A Discerning Spirit

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Focus: A Discerning Spirit

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Letter from the President

Sister Ramona Miller

Dear Friends and Family,

There are moments in our lives when we stand at a crossroads asking "what direction do I take?" A story from the tales of Saint Francis gives an account of Francis with his companion, Masseo, arriving at a three-way crossroads not knowing which direction to choose. Francis asks Masseo to twirl around and around until Francis tells him to stop. When Masseo stops he is facing in the direction toward Siena and Francis says, "that's the way God wants us to go." Making decisions that change the direction of our lives is not so simplistic as in this homey story. A discerning spirit keeps in mind the big picture of one's relationship with God. Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* reminds us that we are called to radiate light and to communicate life; do "not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization!" When we choose new directions in life by asking ourselves "what way does God want me (us) to go?" the answer leads to a deeper satisfaction in living meaningfully aware of God's love.

This issue of *Interchange* contains inspirational accounts by persons with a discerning spirit. The word "discernment" refers to a decision-making process honoring God's will for us. The core vocational questions that define who we are in society are discernment questions: "Is this person that I am dating the one that I am to marry?" "Am I being called to vowed religious life?" "Am I being called to take on a new professional responsibility?" "Is it time to retire?" Once we have articulated a question for discernment, then we dedicate prayer time to hear God's Spirit within and to reflect on the pros and cons of such a decision. With the psalmist we pray, "I listen in the silence awaiting the clarity of your counsel" (Psalm 119).

A perfect example of this was exhibited by the pandemic task force at Assisi Heights. In mid-March, they listened carefully to all the medical and public health leaders to act with certainty and love in closing Assisi Heights to all visitors, knowing this would lessen the possibility of the spread of COVID-19 to our Sister residents. Through these unusual times of social distancing, may we pray with deepened gratitude for all who work tirelessly in essential positions for the common good: health care providers, grocery store staff, gasoline station workers, janitorial crews, and government leaders.

Our discerning spirit will indeed lead us in the direction we are to take on the journey of life.

Sister Ramona Miller

Sister Ramona Miller, OSF
Congregational Minister

Finding My Way: The Cojourning Process

by Carolyn Isaak

Image courtesy of Pixabay.com

Good choices.
The right path.
The holy way.
Contemplative process.
God's plan.

These terms I understand, but ask me to define discernment and I muddle through an explanation. Yet, I know in my heart what is required of me when I seek God's input into my spiritual journey or am pondering a decision.

Discernment leads not to an answer but provides the right direction on my journey. I see God's path unfold in front of me much like the famous poem by Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken."

"...two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled and that has made all the difference."

For me, the process of discernment brings me to choose the "less traveled road." It is the path that is hidden from my view but is clearly shown to me through discernment. All I need to do is ask God for guidance and then listen with patience and faith.

As is often the case, the path I am to take is the most unknown.

Some have heard the story of my Cojourner journey - that it took three years and three different spiritual guides to get me to the blessed Covenant day in April 2019. Three! Yes, and each one of them played an essential part in the process and challenged me to really, truly discern WHY I wanted to become a Cojourner.

When I started the Cojourner program I was a wild, uncontrolled growing vine. I wanted so much to "know" and to "seek" and to "have" the answers. But seeking the answers really just leads to more questions – not answers. I needed to be trimmed back in order for me to really grow in a healthy spirituality.

Sister JoAnn arrived just in time in the Cojourner process. I had actually "quit" just months before I was to make Covenant. She provided me with guidance and direction and also two lovely books one by David Lonsdale, *Listening to the Music of the Spirit* and *Praying Our Experiences* by Joseph Schmidt. She challenged me to quiet down my inner dialogue and instead listen and experience God's voice – and that has made all the difference.

Influenced by Scripture

Sister Monique Schwirtz

Sister Monique Schwirtz: as a teacher; elected to Congregational Leadership; and in her high school yearbook.

The question about how scripture has influenced decisions in my life challenged me to recall how this may have evolved as my spirituality has deepened. As a child, we make decisions or choices about what others might perceive as insignificant. Pleasure, fulfillment and even disappointment enter into the process as we make choices in daily life. In teen years, peers became a significant part of one's decision-making process. Then there is the significant decision to be made about what direction to take in life after high school.

In my family system, it was expected that we would go on for further education. The discerning process also included the reality that, due to intellectual capabilities or interests, there were some limitations on options. At this time in my life, my use of scripture was very limited, as was my awareness of spiritual growth.

However, after two years of college, there was an intuitive knowing that religious life was where I was drawn. Yes, it was the Spirit — not words — working through my intuition, which gave me a certainty and peace about making this choice at the age of 21.

There were years in my religious life history, where choices about professional and spiritual options were not on the average Sister's radar. However, creative opportunities were found in the classroom and through relationship-building. Personally and collectively, I found ways to enrich my spirit and stretch my educational experience.

Vatican II opened up so much to challenge the community's growth and increased individual pursuits. Moving from one community or profession to another now became our choice, and required a deeper discernment process; not only personally but with input from Sisters in the Community. The addition of English in the liturgy provided me with more of an incentive to delve into scripture.

I find it interesting that, in the Gospels, it appears that Jesus was very active and had little time for his spiritual pursuits. But tucked into the stories are many times that Jesus takes time for quiet and prayer, and no doubt discernment. Referring to scripture has helped me along life's journey. From Psalm 119, "I listen in the silence awaiting the clarity of your counsel" and "teach me your statues" has always been important for me, as well as John 16:13 "The Spirit of truth will guide you – the Spirit will tell you about things to come." And, in times of change, I often refer to Romans 12:2 "You must discern the will of God."

I found another source of inspiration and guidance from Thomas Merton, a writer and mystic from our own time. One of his more familiar prayers captures the dilemma that many of us find ourselves in at times:

> *"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all I am doing."*

In retrospect, I realize that I have been silently guided all along life's path by scripture.

Sister Monique passed away unexpectedly on May 7, 2020. Written in her own words, several weeks prior to her passing, this article serves as a fitting tribute to a life well-lived.

Listening to the Natural World

Prairie at Assisi Heights.

"But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
The birds of the air, and they will tell you;
Ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you…"

- Job 12: 7-8

Job, in the Old Testament, searches for meaning in the midst of trials. We may be able to identify with him in some ways today as we find ourselves in the midst of economic collapse, climate crisis and coronavirus health pandemic. Although taken out of context, verses 7-8 carry great wisdom as we discern how to live in a world where the greatest impactful force is the human. We can learn the way forward by listening to the natural world of which we are part.

In St. Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of Creation*, we hear the beautiful line, "Be Praised my God for Sister, Mother Earth who sustains and GOVERNS us." This line and others in the *Canticle* lift the heart and instruct us in how to live. However, do we really understand the deep meaning of having Sister, Mother Earth GOVERN us?

Living in the Twenty-First Century, listening to our brother and sister creatures and elements in the natural world is a non-negotiable part of discerning how we make decisions. Living in the Anthropocene Age, the voices of animals, rivers, trees, plants, stones, and elements at the molecular level speak and inform, instruct, and govern us. The question is, are we listening?

Over the years, the Rochester Franciscan Community has grown in the ability to listen and respond to the voices and challenges of climate change and Earth degradation. Many decisions made in the past few years were informed by listening to Sister Mother Earth and environmental and social facts, something Pope Francis calls an Integral Ecology. Some examples include:

*UN figures of refugees in 2020 rest at 70.5 million on a projection upward.

*In 2019, the UN ruled that climate refugees could not be forced back to a country they fled. Climate change is a factor, and sometimes a multiplier effect, on refugee and immigrant numbers as well as illness and new vector born and other diseases.

*Ice caps are melting causing "sunny day flooding" at high tide in many coastal areas where the vast majority of the world's human population dwells.

*Fires escalate each season causing illness, death, and hardships. Remember that more than 1 billion animals

Sisters as beekeepers at Assisi Heights.

perished in the recent Australian fires.

And while there are many challenging realities, we live each day in the beauty and wonder of Sister Mother Earth. Information, beauty, and the ethical call to care for future generations also guide Integral Ecology decisions of the community.

On June 1, 2009, our Rochester Franciscan Community made a Global Climate Stance to reduce carbon emissions and care for creation through action and public policy advocacy. Actions have included financial investment decisions that address climate change and assist those who are most vulnerable. Divestment of fossil fuels was carefully studied and initiated.

Over the years, we have initiated numerous projects to ensure our care for the gift of our property and building at Assisi Heights. These include managing our prairies, harvesting and planting new trees and trying to eliminate invasive species like buckthorn. Planting gardens for fresh vegetables and flowers; composting, providing beehives for pollination and harvesting and processing their honey for consumption, installation of permeable pavers which prevent up to 100% water run-off on two of our parking lots, and recycling, are just some actions that have been taken. We have also installed 600 solar panels and conserve our energy use with the most efficient motors and lighting.

The most recent effort to address carbon capture, reverence for habitat diversity, and care for the future was to legally place 72 acres into a Conservation Easement to prevent further building on this property and to provide a "home" for the plants and animals, as well as a place of beauty for all to enjoy.

As we move more deeply into an age requiring, even thrusting, evolutionary change and transformation upon us, souls and ears that listen in order to discern how to live in the world must grow exponentially. The voice of Sister Mother Earth who GOVERNS us shouts to us to be heard, respected and appreciated.

We live in an amazingly beautiful world and there is no limit to choices that we can make for beauty, equity, and justice if we live up to our name of Human, humus of Earth.

Even the exhausted blade of grass
that breaks through the concrete
listens
to the wind's song
and
knows that it would be foolish
to do otherwise.

- Author Unknown

Moving Through Life with Discernment

Sister Mary Kay Mahowald welcomes a co-resident to the corridor.

Regarding aging:

"My exercise teacher says we can bemoan our losses and get stuck in the past or we can look at ourselves as we are in this moment, accept this as the "new normal" and live in the present moment. However we choose to look at our changing selves, we are all dealing with the changes that aging brings."

- Sister Kathleen Welscher

As we journey through life, we have moved through many stages or phases of the discernment process. Where do I begin to see my life both personally and professionally? What choices are placed before me? Or did I receive a mission card that "invited" me to go where I never thought I would? This reminds us that discernment is not only something we do, but where others invite us, as they also look at the greater good and the relationships that we share.

As a community of women religious, we have spent a lifetime being invited into discernment. Through various opportunities and small group processes, we have been encouraged to come to decisions about our life journey. It may be through invitations to consider various forms of leadership roles, opportunities to serve the poor, those who are lonely, or those in need of healing of body, mind and/or spirit.

Discernment about moving:

"I made my decision to come to Assisi Heights when I was sitting in the inner court swing after being told by my doctor that I would be facing two surgeries later this year. By the time I finished swinging, I had a plan in place for what I would do to be ready to move."

- Sister Kathleen Welscher

Moving is more than a change in location…

The Sisters of St. Francis have been spending their lives sharing experiences with one another throughout our ministerial lives as we have moved from ministry to ministry or place to place. As Assisi Heights has become the living center for approximately ninety of our members, it is more than a place for our aged

Sister Arnold Ritchey on moving day.

Sisters to live out their later years. It has become a home where we are able to share life through interaction with one another, pray in large and small groups and build and rebuild relationships that have stood the test of time and distance. Where we live and how we transition from one part of the house to another is purposeful, based on care needs and where we can be most comfortable and appropriately cared for as we transition.

"Moving is more than a change in location or geography. It's more than relocating physically. It is more than packing and unpacking one's belongings. It's more than saying good-bye to what's been; it's saying hello to the new place, "yes" to new people, new routines, new attitudes, new dreams and new opportunities."

- Sister Kathleen Welscher

"There is intention built into every stage of life [1]…" says Joan Chittister in her book, The Gift of Years: *Growing Older Gracefully*. And there is intention in our recommended location at the Heights as transitions continue. Conversation with friends, family and those who know the facility are important as decisions are made. Over the past several years, the In Life Together (ILT) team has met and reflected with many in developing the philosophy of person-centered care for residents of Assisi Heights, which includes ways to assist persons whose health or well-being necessitates a transition into the house and from one area to another as the need arises. The persons on each corridor have a role in being sister to one another as life changes occur and as we are asked to participate in gatherings for decision-making. The important question for each of us to discern is, what is in my future and when?

We have moved on from our full days and evenings. We are in the "damping-down time of life… The interior life, the search for the sacred, takes over to the point that we can begin to access how much energy the passion and flows of the past have drained from our life [2]." We come to recognize when we take a deep breath several times a day that we are enough, that we have enough and more than enough. We need to take time to visit another, to share the beauty of the sunrise/sunset, a flower in the courtyard garden or a walk around the grounds…

"There has to be a shift; a letting go of the old in order to find a "new normal." If we clutch to the way it's always been or the way we always did it, if we resist change no newness can come and we will live in the past. When we move, we need to bring our whole selves with us."

Looking outward, drawing inward, sharing with another can bring us to a new place in life that draws us into the next phase of our life lived in relationship with ourselves and others and builds on a life of discerning the current now of who we have become.

[1], [2] Joan Chittister, The Gift of Years: *Growing Older Gracefully* (2008) NY: Blue Bridge Books

The Prayer of St. Francis – A Life of Discernment

To categorize the Prayer of St. Francis as 'no more than' an everyday invocation or litany would be to diminish its significance. It would be like calling Picasso 'merely' a painter, or Beethoven 'just' a musician, or Michelangelo 'simply' a stone carver. The same intensity used by those masters in their creation is accomplished in this well-known and used prayer. The result is a prayer appealing to everyone for centuries.

In his early life, Francis found himself at a crossroads. The dream of his youth to be a knight-in-shining-armor was dashed and a dream shattered. He struggled to shed the expectations of a domineering father and find his own place in society. In his young adult days, life dealt him hard knocks. Distraught and vulnerable, he sought darkness in the quiet of the church… alone. At this low point, with his mind open to receive, he heard a voice. It was the voice that spoke to his heart and readjusted his trajectory. This was his informal introduction to discernment, though he had no previous experience with it or a word for it. What he did discover was an incredible inner peace that was unexplainable. He came to realize that listening had two characteristics, namely quiet and alone, two important pillars of discernment that changed him forever.

Let's go back and examine how this happened. Francis encountered stress which tested his motivation.

Through this experience, Francis learned it was not about what he was to do, but who he was to become. We call it discernment. Watching Francis' process is like watching an unfolding manifestation of love in the height and depth of the soul... Discernment provided space for grace to aid deep listening... alone, without the distractions of the mind. In solitude, Francis uncovered the tranquility and serenity that he sought. It was this process of quiet and seclusion that he came to know how discernment worked for him. He cultivated and promoted this process with his brothers over the years. It deepened his spirit. He stumbled upon spots to find solitude. His most coveted sites were the caves and coves in the mountains. It was here that he met his God and felt peace.

Francis was not a graduate of any prodigious school of theology. But his alternative lifestyle and the discovery of prayerful solitude led him to new techniques bringing about peace. The route to this masterpiece was won by intentional observation of his own and other human encounters by deep, quiet reflection.

He gained wisdom from his many human encounters. Francis took his own shortcomings in stride and he possessed uncharacteristic humility that led him to open doors to a new realm of listening. This Peace Prayer comes with a variety of names, Prayer of St. Francis, Simple Prayer for Peace, or Make Me an Instrument of Peace. It is often attributed to St. Francis, but oddly enough it was not uncovered until 1912,

long after Francis' death. It was written in French and presumed to be authored by Fr. Esther Bonquerel. It was widely popular during WWI and WWII, as peace was highly coveted during that time. Many of the essential qualities of the prayer seem to mimic the life patterns of St. Francis and, over time, the prayer was attributed to him.

Each line of the prayer becomes a meditation on daily life issues, infused with the usual concerns and the world's forces - a meld of spiritual gifts and unusual symmetry of knowing how to use them, resulting in the essence of discernment.

This reflection delves into the depth of personal and societal ills. It underscores inspiration to bring century old issues of hatred, violence, abuse of power, doubt, despair, deceit, shattered dreams, disregard for creation, as fuel that fires the process of discerning. These aspects of life were at the heart of life in Francis' day, too.

In a nutshell, the kernel of this prayer is compressed in the first and last line. *Make me an instrument of peace…* and you will arrive at that desire for peace *by dying* to the obstacles of self-centeredness which keeps peace at bay. Convergence happens in the sanctuary of silence, alone and sometimes with a companion. The intervening verses of the prayer expand the notion these ordinary everyday issues with corresponding emotions can escalate the steps toward peaceful settlements. In the end, we shall not be examined by our virtues; not because they are inessential but because they are real only in so far as we are wholly concerned with our neighbor.

Like the Beatitudes, opposites are true. This prayer reflects that opposites provide the antidote. To drop everything and go the distance for one person in need makes no sense unless one understands the world through the eyes of the heart searching, not for doctrine, but for right relationships with God, others, ourselves and all creation.

Where there is hostility bring compassion,

Where there is deliberate deceit bring truth and authentic concern,

Where there is conflict bring reconciliation, and

Where there is sadness bring joy.

The latter section suggests that the capstone objective of discernment addresses the Divine Experience of God touching the heart, therefore:

Seek to be centered on those neglected, not ourselves.

Give to the forgotten, so as to appreciate and share God's giftedness.

Act on injustices, so that those suffering may be healed.

Simplify your lifestyle needs, so as to give life to others in greater need, and

Promote unity and diversity so as to pardon us of our own divisiveness.

In the silence of the cave, Francis discovered his deepest feelings and desires and that of human nature. He encountered his humanness, the wounded world as well as life's incredible joys sometimes buried, that when released brought unbelievable emotional and spiritual energy. Francis was forever seeking what needed refinement in relationship to God and what aspects of life still lie dormant.

Contemplatives are known as masters of heart listening… called discernment! St. Francis led the way.

The Peace Prayer

The Peace Prayer, "Make me and Instrument of Your Peace" has been attributed to Saint Francis because its content conveys Francis' spirituality. It first appeared in 1912 in a French magazine and has been widely acclaimed internationally including various settings to music.

Peace Prayer of Saint Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

Living with the Spirit

by Sister Briana McCarthy

Image courtesy of Pixabay.com

Once upon a time, there was a young woman who lived on an island in the Pacific. She watched the sunrise every morning and delighted with each sunset. Beauty surrounded her on land, sea, and in the sky. However, there was an ache in her heart. She had no one to share all this beauty with on this lonely island. Talking to the trees and plants gave some comfort while playing with four-legged creatures in the afternoons. After the breathtaking sunsets, a Calliope paint of brilliant pinks, oranges, and deep purples, the woman would experience a deep longing within. She was lonely in her aloneness.

Then the day came when a boat came ashore with several persons. Could it be? Could this be what she longed for? Two young men, two young women and a dog stood before her. Within a few days, the woman was troubled. She found that two of the persons avoided her, one person was friendly, and the other seem indifferent to her presence. Gratefully, the dog became a friendly companion. Suddenly her world became confusing, unpredictable and painful. What do these strangers want? Living now with others opened the woman to a complicated world. Now her longing and hope became a mixture of restlessness and doubt.

As the sun was setting, the woman went down to the sea and sat on the warm sand. While peering into the gentle lapping waves of the Pacific, she became aware of the beauty all around her. Then came a looming darkness within; it held her being, until she heard an inner voice: "Flow with the Waves!"

Discernment is like flowing waves. In our world of complexity, it is taking the time to silently sit and allow the waves to flow over our emotional concerns and anxieties. Since we live in a very complicated world of constant images flashing on our media screens, dissonant voices spreading doom and divisions, the anxiety and discontent in our American culture has reached a frenzied pitch. What are we to do in the midst of all the NOISE and political angst and distortions?

Hope does spring eternal. Remember to: take time to daily center yourself in silence for twenty minutes; ask for the graces needed to flow with the waves of our times; ask for wisdom, compassion, imagination and courage; and choose to act with your talents and passion for the greater good.

Discernment only flows when one is open to the Spirit of God in the silence; listening and receiving with a willingness to be courageous in acting. Namaste!

In Memoriam

Sister Judith Chiodo (April 30, 1940 - December 23, 2019)

Judy was an extroverted woman who enjoyed people, laughter, singing, dancing, traveling and learning in a non-traditional manner. On the flip side, she had a deep longing and great desire for quiet, contemplative prayer. Judy loved walking with people on their spiritual journey "which gifted me with a desire to go deeper in my own spiritual journey." The youngest of four children, she grew up in a large and extended Italian family in Northeast Minneapolis. After high school, Judy went to St. Cloud State University, and accompanied a friend to Rochester who was interested in joining the Franciscan Sisters. Her friend joined and lasted only one week, while Judy, who only came along to "check this out" joined and was a Franciscan for nearly 60 years! After earning a degree in Elementary Education at the College of St. Teresa in Winona, Judy taught students in Rochester, Waseca and Wilmont, Minnesota. In Waseca, she learned of Al-Anon, attended classes and decided to become a counselor. She was accepted to the CPE program and was the first woman to serve in the previously male-dominated field at Hazelden. Judy went on to work for Lutheran Social Services for 20 years, and became certified as a Chemical Dependency Counselor. Later, she earned a Master's Degree in Marriage and Family Counseling. Social justice issues were important to Judy. She gathered a core group of Rochester Franciscans to study and educate others on the significance of raising human trafficking awareness, which resulted in the Congregation's investment in education for the civic community.

Sister Julia Tomsche (January 31, 1934 - March 14, 2020)

The last of five children in the family, Julia was born and raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota. From her telling, it seemed that she was educated by the reality of her surroundings and experiences. She was an avid reader and watched programs on a wide range of interesting topics. A visual representation of her life of learning, was the large number of knickknacks, trinkets and mementos she collected. Each one reminded her of a particular event, trip or person in her life. Julia's vocation with the Rochester Franciscans had several influences. Her mother had three religious Sisters (Sisters of St Joseph). However, it was a Paulist priest who suggested the Rochester Franciscans to Julia. Following the Novitiate, Julia began her assignments as an LPN, serving at Saint Marys Hospital and a number of nursing homes in places such as Winona, Minnesota, Denver, Colorado, and at Assisi Heights and Sacred Heart Nursing Home in Austin, Minnesota. After those years in ministry, Julia worked in Rochester as a dental assistant for five years. As she looked back on her life, she said she had no regrets; and still had a few items left on her 'bucket list.'

Sister Margaret Clare Style (June 5, 1918 - November 19, 2019)

Sister Margaret Clare had a deep love and pride for her family, her Irish descent and an enduring gratitude for being a member of the Sisters of St. Francis. She was the third oldest (and oldest girl) of twelve children raised in Fairmont, Minnesota. After graduation from high school, Sister Margaret Clare stayed home for one year before joining the Sisters of St. Francis. Margaret Clare's gift of seeing others with the eyes of faith bonded her to those she served in ministry. Her warmth and hospitality expressed her openness of heart. A tribute to Sister Margaret Clare was the presence of many students and friends who came to visit her. She usually had a great story that she shared, remembering their times together and leaving them with the feeling of her deep love and care for them. Sister Margaret Clare was given over 101 years of life, of which she spent 82 years as a Rochester Franciscan Sister. She lived the Franciscan values – with simplicity – a deep prayer life, a heart for the poor and marginalized. She had a contagious joy, an ability to laugh. Before leaving this earthly life, she reminded us of the importance of fidelity to community, the challenge to always be loving, as well as being open to a little mischief or laughter along the way, so that the burdens of life can be lifted up.

Sister Martha Ann McGinnis (January 28, 1934 - January 17, 2020)

Sister Martha Ann was youngest of nine children, growing up in Caledonia, Minnesota. At the tender age of four, her mother died, which had a profound effect on all the children. Yet, she acknowledged that her father was especially attentive to her. Sister Martha Ann was proud of the education she received, served by the Rochester Franciscan Sisters. She started her ministry by teaching in elementary schools in Austin, Adams, Winona, and Tracy, Minnesota, as well as Chicago, Illinois. She even became the principal in her hometown school in Caledonia. Sister Martha Ann's vision of ministry led her to the Movement for a Better World, where she became a team member giving presentations in the Church to both clergy and lay leaders after Vatican II. Later, she joined Assisi Heights Christian Community Center as a presenter of programs on spiritual topics. In 1977, she accepted the position as Mistress of Novices, offering guidance to women interested in becoming Franciscan Sisters. After training at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, Sister Martha Ann became a pastoral minister in Watertown, South Dakota, and Tracy, Minnesota. She was then called to serve in Congregational leadership, and following that, went on sabbatical and provided spiritual direction, retreats and religious education in South Africa. Sister Martha Ann had the gift of being a spiritual guide with gentleness, and a willingness to challenge. She was masterful at it. Her joy was found in her singing voice -- which she shared through the years, and graced our prayerful assemblies and liturgies. She sang "Ave Maria" with an angelic voice; but most of all, she loved singing "Danny Boy."

Sister Mary Lonan Reilly (February 8, 1926 - October 8, 2019)

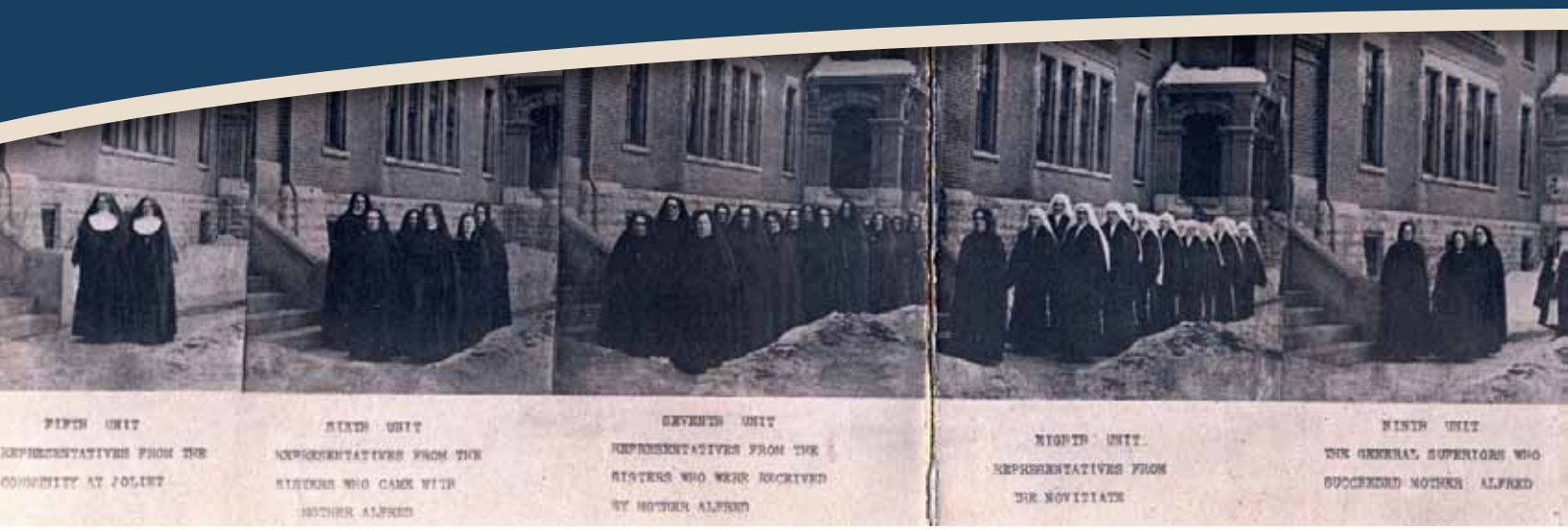
She was an educator almost from the beginning of her life. As the second oldest child of six, Mary Reilly helped take care of the younger ones. She attended a rural country school in Huron, SD. After graduation and teacher training, she returned to teach in the same country school. She entered the Rochester Franciscans in 1946, and, after 15 years of teaching junior high students and life in small convent communities, she was asked to continue her studies. At the University of Notre Dame, she earned History degrees at both the Masters and Doctorate level. In 1969, she returned to her beloved College of Saint Teresa (CST) as a member of the History Department, primarily teaching U.S. History. She was also involved with numerous campus-wide committees and activities, and the social issues of the day were a particular focus. In 1980, Sister Mary Lonan moved from teaching to administration; serving as Executive Assistant to the President for several years. Her final professional position came when she was appointed Congregational Archivist in 1994. For twenty years in this ministry, she was able to meld her expertise in history, her knowledge and love of the Congregation, and her skills of research and teaching.

Sister Monique Schwirtz (May 24, 1938 - May 7, 2020)

Monique began life in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, as Ellen Elise Schwirtz, the first of four children born to John and Victoria Radosevich Schwirtz. Her father's work for different social service agencies moved the family several times within Minnesota, finally settling in Owatonna just before Ellen entered sixth grade. Following high school, she attended the College of St. Teresa for two years. She has said those two years at the College were wonderfully nurturing for her, both academically and emotionally. It was during the College's Holy Week Retreat, in her sophomore year, that Ellen came to know her call to religious life. Her first inclination was to missionary work, but she ultimately followed the suggestion of the College chaplain that she take a closer look at the Congregation she already knew. Thus, she entered the Sisters of Saint Francis the August before her junior year. Whether she was teaching in the classroom, observing as principal, working with the vulnerable through the Minnesota Valley Action Council, acting as Director of Daily Life and Service at Assisi Heights, in Congregational Leadership or at Holy Spirit Retreat Center, there was in her a tenderness, strength and sensitivity to the needs of others that shone through.

From the Archives

by Sister Marisa McDonald



A woman with a discerning spirit... this could be one of many descriptive phrases about Mother Alfred. She died on December 18, 1899, and I am certain that the Rochester Franciscan Sisters noted her anniversary of death every succeeding year in their local communities.

Twenty years after her death, the Sisters decided to hold a large public commemoration. At this time, there were almost 400 members of the congregation.

In 1920, on February 11 (Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, to whom the congregation is dedicated), a large number of clergy and laity joined the Sisters for a morning Requiem Mass celebrated by Bishop Heffron, followed by a solemn pageant in the afternoon.

As was noted in the February 11, 1920, edition of the Rochester Daily Bulletin, it was a grand affair. "The commemorative procession, which was most impressive, represented the historical development of the congregation and the expansion of its work in philanthropy and education. It started from the old Saint John school where Mother Mary Alfred opened the first parochial school in Rochester."

There were nine units in the procession, including representatives from Mission Schools (34 from three states); Saint Marys Hospital; College of Saint Teresa in Winona; Province of Franciscan Friars from Alleghany NY; Sisters of St. Francis of Joliet (the first community that Mother Alfred founded); Sisters who came to Rochester with Mother Alfred; Sisters who were received into the community by Mother Alfred; representatives from the Novitiate; and the three General Superiors who succeeded Mother Alfred.

The celebration included the unveiling of a memorial tablet. This tablet was originally placed in the Center Street Motherhouse, and now is on the wall of Lourdes Chapel at Assisi Heights.

Shortly after the event, a 32-page commemorative book was sent to all the mission houses, along with a copy of the Bishop's speech and instructions to retain it to be read at each succeeding anniversary of Mother Alfred's death.

The Bishop summarized the life and works of Mother Alfred: "Were there difficulties and trials in all this? Oh, yes. Were there doubts and incredulity and discouragement? Oh, yes. Did criticism and distrust ever appear? Oh, yes. There were heart-burnings, disillusion, disappointment and failures a-plenty. But the Sisters committed their way to the Lord and trusted in Him. "

As a side note, holding a celebration with an outdoor procession in February in Minnesota, with persons coming from near and far, must have entailed much trust in God!

We are grateful for gifts given in honor of a Sister or loved one who has been a vital part of your life.

We remember those who have gone before us, and you, our generous benefactors, through the daily prayers of our Sisters.

Gifts received October 1, 2018 through September 30, 2019.

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Committing ourselves to be a compassionate presence for peace in our world, while striving for justice and reverence for all creation, is possible because of our generous benefactors.

Gifts received October 1, 2018 through September 30, 2019.

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You can use your credit card to support the mission and ministry of the Sisters of Saint Francis. To make a secure, on line donation, click on the homepage "Donate Now" button at www.rochesterfranciscan.org. Visa, MasterCard, and Discover are accepted.

Contact Information

Please feel free to email or call the Office of Mission Advancement at 507.529.3536 with any questions.

June Howard, Director | june.howard@rochesterfranciscan.org

Kim Jaworski, Assistant | mission.assistant@rochesterfranciscan.org

From the Office of Mission Advancement *by June Howard, Director*

Dear Friends,

Paul stated in his second letter to the Corinthians, "Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Each of you are truly cheerful givers as demonstrated by your gifts made in memory and in honor of others during this past fiscal year. True giving happens when there is a friendship – love that inspires us to share our lives with others. And you, our dear friends, are a wonderful example of that.

Discerned philanthropy is sufficiently thought through and planned. In regard to charitable giving, the discernment process first helps individuals clarify what they have to give and their meanings and motivations for giving. At Assisi Heights, we have many different ways to support and strengthen the long-term needs of the Sisters and their ministries.

Our monthly giving program, called Franciscan Friends, is one way. You can partner with the Sisters of Saint Francis by making a monthly gift that fits your budget. All it takes is for you to authorize your bank to transfer a set amount from your checking account directly to the Sisters of Saint Francis. Giving is easier and more convenient for you, with no repetitive checks to write and no envelopes to mail. And your donation goes further by reducing our administrative, postage and paper costs. More of your gift goes directly to the needs and ministries.

Another way to give is to join our Mother Alfred Legacy Society. Including the Sisters of Saint Francis with a legacy gift in your will or trust is an excellent way to support and strengthen the long-term needs of the Sisters and their ministries.

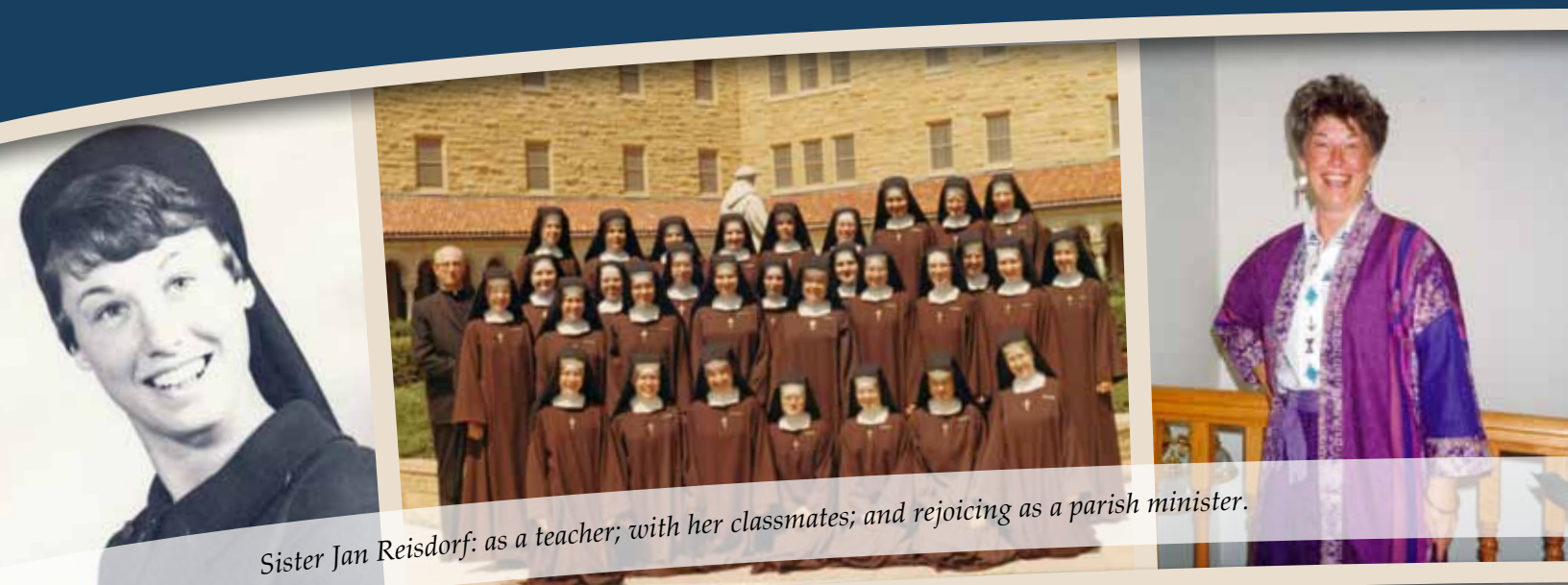
As you work through your plans, we welcome the opportunity to discuss your wishes with you further. Contact the Office of Mission Advancement for more information and resources.

The Sisters of Saint Francis are continually grateful for the many sacrifices people have made to help provide for the Sisters and their ministries. Please be assured that you are remembered in the Sisters' daily prayers.

May you, who serve others, be a light of hope of all creation radiating the love of God!

Love, Joy and Peace be with you,

Different Experiences – Same Decision



Sister Jan Reisdorf: as a teacher; with her classmates; and rejoicing as a parish minister.

Enjoy this discussion between two women who, in two different decades, at two distinctly different ages, with two diverse life experiences, reach the same decision to become a Rochester Franciscan Sister!

Sister Jan Reisdorf:

"I was 18, a high school graduate, when I decided to enter the Sisters of St. Francis Community. This was an extremely difficult decision to make because I had always wanted to become a County Extension Agent... and the thought of life as a Franciscan Sister did not give an 18 year old great joy.

"My parents were very supportive in assisting me in looking at options and invitations. My father thought I should consider a lifestyle that included working with people because he thought I had great people skills. My mother thought that I had excellent teaching skills and enthusiasm as a creative motivator. My two Rochester Franciscan aunts (Renata and Michael) thought that all these skills would make me a welcomed member of the Community, serving in ministry as a teacher.

"I accepted the invitation to join the Rochester Franciscans after my father said "Try it, you just might like it." I must have been attracted to the adventure of the invitation! That all happened in 1963, long before I understood anything about the deeper immersion in the waters of life and baptism! I am surprised that I listened to my parents and that I have enjoyed the great gift of the life of the spirit lived.

"JoAnn, how was it for you?"

Sister JoAnn Chevalier:

"I was in my mid-forties and lived simply with my dog, Annie, in the beautiful up and coming community of Woodbury, Minnesota. Of course, there were good friends and colleagues in the Twin Cities that kept my social life active. Gratefully, I was financially independent and secure. And yet, there was something missing, a kind of longing within me. Based on whispers of the Holy Spirit, I relinquished all belongings and assets. *What?*

"My journey into God began as a child with the influences of family, church and community. I was raised on a farm by my parents with two older brothers near the small Irish village community of Clontarf, Minnesota. We were surrounded by fields of grain and many of God's creatures.

"Several Franciscan Sisters shaped my being as I journeyed through life at the College of Saint Teresa (CST), later as an Alumnae Board member, and

by Sisters Jan Reisdorf and JoAnn Chevalier

Sister JoAnn Chevalier: attending graduate school; at the ceremony accepting her first vows, surrounded by her family; and with her beloved dog, Annie.

now in present days. From time-to-time throughout my post collegiate years, the invitation to consider religious life peered through a crack in the door of my soul. However, I did not listen with the ear of my heart in those days.

"During a CST Alumnae Board meeting, a Spirit-led invitation ensued, "Would you be interested in becoming a Cojourner?" My response, "What's a Cojourner?" The process began with much enthusiasm and inquiry. I was thrilled with the journey, rooted in Franciscan tradition and transformational experiences.

"Through the Cojourning process, the doors swung wide as I studied the life of Francis, Clare, and becoming Franciscan, which ultimately deepened my relationship with God.

Shortly after my Covenant ceremony, continuous and relenting ocean waves gently caressed and nudged my being. I began to listen intently, choosing to no longer ignore the workings of the Holy Spirit, which led to trusting where God was leading me, to that of consecrated life.
"Why now, and with all the uncertainty of religious life?

"My *"Yes"* to this summons is a leap of faith that takes courage and tenacity.
And so, my journey and transformation continue with rich lessons and a reshaping of my being as I live religious life as a Rochester Franciscan Sister.

"I continue to ride this mystery. My journey and vocation are, foremost, about my relationship with God. I often ask, "God, what is it you desire of me? What is mine to do?""

Sisters of Saint Francis
Academy of Our Lady of Lourdes

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