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The Whitehall FRANCISCAN

The Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God



HOPE and FIDELITY to the Gospel Message

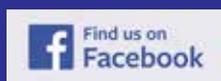
A message from General Minister Sister Joanne Brazinski, OSF



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In a world that continues to challenge our moral compass, our belief in the goodness of people and our ability to go beyond our present limits, we are called to be hopeful and faithful. The response to the message of Pope Francis to the world and the Church manifests the hunger for a return to the Gospel life in a way that is life-giving to all. Our Franciscan tradition is one of hope and fidelity to the Gospel message. It is a tradition that focuses on the wonderful gift given to us by God; we have been created out of Love. What a wonderful charism to share!

In this issue of the *Whitehall Franciscan*, we bring you a few of the ways that the Sisters of Saint Francis of the Providence of God are attempting to be women of Hope and Fidelity.



- We celebrate 95 years as a congregation, years that have truly been marked by God's Providence leading us in ways that were and are beyond our imaginings.
- Recently, we concluded our XXII General Chapter as a congregation, where we came together to ponder the mystery and gift of charism and to be attentive to where Providence is asking us to share life and hope.
- In this issue, you will find the information about the two new missions we have undertaken in Brazil – the direction of a grade school in a very poor area of Minas Gerais, Brazil and bringing a healing presence to those in the Amazon through the ministry of our Sister Marlene Avansi.
- We share information about the reality of global warming in an effort to awaken the awareness of our connectedness to all of creation and to all peoples, and to put before us once again the need to care for our common home.

Hope is essential to life, but how do we describe it? I find that the words of Václav Havel speak much about this virtue so needed today:

"Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good. Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

As Franciscan women who are deeply committed to God, we believe that we are called to live in hope and in fidelity to the Gospel. We are called to bring a sense of hope to God's people. We are convinced that it is important to work for something because it is good. We know that what we are doing, how we are choosing to be attentive to God's Word and to be open to God's Grace are part of living our Franciscan Evangelical Life.

With Francis of Assisi, we pray:

"You are holy, Lord God, Who does wonderful things. You are love, charity. You are wisdom. You are our hope. You are our eternal life; great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful Savior."

To all of our readers, we pray that you may experience hope in every new blade of grass, every child's smile, in the song of the bird, the gentle breezes of spring and the quiet of your heart. Blessings in this season of life and hope!

Sisters Celebrate 95 Years as a Congregation

On March 12, 2017, we were blessed to celebrate the 95th anniversary of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God. We give thanks for the faithful lives and dedicated service of all our Sisters - past and present - as well as all who have been vital to our mission. Join us as we pause to remember a few moments from our past 95 years.

Beginnings

Founded in Pittsburgh in 1922 to serve the region's Lithuanian immigrant community, our congregation was originally called the "Lithuanian Sisters of St. Francis." The Congregation's name was officially changed to the "Sisters of St. Francis of Providence of God" in 1949 to better reflect the inclusiveness of our mission.

22 member Lithuanian Sisters of St. Francis of the Third Order formed with assistance from the Sisters of St. Francis of Millvale (now the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities). Our pioneer sisters are pictured with the Millvale community's Mother M. Chrysostom Krill in 1923.



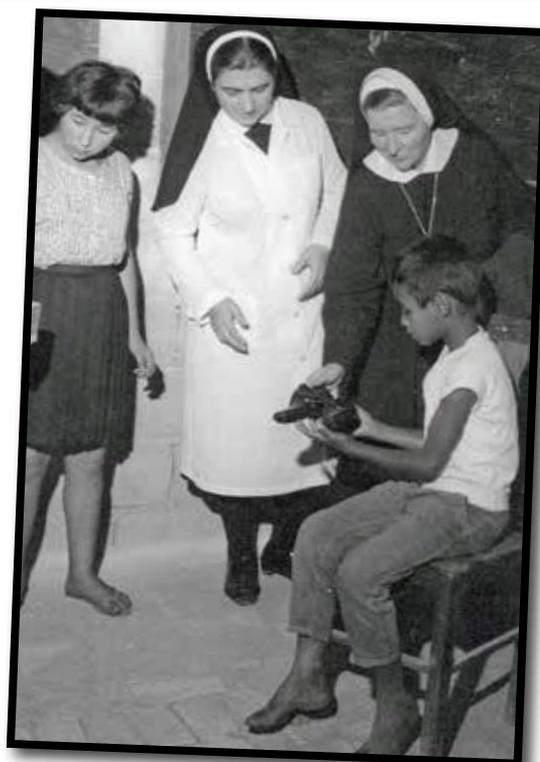
Sister M. Ligouri Vitkauskas with St. Francis Academy students in the 1950s.

Education

In 1929, the St. Francis Academy began in our Motherhouse, then moved to the St. Francis Academy building in 1939. The Sisters educated over 3,000 young women at St. Francis Academy, as well as countless other students at numerous elementary and high schools where our Sisters served in Pittsburgh and throughout the United States.

Brazil

In 1938, five Sisters sailed to Brazil to begin a mission. Today, 42 Sisters in Brazil continue to serve through engaging in education, healthcare and pastoral ministry. Our Community also sponsors several schools and missions serving impoverished areas in Brazil and Bolivia.



Sisters Antonina Ferreira and Beatrice Siratavic in 1968 in Paiol Velho where our Sisters served as educators, as well as provided students and their families with food, clothing and medical supplies.

Continued on page 9

2017 General Chapter

Look, God is Doing, in Us, Something New..



Every four years, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God convene for a General Chapter to discuss issues, plan for future challenges facing the community, and elect a new leadership team. This year's General Chapter was January 8 -18 in São Paulo, Brazil.

Guided by this excerpt from the Book of Revelation, "Look, God is doing, in us, something new . . . ," delegates from the USA and Brazil heard a variety of reports that offered a view of the current state of the congregation and its ministries. They also discussed a series of questions that the congregation-at-large has shaped and projected various resolutions to guide the new congregational leadership team over the next four years.

The General Chapter gives delegates time to get to know more about each of the congregation's ministries and the

challenges each face. The delegates also provide input on each ministry, and discern where and how God might be calling the Sisters to respond. This is done through small and large group discussions as well as in reflection/prayer groups. Through this process, a vision for the future emerges, and the delegates chose those women who can best animate and move the Sisters forward for the next four years.



More photos of our Sisters at General Chapter can be viewed on our Facebook page: [facebook.com/osfprov](https://www.facebook.com/osfprov)

Introducing... Our New General Leadership Team



General Minister
Sister Joanne Brazinski



Assistant General Minister
Sister Maria José da Conceição



General Councilor
Sister Janet Gardner



General Councilor
Sister Rute Almeida Guimarães



General Councilor
Sister Maria Goretti Avanzi

Peace & Every Good!



As we confidently, joyfully, go forward, our hearts are filled with gratitude for our outgoing leadership team. Thank you, Sisters Joanne, Joalice, J. Lora, Maria Goretti, Barbara and Selma for guiding our Community on our journey these past four years. Remaining faithful to our charism and mission, your efforts invited God to do, in us, something new.

Pictured is our outgoing leadership team (left to right) Sisters Barbara Zilch, Joalice Conceição dos Santos, Joanne Brazinski (re-elected), J. Lora Dambroski, Maria Goretti Avanzi (re-elected) and Selma Maria dos Santos.

God is Doing Something New

New Ministries Serve Those Living in Poverty

Sister Marlene Serves Northern Brazil as Medical Doctor and Surgeon

At the narrowest and deepest point of the Amazon River in northern Brazil is the town of Óbidos. Although the region is quite beautiful, most of the 50,000 citizens of Óbidos are poor and rely upon the harvesting of nuts, commercial fishing and small businesses for their livelihoods. Roads into and around the town are made entirely of dirt, as the community lacks the funding for asphalt. Óbidos is only accessible from São Paulo via a plane ride to the city of Santarém, followed by a three-hour journey by small motor boat - or a prolonged voyage on a larger ferry that takes up to eight hours.

The main hospital serving the town's people is the Santa Casa De Misericórdia De Óbidos, which is administered by a Franciscan congregation. Originally built by the Alcoa Corporation for their local workers, a new hospital is being erected, in a continuing partnership with Alcoa, in front of the older one to better serve the area. The Franciscan congregation has also raised money to build and operate a hospital boat.

Until recently, the hospital was served by three physicians. Often, patients needing surgery had to be transported to another facility nearly two hours away.

To help alleviate this dire situation, Sister Marlene Aparecida Avanzi - a member of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God in Brazil, medical doctor, and experienced surgeon - accepted an invitation to become a member of the hospital's staff. By her presence, many patients requiring surgery will be able to have it performed on site. Sister Marlene will also be serving at a small emergency hospital in town, as well as on the traveling hospital boat.

Our thoughts and prayers are with Sister Marlene as she continues in this new ministry serving those in need in one of the poorest regions of her native Brazil. Going forward, we also hope to send additional Sisters to minister in the area.



Sister Marlene and her first patient in Óbidos.



Located on the Amazon River, much of the Óbidos region is only accessible via boat making it difficult to travel to the city for medical care. Once completed, Sister Marlene will be able to minister on a specially designed hospital boat that will travel part of the Amazon river. The photo to the right shows what the hospital boat will look like, as well as its planned route.

Continued on page 7

New Ministries (continued from page 6)

Sisters Serve and Sponsor School in Impoverished Area

Picture a school with 370 students. Although the building's exterior exhibits some modernity, inside are broken desks and outdated equipment. Children come each day dressed in ripped pants or shabby dresses and wearing old, broken thong sandals. 90 of the students are orphans - some actually live in pig pens as their homes! A number of the children are undernourished, having never eaten anything except rice. As such, 40% of the students have been diagnosed with learning disabilities due to the swelling of their brains caused by malnutrition. These children are also exposed to contaminated water, as wastewater often seeps into the local sources of drinking water. Moreover, there are also victims of incest, drug-dependent and alcoholic parents and domestic abuse among the student population.

Not a very pretty picture, but such was the former

San Miguel School in the Brazilian city of Barbacena, located in the state of Minas Gerais, along the main highway that connects Brasilia (the capital of Brazil) and Rio de Janeiro.

Originally, the school was administered by a missionary from Italy, whose father funded the program. However, upon his father's death, funding disappeared and the school was turned over to the state of Minas Gerais, who appointed a local missionary as administrator. However, the state was unable to properly fund the school. It fell into disrepair and, more importantly, there was a lack of any genuine learning atmosphere.



Sister Selma Marie Dos Santos (3rd from left) and Sister Odete Pereira da Silva (right) are pictured with some of the students shortly after our congregation agreed to sponsor St. Francis of Assisi School.

At this point, the local missionary approached our congregation and asked if we could take over the school's administration. Once our leadership agreed, the contract with the state was cancelled, and we began to assemble a team.

The school has been re-named the St. Francis of Assisi School (Colégio São Francisco de Assis). Our Sisters assumed overall responsibility, but rely upon local teachers and other lay persons to administer the school.

As our Sisters took over sponsorship of the

school, uniforms and sneakers were purchased for the students. Showers will be also be installed on site, as many of the children, lacking indoor plumbing, simply take a dip in the lake as a way of cleaning themselves before coming to school.

Presently, Sisters Maria do Carmo Pereira and Juliana Ayres da Silva serve the area's residents through pastoral ministries among the local residents. A program providing food baskets for families is also being planned, and our Sisters will continue to seek ministry opportunities as they learn more about the area and the needs of the people.

Please join us in prayer for the success of St. Francis of Assisi School, students and their families, as well as our Sisters serving in the region.

If you would like give to help our Sisters serving in Óbidos or Barbacena, you may use the enclosed envelope to send a donation to our USA administrative offices. Please include a note saying: "for Óbidos/Barbacena." For more information or other ways to help, please contact us at development@osfprov.org or 412-885-7232.



New sneakers, uniforms, backpacks, and school supplies were given to students thanks to the generosity of our USA Associates, schools sponsored by our Sisters in São Paulo, and other generous benefactors.

Care for Creation: Global Warming

Global warming may indeed be the sharpest example of how policy in Washington may change under the new Administration. It's unclear how funding for climate-change initiatives will be impacted. However, one thing is clear for sure: Climate change is real.

The scientific consensus is that Earth's climate is unequivocally warming, and that it is extremely likely (95% probability or higher) that this warming is predominantly caused by humans - notably the increased concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere from human activities, such as deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels.

Earth orbiting satellites and other technological advances have enabled scientists to see the big picture, collecting many different types of information about our planet and its climate on a global scale. This body of data reveals the signals of a changing climate.

Scientists know that certain gases trap heat and act like a blanket to warm the planet. One of the most important is carbon dioxide (CO₂), which we release into the atmosphere when we burn fossil fuels – oil, coal and natural gas – to generate electricity, power our vehicles and heat our homes. As we overload our atmosphere with CO₂, more and more heat is trapped, and Earth steadily warms up in response. How do we know? The scientific evidence is overwhelming. CO₂ absorbs heat reflected from the Earth's surface – heat that would otherwise pass freely into space. The CO₂ then releases the heat, warming the Earth's atmosphere.

Over the past 50 years, the average global temperature has increased at the fastest rate in recorded history. Moreover, experts see the trend is accelerating: All but one of the 16 hottest years in NASA's 134-year record have occurred since 2000.

In the United States, the burning of fossil fuels to make electricity is the largest source of heat-trapping pollution, producing about two billion tons of CO₂ every year. Coal-burning power plants are by far the biggest polluters. The nation's second largest source of carbon pollution is the transportation sector, which generates about 1.7 billion tons of CO₂ emissions each year.

The climate has changed many times in the geologic past due to natural causes, including volcanic activity, changes in the sun's intensity, fluctuations in Earth's orbit, and other factors – but none of these can account for the current rise in global temperatures.

Climate change deniers have argued that there has been a “pause” or slowdown” in rising global temperatures, but several recent studies have disproved this claim. Scientists say that unless we curb global-warming emissions, average U.S. temperatures could increase by up to 10 degrees Fahrenheit over the next century.



So what are some of the effects of global warming?

Higher temperatures are worsening many types of disasters, including storms, heat waves, floods and droughts. A warmer climate creates an atmosphere that can collect, retain and drop more water, changing weather patterns in such a way that wet areas become wetter and dry areas drier.

Prolonged dry spells mean more than just scorched lawns. Drought conditions jeopardize access to clean drinking water, fuel out-of-control wildfires, and result in dust storms, extreme heat events and flash flooding. At the opposite end of the spectrum, heavier rains cause streams, river and lakes to overflow, damaging life and property, contaminating drinking water, creating hazardous material spills and promoting mold infestation and unhealthy air. A warmer, wetter world is also a boon for food-borne and waterborne illnesses and disease-carrying insects.

Pope Francis Takes Stance

In *Laudato si': On Care For Our Common Home*, Pope Francis writes, “When we speak of the ‘environment,’ what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. Recognizing the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behavior patterns, and the ways it grasps reality . . . we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”

Can you hear St. Francis' voice in these words? Our environment, God's creation is not just our surroundings. It is brother and sister to us. We are meant to live in harmony with all creation. Now there's a challenge!

For more information and references, please visit www.catholicclimatecovenant.org or climate.nasa.gov

95 Years as a Congregation (continued from page 3)



Healthcare

In 1941, the Sisters acquired Good Samaritan Hospital in Mt. Vernon, IL. Then, in 1974, the Daughters of Charity transferred sponsorship of St. Joseph's hospital in Alton, IL to our congregation. Our Sisters engaged in healthcare ministry in these locations until 1988.

Good Samaritan Hospital in 1973. Front row: (left to right) Sisters M. Francita Platukas, Maryjane Klein, Helene Balciunas, Aquina Zidanavich, Monica Belskas, Catherine Blahut, Alma Pukel, and Assumpta Vosilius. Second row: (left to right) Sisters M. Henrietta Pusvaskis, Leonard Peckus, John Cisarik, Jane Frances Brenner, Valerie Ann Grigal, Augustine Knight, Joanne Dumchus and Dolorita Butkus.

Lithuania

Our Sisters were missioned to Lithuania twice. First in 1935, but World War II forced our Sisters to leave after only a few years. After the country achieved independence from the Soviet Union, our Sisters returned in 1992 to help Lithuanians rebuild through efforts that included feeding the poor, pastoral ministry and helping establish a hospice in Utena. In 2012, the mission was transferred to the Lithuania-based Sisters of Divine Providence.



Sister Michele Garas ministering to children in Utena, Lithuania in the early 2000s.



Franciscan Child Day Care Center

In 1982, our Franciscan Child Day Care Center opened to serve families in Pittsburgh, and continues to operate from the former St. Francis Academy building. A Keystone STARS facility, the Center provides care and education to children 6 weeks through 5 years of age. They also offer a Before and After School Care and a Summer Program for school aged children.

Sister Marietta Zvirblis, long-time director of the center, during a typical day at the Franciscan Child Day Care Center in 1980s when it was still located in St. Clare Hall. About 10 years later, the Center moved to its current location in the former St. Francis Academy Building.

Confidently, Joyfully, We Go Forward

Living the gospel life, our Sisters continue to serve the cities of Pittsburgh and São Paulo, as well as other urban and rural areas of the USA, Brazil, and Bolivia. Our ministries focus on peace, care for creation, the needs of the poor and marginalized, advocacy for victims of human trafficking and other social justice outreach. We hope you will continue to bless us with your presence on our journey, as we confidently, joyfully, go forward to where Providence leads us to share the love of Christ.

Learn more about our story at www.osfprov.org

The Seven Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

The Catholic Church's social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. Modern Catholic social teaching has been articulated through a tradition of papal, conciliar and episcopal documents. In these brief reflections, we highlight several of the key themes that are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition.

IF YOU
WANT PEACE,
WORK FOR
JUSTICE.

~Pope Paul VI

1 Care for Poor and Vulnerable People

A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes that Jesus identified himself intimately with the poor and marginalized people in society and that we must always treat them with respect, dignity and care. This concern extends beyond one's own area to people suffering throughout the world.

2 The Unity of All People

The Church teaches a basic solidarity among all people and a responsibility to work together for the benefit of all. The call of the Gospel is to live in harmony and peace among all people, respecting other nations, cultures and religions.

3 Human Rights and Responsibilities

The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities – to one another, to our families and to the larger society.

4 The Importance of Family and Faith Community

The Church teaches that family and communities rooted in faith are the foundation of both church and society, living and teaching the values of the Gospel. Every government has responsibility for protecting, supporting and encouraging the family for the basic well-being of the entire society.

5 Our Responsibility for Stewardship

At the core of the environmental crisis is a moral challenge that the U.S. Bishops address: that we use and share the goods of the earth, what we pass on to future generations, and how we live in harmony with all of creation.

6 Human Dignity

Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, every person's life and dignity must be respected and supported from conception through natural death. We believe that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

7 The Rights of Workers

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected – the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to safe working conditions, to disability protection, and to security in retirement.

How does Catholic Social Teaching influence our mission? To learn more, visit the justice and peace page of our website:

www.osfprov.org/ministries/justice

XXII General Chapter Declaration

Introduction

We, the Sisters of Saint Francis of the Providence of God, commit ourselves to be: Women of the Gospel rooted in the Providence of God, living our Franciscan Evangelical Life with prophetic courage and creative fidelity, caring for our common home, living with integrity and working as Church in partnership with Religious and laity.

Future of our Congregation

To strengthen creatively the viability and unity of our Congregation.

Identity, Charism and Mission

- To reinvigorate our identity, charism and mission.
- To promote inner freedom and congregational lightness.
- To strengthen, expand and live our practice of itinerancy.
- To live our mission in an incarnated contemplative manner.

Governance

- To simplify the structures of the congregation.
- To promote inclusive participation and to be a reconciling presence.

For about our mission, charism and Franciscan Spirituality, visit www.osfprov.org/about-us/franciscan-spirit



fdcc@osfprov.org 412-882-5085

Childcare is in our Hearts and Children are the Heart of our Center!

The **Franciscan Child Day Care Center** has provided a child-centered environment for over 30 years. Our secure center in Pittsburgh's South Hills is a **Keystone STARS** facility. We care for **infants, toddlers and preschoolers**, as well as provide care for **school age children** in our **Before and After Care Program** and **Summer Program**.

www.franciscanchilddaycare.org

Full and part time care plans are available.

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Confidently, Joyfully, We Go Forward!

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Spiritual Direction

Through Spiritual Direction, Sisters accompany persons on a spiritual journey, helping them to reverence their sacred story. The purpose of direction emphasizes growing closer to God. It is not psychotherapy, counseling or life planning. Spiritual Direction is specific to your spiritual journey and encourages you to explore the movement of God within your life.

Our Spiritual Directors are also experienced in group facilitation, and are available to facilitate group meetings or retreats.

**To schedule an appointment,
or for more information, please contact:**

Sister J. Lora Dambroski, OSF
412-559-1866 or sjldambroski@osfprov.org

Sister Althea Anne Spencer, OSF
412-708-3470 or saaspencer@osfprov.org

Therapeutic Massage

Therapeutic massage offers physical, emotional and spiritual benefits. Sister Althea Anne Spencer, OSF, is a licensed massage therapist, a member of the American Massage Therapy Association and NCBTM Board certified with over 20 years experience as a massage therapist. Through massage therapy, she will assist you in finding your balance of body-mind-soul.

Sister Althea Anne's massage therapy office is located at

St. Sylvester Parish
3754 Brownsville Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15227

**For more information, current rates
or to schedule an appointment, please contact**

Sister Althea Anne Spencer, OSF
412-885-7233 or saaspencer@osfprov.org