

A Legacy of Faith and Service: The Notre Dame Sisters of Omaha Embrace Coming to Completion

Since their arrival in the United States in 1910, the Notre Dame Sisters have made a deep impact through their service, education, and dedication to social justice. Today, numbering 27 members, they face the question of what it means to be the last remaining Sisters of their Congregation in the United States. Their answer has been to continue to live the foundational mandate of their rule of life: "A Notre Dame Sister is an apostle until the last moment of her life."

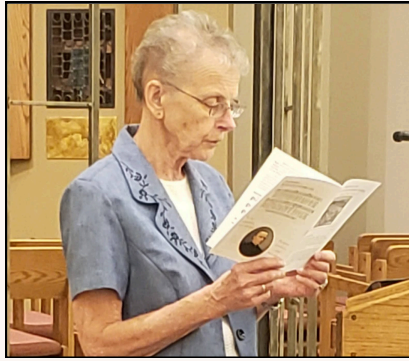
While their numbers are diminishing, their spirit remains strong. Reflecting on their mission, Sr. Joy Connealy shared, "My commitment to live and serve as a Notre Dame Sister is at the core of my being. It is the lens through which I see my life and service. Even in retirement, I've found new ways to live this commitment, whether through prayer, being present for others, or simply bringing God's light and love to each encounter. My contemplative presence is how I continue to serve."

At present, six Sisters are living in senior care facilities, ten are living independently at Notre Dame Housing, formerly Notre Dame Academy, and eleven others live independently in Omaha, Grand Island, and Colorado. When the community's last member dies, it will mark the end of the order's presence in North America; however, the Notre Dame Sisters' provinces in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Germany remain vibrant centers of faith, education, and service, actively contributing to their global mission.

Sr. Rita Ostry, President of the Omaha Province, reflects on the enduring mission of the Notre Dame Sisters, stating, "As Notre Dame Sisters we have been called to proclaim the mission of Jesus to be in a loving relationship with all people and all of creation. Faithfully relying on God's grace, we reach out to the poor, meet unmet needs, advocate for justice and peace, bringing hope and healing to the world."

We are humbled by all who have

partnered with us and continue partnering with us, carrying this legacy into the future."



Sr. Rita Ostry, ND

Sr. Margaret (Maggie) Proskovec, also embodies this legacy in her teaching ministry at the University of Nebraska Kearney. She shared, "My current ministry has taken me back to my initial vocation of teaching. Now, in my late 70s, I teach a course in Art Appreciation that flows from the Notre Dame Charism of 'nurturing in others a conviction of God's love' and use my best gifts and talents to help 'build a community of love and support for every person.' As an apostle, I take seriously the final commission of Jesus to his followers to 'go out into the world... and teach others what He has taught us.' I also facilitate a jail ministry for women inmates, which has deepened my own faith as we experience together a God who loves without reservation."

The Sisters have assessed their situation in recent years and are laying the foundations for a trust to fund ongoing care of all the remaining Sisters as well as continue to support their ministries. They have concluded very gratefully that they have sufficient funds to provide quality care for their remaining members throughout their last days and therefore they will no longer be conducting intensive fundraising. Careful stewardship, a simple lifestyle, generous supporters, and skilled and dedicated staff have made this possible.

It is important to the Sisters to continue to offer people the opportunity to be an active part of meaningful work and they are grateful for all of the devoted partners who continue to support them with time and

funding. The Sisters look forward to ongoing collaborations with their supporters so they may continue to promote the spirit of service and justice for those in need.

At a time when numerous immigrants were making their way to the U.S., numerous requests asked for Notre Dame Sisters to come to the U.S. from Bohemia, among them one from the Archbishop of St. Louis in 1907. In response, Mother Mary Qualberta and four other Sisters left their homeland in 1910 to work with Czech people in the U.S., arriving on May 10, 1910. They first worked at an orphanage in Fenton near St. Louis, Missouri. In 1911, five more Sisters came from Czechoslovakia, and young women from the United States also joined the community, allowing the Notre Dame Community to grow and foster the Gospel in the United States.



Mother Mary Qualberta, ND

In 1917, at the urgent request of Archbishop Jeremiah Harty of Omaha, Mother Qualberta sent two Sisters to staff the Boys Home, founded by Father Flanagan at 20th and Dodge Streets. Sister Rose Slevin, an American, and Sister Martha Djobek, a Slovak who did not know a word of English, were chosen. In 1920, the Sisters purchased Seven Oaks Farm at 35th and State Streets from Father Flanagan. Here the Sisters established their provincial headquarters in Omaha.



1911 Fenton, MO: First Sisters in America



Father Flanagan's Boys' Home

As the Congregation of the Notre Dame Sisters grew in the United States and Omaha, the Sisters continued meeting unmet needs staffing numerous parish schools, many of them in communities settled by Czech immigrants including Cedar Rapids, IA and numerous Nebraska, Iowa, and Kansas towns. In 1926 under the leadership of Sr. Mary Qualbertina Vanek, they opened Notre Dame Academy. Here young women from Omaha and rural areas without any Catholic high school were able to receive a quality Catholic education that emphasized nurturing their faith, developing their gifts and learning social responsibility. The all-girls high school began with 15 students, growing to 26 by the end of the first academic year. The Academy enrollment peaked at 400 in the early sixties. The Sisters educated thousands of young women throughout the Academy's 48 years. The Notre Dame Sisters sponsored and staffed the Academy and staffed until its merger with the Christian Brothers' Rummel High School in 1974, forming Roncalli Catholic High School, which continues Notre Dame Academy's and Rummel's legacy today. In 1998, Notre Dame Academy and Convent was listed on the National Register of Historic Places for the architecture of the building itself, and for the contribution the Notre Dame Sisters made to Czech culture in Nebraska and the greater United States.

Education remains an important mission of the Sisters, and each year, they extend scholarships to students in Catholic elementary and secondary schools and support programs to provide young mothers with professional education for the support of their families. They continue to provide students today with the opportunity to deepen their faith journey and develop into socially responsible people. They continue a supportive relationship with Roncalli Catholic High School through scholarships and

cooperative ventures.



Notre Dame Academy 1925-1926

After the closing of the Academy, the Sisters continued to teach throughout the Midwest. At the same time, they responded in new ways to unmet needs. Recognizing the severe shortage of affordable housing for seniors, the Sisters decided to convert their beloved Academy into safe, affordable housing for seniors, now known as Notre Dame Housing (NDH). Between 1996 and 2012, with substantial support and collaboration, they established 107 units of affordable independent housing. The Sisters support that independence through the Life Enrichment Coordinator who oversees social, intellectual, nutritional, and spiritual programming.

Recently, they opened a 5,000-square-foot Life Enrichment Center, featuring a permanent food pantry, exercise room, and gathering spaces. The Sisters will continue to financially support the life enrichment programming at Notre Dame Housing, into the future.



1997 Ribbon Cutting, NDH

The Notre Dame Sisters have long been champions of social justice, most recently working to combat domestic violence, aid immigrants, end human trafficking, and advocate for human rights. Their collaborative work has produced innovative local and regional programs. Their support for these causes is ongoing.

Sr. Ernestine Havlovic, the oldest living Sister at 95 and a teacher for 51 years, reflected on the legacy she hopes people remember: "I hope people remember that we were simple and dedicated, working alongside them in their lives. We helped educate their children,

and they were always so grateful. Many still reach out to share when their child wins an award or gets a promotion, and it brings me such joy to see the impact we've had on generations."

The Notre Dame Sisters have touched countless lives through their ministry over the years. Whether it's been through teaching, serving those with unmet needs, or offering a listening ear, the Sisters' presence has shaped communities and individuals in profound ways. When asked how she hopes people have incorporated the Sisters' spirit into their lives, Sr. Margaret Hickey, ND, shared, "In my current roles on two Boards and through attending various city events, I'm frequently reminded that we Sisters have successfully incorporated our spirit into others' lives. My former students tell me, 'You saved my life!' or 'You sat with me at the hospital when my mom was dying.' They say, 'I became a teacher because you modeled good teaching skills,' or 'I'm a journalist because of you.' One even said, 'I've stood on street corners with the marginalized because you taught me how.' And I wasn't the only Notre Dame Sister present in their lives. All my Sisters were present because they trained, nourished, and affirmed me into who I am today. We've made an impact—not in a grand, Hollywood fashion, but with a quiet, unassuming, faith-filled presence. Every day, even in my 'retired' life, I see the fulfillment of my hope that we've made a difference, and I am deeply grateful for God's working through us."

Though the Notre Dame Sisters are small in number, their spirit and dedication are undimmed. As they look toward the future, Sr. Joy Connealy emphasizes, "Even as we come to completion, our legacy endures. The love and support we have shown will help others know God's great love. Owning their gifts and passing on God's love to others will continue to make the world a better place."

Like the early Sisters who braved new lands to plant seeds of faith and hope in the American heartland, today's Sisters resolve to be apostles until the last moment of their lives, mirroring the resilience of their pioneering past. With God's grace their legacy will endure even after their final chapter.