine Barrett, SMA Class of 1980:

The two years I attended St. Mary's Academy made me the person I am today. Those Sisters influenced me, gave me sight, compassion, love, and the will to do whatever I wanted. They did a great job of taking care of their charges and showing us how to be good, kind, and independent women of the future.

How the Sisters were able to see to the heart of the student was incredible. They would deal with girls who had never left home and were homesick and girls who were always testing the waters and those that needed extra help with their schoolwork. It really didn't matter what you needed, they knew how to help each and every one of us.

They had no idea what had landed on their doorstep. I am not sure how they permitted me to keep my tongue as I wagged it at them every chance I could. I once upset Sister Phyllis so much she could be heard yelling at me from her office to the library. She banged her fist on her desk and a wooden puzzle of a camel that sat upon her desk went into the air. Sister Alberta was cleaning the school and mopping the floors when I left Sr. Phyllis' office, and she asked if I was all right!

Sister Marlene Miller ran the dorm. She had a wicked laugh that came straight from her heart. When she was tickled everyone knew it. She had

the ability to be giving out discipline to one as she was wishing another happy birthday and showing true feelings to both.

Sister Paula was the sophomore RA. I spent a lot of time talking with her, which I loved.



The girls' dorm in the old Mary Hall of St. Mary's Academy, circa 1940.

Sister Denise was over the girl's dining room and I had the privilege of working for her. She is a beautifully sweet woman who cut my class flower (lilies of the valley) and put them in my room.

Sister Mary Core entered us into every parade in the fall and came up with float ideas that sometimes were over the heads of those viewing the parade. But that never fazed her.

Sister Susan taught us math. I still quote her about once you lose sleep you can never get it back.

Sister George Anne worked in the kitchen but also loved us, and the animals. She always had a dog tagging along with her!

Tina Mickiewicz:

Sr. Teresa Ann guided the beginning of my adult faith while she was working at St. Pius X. Her introduction to the Benedictines led me to work at

St. Mary's Academy where I worked daily with Sr. Phyllis and Sr. Marlene. To work and live alongside all the Sisters was a true blessing. Because of their examples I became an Oblate. I wish I could list each of you. Please know that I appreciate all of you!

Melissa Calhoun:

Thank you for the opportunity to do this. A huge thank you to Sister Catherine Cleary. I am so grateful for the gift of her wisdom. The readings and time she shared with me continue to resonate throughout my life.

Connie Lake:

Sr. Marilyn Roman was one of the greatest role models EVER! She was my principal in my early years of teaching. She taught me not only to be the best teacher I could be, but also the best person I could be. I still think of her often, and rest easy each night, knowing she prays for me daily. Time passes ... but our friendship will remain so very important to me. May God's blessings be with her today, tomorrow, and always!

Sharon Flanagan Mungo:

In gratitude to Sr. Audrey who went beyond understanding to prayerfully and patiently put the broken parts together in the Benedictine way of healing, living and loving. You will always have a special place in my heart of hearts! As a spiritual director, I teach what you taught me, guide as you led me, and above all listen as you showed me. May God bless and keep you, dear one.

Kay and John Mallon:

Sister Catherine and all of you, her colleagues at St. Mary's, have been a channel of grace and life to us!



Sister Marilyn Roman, center, listens during a meeting.

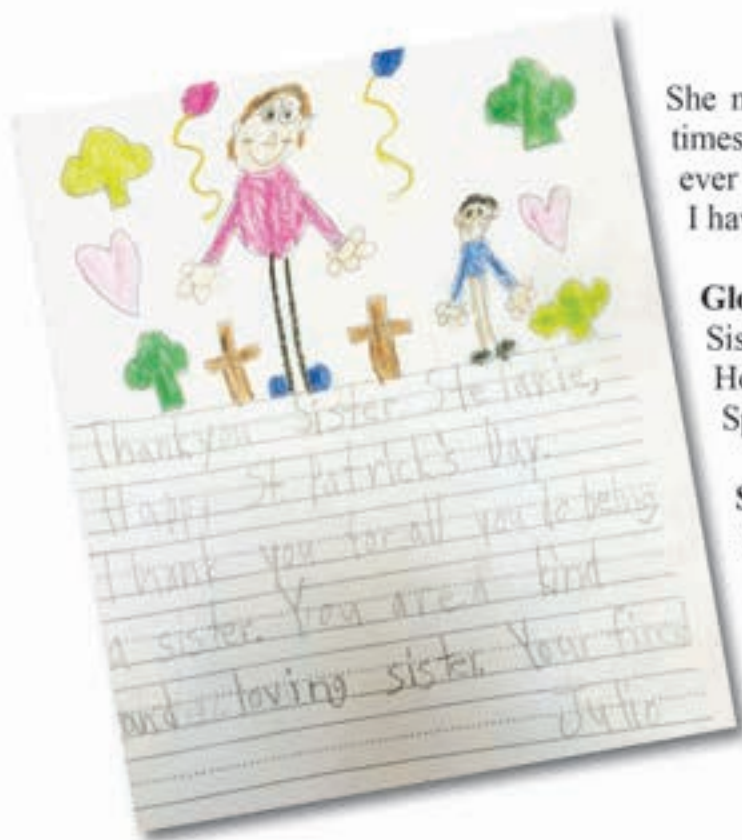
And when we pray the Hours we are close to all of you at St. Mary Monastery! Our love and the Lord's blessings to all of you!

Bonnie Amesquita:

I was a needy kid, who had struggles at home and was new to the school. I needed someone to listen to me, and the Sisters did. Isn't it funny how something as basic as listening can leave such a strong impression?

Anne Nelligan:

When I came to St. Mary's I was very lonely. Sister Mary Core took me under her wing. She sheltered me from the other kids that made fun of me.



She made my short stay there one of the most peaceful times of my life. I think about her often and no one will ever fill that place in my heart. THANK YOU for the life I have today.

Gloria Young:

Sister Germaine Cupp got me involved with helping the Homeless, also sharing resources. She is gone, but her Spirit lives on, and Her work continues! I miss her.

Sandi Calvin:

Sister Rosemary Becker, for over 7 years, has been a source of inspiration for me, with her love of community, her energy and humor. I loved my visits to the Monastery.



Kas Sowa:

Sister Sheila taught me in 4th grade at St Columba School in Hegewisch (Chicago) in 1959/60. I never forgot her, such a wonderful woman and sister! God bless her and all the sisters!

Rev. Marjorie Kooy:

Sister Marilyn Hettinger led a prayer group in Munster, Indiana for some time and was a friend to me when I needed her. My mother was dying of Alzheimer's Disease and Sister Marilyn was my confidant and comforter. I learned so much about contemplative prayer and this has been so helpful in my walk with God. Thanks to all of you for the loving work you do!

Margaret Mary Dabe:

I would like to thank all of you dear Sisters for giving structure and instilling values in my life that I act on still to this day.

Yoshiko Euchida, Japan

I did not belong to any religion when I was a schoolgirl at SMA and was the most careless girl of my Class. I thought other girls were more committed into school activities. But at that time I was younger and immature. I would like to thank all of you for supporting me at SMA. I will never forget all of you and the love I had received.

Uraina Swanson Rubingh

The Sisters are a special gift from God and blessing to me.

Veronica Minnaert

Thanks to all of the Sisters who were a large influence on my life when I was a student at St. Mary's Academy. Your love and dedication made a positive contribution on my life forever. God bless!!

Barbara Jordan

Sister Sandra always listened to me when I needed good advice. Thank you!

Maggie Foresman Kindig

Lovely, Kind Sister Sheila, Love this Wonderful Woman!

Lizzie Susco

A thank you to Sister Rosemary who taught me at St. Clare School. She was always very sweet and patient with me and the other students.

Marcie Coffman

The Sisters had a profound influence on me and my four brothers and sister. They taught us religion and later educated both of us girls in High School. They provided a wonderful future for us that, along with the faith and strength of our parents, allowed us to honor God's plan for us.



St. Mary's Academy library, 1942



Area middle school students play piano during the "Be a Catholic Sister for a Day" retreat at St. Mary Monastery earlier this year.

Peg Colgan Bankie

I am 88 years old but still want to thank the teachers I had. I went to St. Johns the Baptist grade school in Bradford. I had Sr. Gerard, (who later taught my daughter at Bergan H.S), Sr. Eleanor and Sr Regina. I attended St. Mary's (class 1944). I am thankful for all my good teachers there. We had such good times!

Timothy Donovan

Sister Rose Joseph did so much for us during my 2nd grade year. I'll never forget her.

Kathy Bailey

Sister Marlene was there when I needed someone to talk to. Thank you!



Our History: A Quick Look Back

Founded 1500 years ago by St. Benedict, Benedictine monastic communities spread throughout Europe. Called “schools for the Lord’s service,” these communities followed the Rule of St. Benedict in their communal prayer, work and lives together.

In 1852, 27-year old Sr. Benedicta Riepp set sail with two other Benedictine nuns for America. They had volunteered to leave the cloistered and protective confines of their 900-year-old abbey in Eichstatt, Bavaria, to educate immigrant children in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. Their experience set in motion the changes that would help define American monasticism.

Life with Children

The orderly life of European nuns was quickly altered by the reality of life in pioneer America. For one thing, the small cabin in which they lived had to double as a school during the day. And many of the children needed much more than an education. They needed food, shelter and medical care as well.

As Catholic Sisters across time, the once-cloistered Benedictine nuns rolled up their sleeves and did what needed to be done. The cloister was thus modified, and monastic American Sisters came into being.

Pennsylvania to Chicago; Nauvoo to Rock Island

Benedictine communities began to crop up all over the United States, with small groups of Sisters following the settlers from Pennsylvania to Ohio, Indiana, the Dakotas and beyond. Our own community moved first to Chicago, where they established St. Scholastica’s Convent, and then, downriver, to Nauvoo, Illinois.

The move to Nauvoo came in 1874, when Fr. Reibold asked St. Scholastica to send Sisters to establish a school for girls. Sr. Ottilia Hoeveler made the trip by train and steamship with four other Sisters, founding the school that would become St. Mary’s Academy. By the turn of the century, the Sisters of St. Benedict had built a thriving academy for girls and a grade school for boys. They also had acquired several buildings to house classrooms and dorms. “The nuns are making a thriving city out of a deserted Illinois town,” said the St. Louis Post Dispatch.

St. Mary’s Academy continued to thrive throughout most of the 20th century, providing progressive college preparatory education to young women who went on to open their own businesses, practice law and medicine, create art, and provide service to God’s creation. The Sisters continued to expand their education ministry at the same time, helping open and staff schools throughout Illinois and into Indiana.



When the popularity of boarding schools began to decline across the country in the 1990s, the Sisters began to question how they best could continue to serve God and God's people. After much prayerful discernment, they closed their school and sold everything to provide sufficient funds to build a new monastery.

Today

The Benedictine Sisters established their new home atop a hill one hundred miles upriver from Nauvoo, in Rock Island, Illinois. There, they could preserve acres of woods for wildlife and dig a lake for the environmentally protective practice of geothermal heating and cooling.

The new St. Mary Monastery and Benet House Retreat Center, opened in 2003, were built according to the Rule of Benedict, incorporating such values as community, hospitality and good stewardship. A full schedule of spiritual retreats and programs is offered throughout the year. Spiritual direction is also available.



Benet House Retreat Center

Today, the Benedictine Sisters continue such ministries as prayer, retreats, spiritual direction, education, parish work and outreach to the poor. To learn more about the Benedictine monastic community, browse their retreat offerings, consider volunteering or explore the lay Benedictine Oblate* program, call (309) 283-2100 or visit www.smmsisters.org.

Benedictine Oblates are Christian lay women and men who seek to enrich their life with the ancient wisdom of St. Benedict, in association with Benedictine monastics.

SMA Reunion Announcements

Class of 1953

September 18-20, 2015

Class of 1957

August 14-16, 2015

Class of 1959

October 9-11, 2015

Class of 1963

July 24-26, 2015

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Letter from the Prioress

Dear Friends,

Our hearts continue to be nourished by the Scripture stories of the Resurrection of Jesus, and nature itself is adding its unique expression of "Alleluia!"



As we mark this Year of Consecrated Life and our 140th year as a Benedictine community, many of you have shared your personal stories of experience with our sisters.

It is with gratitude and humility that we feature some of those stories in this commemorative issue of Connecting Point. For me they affirm once more the dynamic presence and power of the Spirit of God active in our ministries throughout the years. And they call us all, I believe, to recognize how our simple acts of caring build relationships and provide hope to one another.

May we together be bearers of life and hope for all those whose lives we touch. We sing "Alleluia!" in gratitude for your presence in our extended Benedictine family!

Blessings and Love,

Sister Sandra Brunenn, OSB