

# The Whitehall FRANCISCAN

The Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God

*Seeding Hope through Education*



## Mission Statement

We, Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God, commit ourselves to the evangelical life of continuous conversion in the tradition of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis.

Called together by a good and provident God, we cultivate an intimacy with God that is nourished by Scripture and Eucharist and a reverence for all creation.

Faithful to our Charism, we go to those whom Providence sends us, and conscious of our mission in the Church, we witness to the Kingdom by our lives of service.

We will be instruments of justice and peace among those in need of evangelization, healing, and reconciliation, especially the poor and oppressed.

In simplicity and joy we want to be signs of hope, for we believe that Jesus Christ is with us in the power of His Resurrection.

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# The Heart of our Mission

## Seeding Hope Through Education

A message from General Minister Sister Joanne Brazinski, OSF

On March 12, 2022, the Sisters of Saint Francis of the Providence of God will celebrate 100 years as a Congregation. On March 12, of this year, we begin a year of preparation for our 100th Anniversary. Sisters from the USA and Brazil gathered for prayer together via ZOOM to give thanks to God for the many blessings we have received, to pray for the grace to live fully the present and for the courage to embrace our future confidently. In the next issues of the *Whitehall Franciscan*, we will be sharing with our readers glimpses of our rich and blessed history. We invite you to give thanks with us to our Good and Provident God for all that has been part of these years.

Although our members have been involved in various ministries over the course of a century, from the beginning until the present, the focus of education has been strong and constant. Education has not simply meant presence in the classroom with students. It has always meant being attentive to individual needs and reaching out in whatever way possible to plant seeds of hope. It has meant seeing the uniqueness and creativity of each person, helping to develop skills for life, encouraging and challenging each to be part of creating a more fraternal and just society.

As a Congregation, we are currently reflecting on Pope Francis' Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* and in our schools we are studying the elements of his Global Education Pact. Pope Francis calls us to recognize our connection to all peoples and he reminds us that **"education is always meant to be transformative and that it bears within itself a seed of hope: the hope of peace and justice, the hope of goodness and beauty, the hope of social harmony."** I believe that our experience in the field of education has given and continues to give witness to the transformative power of education.

We not only share a bit of our history in the area of education, but also what is happening today in our Franciscan Child Day Care Center in the USA and in our four schools and social center in Brazil. Ministry in education has always brought challenges and with the pandemic, it has brought even more. Our schools adapted quickly to the use of online learning platforms and meeting the many new challenges of this time. In the midst of it all, we continue to seed hope in the lives of many. As a Congregation, we are committed to academic excellence, fostering Christian and Franciscan values in those who are part of our formal and informal education processes. (Congregational Pastoral Education Plan) Our schools are engaged in ongoing formation for teachers and challenging students to care for creation, to work toward sustainability and to understand the interrelationship of all peoples. Since our foundation as a Congregation, our mission has been to follow Jesus Christ after the example of Francis and Clare of Assisi. We have been called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. Our years in the fields of education have certainly given us the opportunity to do so.

In the Global Education Pact, Pope Francis challenges all peoples, not only those involved in education, to be about supporting education that is concerned with grasping the interdependence of humanity and about affecting the heart of society. He encourages change on a global scale so that education may become a creator of fraternity, peace and justice. As we celebrate a century in this area of ministry, we are committed to continue our efforts to seed hope for a world that knows solidarity, sustainability, fraternity, justice and peace.

*Sisters of Saint Francis  
of the Providence of God*



Confidently, Joyfully, We Go Forward!  
"God is with us" Joshua 1,9

# Forged by Faith

## Reflecting on a Century of Education Ministry

Our Franciscan community was forged by our Catholic faith, Lithuanian roots and education ministry. Before they were Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God, our founding Sisters served as educators. During the immigration boom of the 1800's and early 1900s, communities of Lithuanian immigrants grew across the United States, especially in Pennsylvania, Illinois, Michigan and Connecticut. Catholic parishes and parochial schools were the heart of these communities, and they needed both priests and Sisters who understood the Lithuanian language, culture and faith.

As Lithuanian members of the mostly Polish Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, our founding Sisters were sent to serve Lithuanian Catholic schools like St. George in Chicago and St. Casimir in Pittsburgh. These parishes and their priests soon advocated for a new Congregation of Lithuanian Sisters who they felt were best able to meet the unique needs of their growing communities.

Under the title, the Lithuanian Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis of Assisi, our Congregation was officially founded on March 12, 1922 thanks to the faithful support of the Lithuanian Catholic community, including Rev. Michael L. Krusas of Chicago and Rev. John J. Sukaitis and Rev. Magnus J. Kazenas of St. Casimir Parish. Throughout the delicate and challenging process of leaving one Community to form a new Congregation, God's providence was present through the mediation of Mother M. Clara Netkowski of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, unconditional support of Pittsburgh Bishop Hugh C. Boyle and the support of Mother M. Chrysostom



*In 1898 the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth were called to serve St. Casimir Lithuanian Parish in Pittsburgh, PA. Sister M. Gertrude Rodgers and Sister M. Alphonsa Janusis, pictured on the above circa 1910, would become part of our first group of pioneer Sisters.*

Krill and the Sisters of St. Francis of Millvale, who agreed to sponsor our fledgling community and train our fifteen professed Sisters, nine novices and two postulants to follow the Franciscan way of life.

In 1949, our Congregation's name was officially changed to the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God and our mission expanded to serve persons of all backgrounds through a variety of ministries. However, education remained the heart of our mission throughout the 20th Century.

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*Our Sisters served at St. Joseph's School in Mahanoy City, PA from 1925-1971.*

*Sister M. Theodora Shadis in 1961 with students from St. Casimir High School in Pittsburgh, where she served as principal.*



# Education through the Century (continued from page 3)

Over the past century, most of our Sisters, living and deceased, served in education ministry. Some for a few years and many for decades. All have profoundly transformed students, families and the communities served.

Our Congregation began St. Francis Academy in 1929 at our newly built Motherhouse in Pittsburgh's South Hills, and opened the St. Francis Academy building in 1939 (read more on page 5.) Our Sisters would educate over 3,000 young women at SFA, as well as countless others in 33 elementary and 10 secondary schools throughout the East Coast and Midwest, as well as California, New Mexico and other areas of the country. Providence also called our Sisters to serve in colleges and universities, as well as missions outside the United States, such as Brazil, Bolivia, Lithuania and the British West Indies.

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*Sister Augusta Skulis with students at St. Valentine School in Bethel Park, PA where her education duties included organizing fun and competitive play at recess. (c. 1977)*



*In the 1960s, Sisters Evangelista Calvin and Agnes Kathryn Wilson spent summers serving on the island of Carriacou in the British West Indies where they taught reading methodologies to indigenous lay teachers.*



*Sister Nancy Langhart with her home economics class at St. Francis Academy (c. 1960s). She would later serve as a guidance counselor at SFA and Geibel Catholic High School in Connellsville, PA. She also served at Bloomsburg/Bucknell University, the State University of New York, and the College of St. Rose in Albany, NY as a campus minister and councilor.*



*Sister Janice Campbell with students at Mt. St. Peter School in New Kensington, PA. (c. early 1980s)*



*Sister Mary Ann Lostoski (right) served as principal at St. Joan of Arc School in Pittsburgh from 2004-2007.*

# Rooted in Franciscan Spirit

## St. Francis Academy's Legacy of Hope

In 1926, as our new Franciscan Congregation became more established in Pittsburgh's south hills community, the Sisters opened a preparatory school for girls who had made known they wanted to join the community. Soon after, however, word of the school's quality education spread and parents were asking if their daughters could take classes, commuting each day rather than boarding with prospective postulants.

Early on, classes were held in the Motherhouse convent. As the number of day students not pursuing religious life swelled, it didn't take long for the student body to outgrow the convent, so much so that the Sisters began making plans to build a new separate Academy building in the mid-1930's.

To begin construction, Mother Aloysia obtained permission from the diocese to mortgage the convent building by taking out a loan of \$65,000 (adjusted for inflation, \$65,000 in 1938 is equal to \$1,600,000 today).

Additional funding was secured by the Sisters' teaching stipends, the St. Francis Academy Mothers' Guild and the various convent Auxiliaries in cities that were strongholds where the Sisters had distinguished themselves by way of opening elementary and secondary schools.

The academy building was meant to accommodate 300 students and was



Sister Althea Anne Spencer (right) with business class student Erika Lancaster at St. Francis Academy in 1988.

completed in 1941 at the cost of \$200,000 (adjusted for inflation, \$200,000 in 1941 is equal to \$3,540,000 today).

When first opened, the Academy's enrollment was just under 200, so to make better use of the space, the Sisters opted to open an elementary school with a first and second grade. Each year, another grade was to be added. By the 1950's, however, the area was changing from rural to suburban, chock-full with growing families. Parish elementary schools eventually opened to care for their needs. As a result, the Academy's lower grades were phased out by 1958, while the high school continued to flourish with increasing enrollments.

The first principal, Sister M. Loyola Sebelskas, was proud of the three-story building, which featured a library with 8,000 volumes; chemistry, physics and biology labs; a model office equipped with office machines for commercial students; home economic labs for food, clothing and design courses; and a cafeteria, gymnasium, music room and individual lockers.

The expectations of the teachers regarding the students' behavior were evident in the "Rules and Regulations." These included uniforms to be worn daily, with a freshly laundered blouse each day. Jumpers were to be pressed and spotless, with white anklets and regulation shoes. Jewelry and make-up were forbidden. Loud talking, whistling or running in the hallways was not allowed and there were three minutes allocated to change classes. Violations meant demerits and a total of 25 demerits in one marking period resulted in dismissal.

On January 15, 1991, the Academy's Board of Directors voted to close the school. It was an extremely difficult decision but the financial constraints and increasing competition with co-ed Catholic and public high schools gave the Sisters little choice. The Congregation



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

explored all possible alternatives, but they didn't want to jeopardize the Academy's reputation.

Throughout its history, SFA earned prominence as an academic and spiritual leader in values-based education. But it wasn't just the school's academic strength or its reputation; students and families were genuinely happy there, and the spiritual, intellectual and moral growth nurtured at the Academy translated into long-term life success.

At the closing ceremonies attended by over 600 persons, school principal Dorothy McGinley drew a rousing response when she quoted a teacher who always reminded the students: "Remember, you're an Academy girl."

With the closing, the Academy's teachers and staff could look back on the 3,000 students they had prepared to make significant contributions to the life of the Church and the community.

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# Education through the Century (continued from page 4)



Sister Sylvania Krafton (center) coordinated the R-T-R program for more than a decade and is pictured with R-T-R tutors Sisters Louise Marie Simcoe (left) and Lucy Astrauskas (right).

After Sister Elise Mora retired from St. Bonaventure University, she volunteered to teach Spanish at St. Thomas More School in Bethel Park, PA.



In 1978 the Sisters began the Reading, Thinking and Reasoning Center (R-T-R) at the Motherhouse to provide remedial tutoring in a variety of academic subjects for individual students ages kindergarten through adult. Sister Agnes Kathryn Wilson served as the program's initial coordinator, and was followed by Sister Sylvania Krafton who built the program from 1982 until 1993. In addition to meeting a growing need in the Pittsburgh region, the Center allowed retired Sisters, who were teachers, the opportunity to continue their ministry on a part time basis. The ministry ended in 1994, but individual Sisters continued to offer tutoring and mentoring into the 2000s.

Like many religious communities, our Congregation transitioned into a smaller and older Community throughout the 2000s. Enrollment in Catholic schools was also declining. During this time, many Sisters in the

United States serving in education ministry were called to other ministries or retired to engage in part-time ministry assisting in administration, Community ministries and outreach efforts when able, as well as dedicate the remainder of their lives to the ministry of prayer. Yet, our education ministry remains a keystone of our present mission with our Franciscan Child Day Care Center in the United States and our Congregation's thriving schools in Brazil.

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## St. Francis Academy (continued from page 5)

### Spirit of Academy lives on through Alumnae

Dianne "DeDe" (Kobosky) Metro, class of 1969, talks about a feeling of being welcomed from her first day. "There was a family atmosphere that was very important to me as young girl going into high school."

Linda (Straub) Cline, class of 1972, mentions it being "much more than a school. There were friendships made that still last."

The Academy closed in 1991, but the Sisters who taught there and their students say the spirit lives on to this day. Since its founding, St. Francis Academy Alumnae Association has brought alumnae, teachers and friends together to serve as a community of support for one another. They've also engaged in charitable activities to support our Sisters and ministries as well as the Franciscan Day Care Center and Sisters Place.

Though pandemic precautions canceled most 2020 events, Alumnae, Sisters and friends usually gather for a mass for deceased members, bus trips and other smaller events throughout the year. The major social event and fund raiser has been the annual Tulip Luncheon in April where alumnae gather in friendship and classmates are reunited.

In addition, the Association established its Legacy Award Scholarship, a merit-based scholarship awarded to in-coming freshmen at Seton LaSalle Catholic High School. Each award is for \$1,000 a year to assist with tuition, with each recipient receiving a total of \$4,000. Scholarship recipients must remain enrolled in Seton LaSalle and maintain their GPA. Since its inception in 2008, the Association has awarded 22 scholarships as of March 2020.

In 2013, the Sisters conferred its San Damiano award on the Alumnae Association at their annual Autumn Gala. The event program said, "This group of energetic women has demonstrated a strong commitment to the Sisters who nurtured and encouraged them during their formative years as Academy students."



SFA Alumnae Association Board members include (back row), Corresponding Secretary, Kathy Tietz Hornynak '78; President Lori Husak Lukich '85; Vice President Maria Ammon '84; Recording Secretary, Wendy Hines Hayes '76; (front row) Newsletter Co-Coordinator CeeCee McNulty '81; Treasurer Angela Walker '85; and Newsletter Co-Coordinator Chris Ringling '85.

# Education through the Century (continued from page 6)

## Education Ministry Blooms in Brazil

In 1938, five pioneer Sisters sailed to Brazil to serve Lithuanian communities who had settled in the São Paulo area. Soon after they arrived, our Sisters established a school in Vila Zelina, a small borough of São Paulo, because they knew the vital importance of education for children and young people.

Similar to our experience in the United States, our Community in Brazil continued to grow and our ministries expanded to serve persons of all backgrounds from cities to rural communities, as well as missions in the Amazon and Bolivia.

Today, in São Paulo, more than 3,500 students attend primary and secondary schools sponsored by our Congregation. These schools include

Colégio Franciscano Nossa Senhora do Carmo, the first co-educational Catholic school in São Paulo, Colégio Franciscano de São Miguel Arcanjo, and Colégio Franciscano Pio XII. Our schools offer students a quality education, bilingual studies in Portuguese and English, and the opportunity to learn new technologies, like 3D printing. Pio XII and São Miguel schools offer a program through the University of Missouri where students earn a US diploma and college credits.



Sister Antonina Ferreira and Sister Beatrice Siratavic teach students in Paiol Velho (c. 1968).

In 2016, our Sisters took over a school in the impoverished area of Barbacena, located in the state of Minas Gerais along the main highway that connects Brasilia (the capital of Brazil) and Rio de Janeiro. Renamed Colégio São Francisco de Assis (St. Francis of Assisi School), our Sisters partner with lay teachers, administrators and others to serve more than 350 students, including many orphans and children ex-

periencing extreme poverty. Our Sisters provide students with uniforms, sneakers, backpacks and educational materials, and the school has been renovated to offer safe learning and recreational spaces, as well as showers for children without access to indoor plumbing. Sisters also engage in pastoral ministry and outreach to children and families experiencing poverty.

Our Community also sponsors Saint Francis and Saint Clare Social Center in São Paulo, where children and young people come together before and after school to study, learn skills and recreate with peers. The Center's goal is to empower at risk youth to grow and thrive.

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Sister M. Gloria de Souza (left) and Sister Yolanda Marcelino (right) with professional athlete Milene Domingue a.k.a. the "Queen of Soccer" who visited Pio XII for their field day celebration in 2019, when the school celebrated 65 years.



Sister Selma Maria dos Santos organized a drive through blessing of the animals at São Miguel Arcanjo school for the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi.



Sister Maria do Carmo Perreira with students from Colégio São Francisco de Assis in Barbacena.

# Education through the Century (continued from page 7)

## Children are the Heart of the Franciscan Child Day Care Center

In the late 1970s our Community began to recognize an increasing need for quality child care in Pittsburgh, which was especially apparent to our Sisters serving families with young children in parishes and elementary schools. In 1982, the Franciscan Child Day Care Center opened on the ground floor of St. Clare Hall – the former dormitory for St. Francis Academy. Under the guidance of Sister Marietta Zvirblis, the Center grew from caring for 13 toddlers into a full-fledged day care facility caring for over 60 infants, toddlers and preschoolers. By the early 1990s, with waiting lists and the hope to add a Before and After School program, it was clear that more space was needed. In 1994, the Center moved to the renovated former St. Francis Academy building to allow more space to grow.

Over the next three decades, the Center continued to thrive in the peaceful and nurturing embrace of our Sisters, Board, caregivers and directors, including Sister M. Michael Stroyer, Sister Marietta, Carol Unrue, Sister Linda Kaman, RSM and the current director Sandra Merlo, who has guided the Center for the past 17 years. Growth during this time included the addition of Before and After School and Summer Programs for school-age children.

As a ministry of the Sisters, the Center embraces Franciscan values, including love of neighbor, peace and justice, and care for all creation. Our Sisters are also actively involved in the Center, serving as Board members, caregivers and volunteers. Presently, the Franciscan Child Day Care Center Board includes Sisters Janet Gardner (president), Mary Ann Lostoski (vice-president) and Althea Anne Spencer (treasurer).



*As a member of leadership, Sister Marietta Zvirblis was instrumental in establishing the Franciscan Child Day Care Center. When the Center opened in 1982, she first served as the ministry's coordinator; then director until 1996.*



*Sister M. Hilária de Oliveira currently serves as a caregiver at the Center.*



*Sister M. Edward Urban volunteered to read to the children and help when needed.*



*Sister Barbara Zilch (left) served as president of the Franciscan Child Day Care Board for almost two decades. She is pictured with Center director Sandra Merlo in 2017.*

## Confidently, Joyfully, We Go Forward

Reflecting on a century of our Community's education ministry, we are blessed to see God's Providence working through our lives and ministries. As we confidently, joyfully, go forward to where Providence calls us in the USA, Brazil and beyond, we remain grateful for each student, teacher, administrator and parent we've encountered on our journey. We are also grateful for our extended Franciscan family whose prayers, gifts and support have been vital to our mission to serve children, youth and families for more than a century.

*Editorial Note: In addition to our Sisters and archives, A Celebration of Franciscan Spirit: Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God 1922-2000, by Eileen Leindecker Gimper, PhD was a source of historic information for this article.*

# *A Heritage of Faith and Hope*

## *Our Two Missions to Lithuania 50 Years Apart*

Lithuania -- a relatively small nation with an area slightly larger than the state of West Virginia and a population of approximately 3 million-- it none the less has held a special place in the hearts and minds of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God. After all, the Congregation was founded to teach the children of Lithuanian immigrants here in the United States. It was also foreseeable that the Sisters would desire to maintain ties to the nation from which they or, in most cases, their parents had emigrated.

Not surprisingly, then, a small group of our Sisters journeyed back to Lithuania in the mid-1930s where they spent most of their time learning the customs and language, taking university courses and administering a boarding school for young girls. Unfortunately, before they could firmly establish themselves with the local community, the Sisters were forced to return to the Motherhouse. The rumblings of World War II had been set in motion and, on orders from the U.S. Consul, they were directed to return to the U.S.

Two of our Sisters, Urban Kolash and Virginia Pask, devised a low-key wardrobe for travel, by ironing what money they had into their veils. The Sisters wrote home, "The only route accessible is through Siberia to Japan . . . what a mess we are in." They also described an alternative route which they ultimately undertook, traveling through Germany, Switzerland and Nazi-occupied France, before arriving in Lisbon, Portugal, where they boarded a ship bound to the United States. The Sisters vividly described the harrowing trip across France by bus, as the German army had destroyed most of the



*Pictured above: Sister M. Felicia Pieza (left) and Sister M. Virginia Pask (right) with students during our first mission to Lithuania, prior to World War II.*

*Pictured left: Sisters host a Christmas gathering during our first mission to Lithuania.*

railroad bridges.

After the war, the Soviets dropped the Iron Curtain around all of Eastern Europe, prohibiting the return of any religious community to the region.

During the Soviet occupation, Catholics were persecuted. Schools, churches and convents were closed and all printed material pertaining to religion was destroyed. The nation's youth were often sent to Russia for employment and re-education or recruited for the army. Thousands were tortured, imprisoned or executed. Many were sent to Siberia never to be heard from again.

With the collapse of the Soviet empire, Providence once again sent the Sisters back to Lithuania in October 1992, a year after the nation had regained her independence after 50 years under Soviet rule. An invitation had been extended to our Congregation by the Catholic Lithuanian Caritas Federation.

Sister Michele Garas, whose family had fled Lithuania during the early years of Soviet occupation, along with Sister Dolorita Butkus, volunteered to teach religion in the Saule



*Sister Dolorita Butkus with a resident at St. Clare Hospice.*

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## Lithuania (continued from page 9)

Catholic School in the town of Utena. Other Sisters who served the mission throughout the next two decades included Sisters Miriam Racas, Ruth Maria Ratkievicius and Marianne Walters.

Sister Dolorita affectionately recalls those first days in school when she was asked by one curious student, "From what world did you come?"

Sister Michele, upon her return, found a people alienated and restrained after decades of oppression. Nevertheless, she described a people of "love of life, hope and joy... Resurrection."

Through the years, others served in this ministry that found the Sisters teaching school and visiting orphans, the elderly and the poor and supplying food, clothing and medicine when available. Early on, their labors were supported by the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Eastern Europe.

With an extensive background in hospital ministry in the U.S. as a registered nurse, certified anesthetist and registered respiratory therapist, Sister Dolorita derived special satisfaction in helping found St. Clare Hospice in 1996. The only religious-sponsored hospice in the country, St. Clare Hospice began in a building that had been vacated for years. It took five truckloads



*Sister Michele Garas with a student at the Saule Catholic School.*

of debris to be hauled away to make room for the new ministry.

Sister Dolorita helped launch the hospice ministry with practically nothing, obtaining donations of beds, mattresses, sheets and linens. Aid to Lithuania, Inc., the Knights of Lithuania, and Lithuanian Aid to Lithuania, plus other groups in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and elsewhere were instrumental in obtaining needed supplies. Care was provided for hundreds of patients, plus they were able to offer respite to families of those suffering from terminal illnesses.

Sister Dolorita also initiated a food program wherein once a month, she and Sister Michele distributed food to persons experiencing food insecurity and hunger. Sister continued to serve as a consultant and fund raiser until ill health caused her return to the Motherhouse in late 2011. Sister Michele remained until the following year.

After twenty years of ministry, the mission was permanently transferred to the Lithuanian-based Sisters of Divine Providence, in May 2013. Our Sisters are proud to have served the people of Lithuania and are particularly grateful to all the generous benefactors who helped sustain the mission for nearly 20 years.



*Sister Janet Gardner visited with Utena residents during one of her trips to the Lithuanian mission as General Minister.*

## Lithuania's Hill of Crosses Stands as a Peaceful Act of Resistance and Faith

An enduring symbol of the faithfulness of the Lithuanian people, the Hill of Crosses began as a memorial for Lithuanians to pray for peace and the souls of loved ones lost in the struggle for independence. During the Soviet occupation, the hill took on a greater significance as a place for peaceful resistance and demonstration of the Lithuanian people's faith. Soviet forces bulldozed the hill at least three times, but each time Lithuanians returned to pray for peace and freedom, as they resurrected new crosses. Today, with over 100,000 crosses the hill attracts faithful pilgrims from all over the world who come to pray and experience the wonder of this sacred place.



*Sisters Marian Blodis, Ruth Maria Ratkievicius, and Gloria de Souza visited the Hill of Crosses in Lithuania in 1999.*

# Challenge Accepted

## Sisters Committed to Ending Food Insecurity and Hunger

One bad month. That's all it takes for many Americans to be economically devastated. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought more than a year of bad months, and the United States is experiencing a crisis of hunger and food insecurity that hasn't been seen since the Great Depression.

Though there has been an ongoing food insecurity problem in the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a significant increase. According to Feeding America, the number of people experiencing food insecurity grew from 35 million in 2019 to more than 50 million in 2020, including an estimated 17 million children. In October 2020, the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank reported a projected 42 percent increase in food insecurity rates in the region due to the pandemic.

At the beginning of the year, recognizing this growing crisis, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Region 4, issued a challenge to their region and others to address hunger and food insecurity during Catholic Sisters Week, March 8-14, 2021.

"Our neighbors are hurting! We must act now and come together to lend assistance however we can," said general councilor Sister Janet Gardner, OSF, who helped coordinate the challenge. "Each one of us can do something to help our neighbors struggling with hunger and food insecurity. Our communities can provide opportunities to unite in service to collect food donations, create community gardens, and contact elected leaders to ask them to work together to help our neighbors in need, especially children, seniors, and the working poor who do not qualify for assistance programs."

The Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God joined more than 80 religious communities of women throughout the United States to accept the challenge and go forward with increased efforts to serve persons in need, as well as



bring awareness to the growing problem of food insecurity and underlying causes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty, unemployment, under-employment, climate change, discrimination, war/conflict and "food deserts" with limited access to nutritious food.

As part of the Catholic Sisters Week Challenge to End Hunger and Food Insecurity, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God hosted a food drive to benefit St. Winifred Food Pantry, which serves families and individuals in Pittsburgh's South Hills. We were joined by our Franciscan Child Day Care Center who collected donations from families and staff.

The challenge was extended to ministries, parishes and individuals to join efforts to help persons experiencing hunger and food insecurity, or initiate charitable endeavor and service projects in their own communities.

Beyond Catholic Sisters Week, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God are committed to continuing to address food insecurity and hunger by addressing immediate needs, as well as increasing our efforts to understand and solve the complex, varied and interconnected causes – economic, environmental, systemic and societal. **Will you join us?**

*Learn more about food insecurity and hunger, and ways you can help at:*

**Feeding America: [feedingamerica.org](https://feedingamerica.org)**

**Bread for the World: [bread.org](https://bread.org)**

**Catholic Sisters Week: [catholicsistersweek.org](https://catholicsistersweek.org)**

### Join us and accept the challenge to End Hunger and Food Insecurity:

- Organize regular food drives for local food bank or food pantry.
- Set up a Community Garden, Little Free Pantry, or other project serving persons experiencing food insecurity or hunger.
- Volunteer for a food pantry, soup kitchen, meals on wheels or other organization serving persons experiencing food insecurity and hunger
- Donate to an organization that is working to end hunger, food insecurity or food injustice.
- Contact your local, state and federal representatives and advocate for policies that will increase access to food, including expanding SNAP benefits, increasing the minimum wage, and funding food initiatives.
- Pray with us for those experiencing food security and hunger.



*Sisters of Saint Francis of the Providence of God*  
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