

The Whitehall FRANCISCAN

Vol. 31, No. 1
Spring 2022

The Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God

CELEBRATING A FOUNDATION OF FRANCISCAN FAITH



Mission Statement

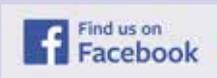
We, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God, commit ourselves to the evangelical life of continuous conversion in the tradition of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis according to the example of our founding Sisters.

Called together by a good and provident God, we cultivate an intimacy with God that is nourished by Sacred Scripture, by the Eucharist, by our gift of self to others and in reverence for all creation.

Faithful to our Charism, we go to those to whom Providence sends us and conscious of our mission in the Church, we assume the commitment of evangelization and liberation, especially with the poor and oppressed. We witness to God's overflowing love by our lives and service, promoting justice, peace and reconciliation among all.

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

The Whitehall Franciscan is a quarterly publication of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God
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A Future Full of Hope

“For I know the plans I have made for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe, plans to give you a future full of hope!”

Jeremiah 29:11

It was with this hope, shared by the prophet Jeremiah, that a multitude of Lithuanian immigrants left their country after World War I, in search of a better life, a life that would allow them the freedom to worship in their Catholic faith and assure the well-being of their families. Our founding Sisters knew this hope well, for they came from these families, and were determined to meet the needs of the burgeoning Lithuanian parishes throughout the United States. Parish priests cried out for more sisters to teach in their parish schools and work with the immigrant families. Thus, with the assistance and encouragement of members of the Lithuanian Priests Association and the generosity of the Lithuanian people, a new congregation was founded on Mt. Providence in what is now Whitehall Borough near Pittsburgh, PA.

The Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, a primarily Polish congregation, first formed our Sisters in the religious life. The Sisters of St. Francis of Millvale welcomed our first members as they initiated the new foundation in 1922 and shared the richness of the Franciscan charism with them. For these two congregations, we are so grateful.

By 1938, with a growing community, our Sisters answered the call to assist Lithuanian immigrants in São Paulo, Brazil and sent Sisters back to Lithuania for language studies and mission work. Always attentive to the impulse of God's Providence the congregation has met new needs as the times have changed.

Today, we are blessed to continue, with the same fervor, the life and mission begun by our founding Sisters. Throughout this Centennial Year, we hope to share with you some of the many blessings we have experienced as we “follow Jesus Christ, in the example of Francis of Assisi” (Charism) and give “witness to God's overflowing love by our lives and service, promoting justice, peace and reconciliation among all.”

(Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God Mission Statement)

Thank you for being yet another blessing for us and an important part of this marvelous journey! Confidently, Joyfully, We Go Forward!

Sister Rute Almeida, General Minister

Sister Adriana Duarte

Sister Janet Gardner

Sister Neide Teixeira

Sister Joanice dos Santos

Founding Sisters on the Front Cover

Row 1: (l to r): Mother M. Aloysia Yurgutis, Sr. M. Alphonsa Janusis, Sr. M. Anthony Jesulaitis/Jasulis, Mother M. Baptist Laurinaitis, Sr. M. Benedict Krungelevicius/Krungel; **Row 2:** Sr. M. Brigitta Urnezis, Sr. M. Casmira Peciulis, Mother M. David Pocius, Mother M. Francis Mangert, Mother M. Gertrude Radziukinas/Rodgers; **Row 3:** Sr. M. Lucille Mazrimas, Sr. M. Paul Vaiskelonis, Sr. M. Regina Blase, Sr. M. Stanislaus Pasakarnis; **Row 4:** Sr. M. Vincent Melvidas, Sr. M. Angela Barcis, Sr. M. Beata Zelionis, Sr. M. Bernard Raciunas, Sr. M. Clara Kucinskas; **Row 5:** Sr. M. Cecilia Merliunas, Sr. M. Gabrielle Mazelauskas/Maze, Sr. M. Joseph Micunskis, Sr. M. Seraphine/Marie Merliunas, and Sr. M. Teresa Serpetauskas.

How it Started...How it's Going

Leadership of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God

1929



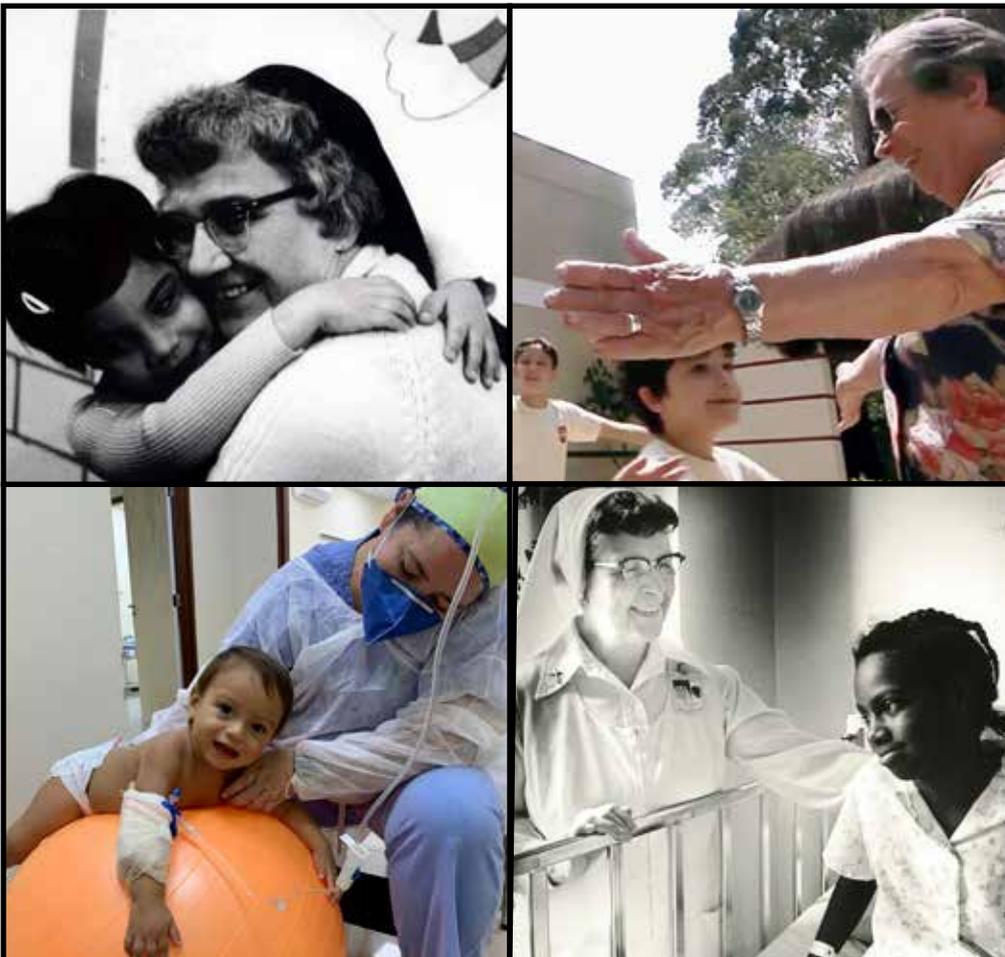
Our first elected Council (l to r) Sister M. Francis Mangert, Sister M. Paul Vaiskelonis, Mother M. David Pocius (Mother Superior), Sister M. Baptist Laurinaitis, and Sister M. Aloysia Yurgutis.

2022



Today's General Council (l to r) Sisters Janet Gardner, Assistant General Minister Adriana Duarte, General Minister Rute Almeida, Joalice dos Santos and Neide Teixeira.

Thank you for a Century of Generosity!



The story of the first 100 years of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God is not complete without acknowledging our faithful supporters who continue to be essential to our ministry and efforts to serve our neighbors in need, care for all of God's creation and work for peace and justice. This blessed list includes our family, friends, and benefactors, as well as support organizations such as our Associates, Auxiliaries, St. Francis Academy Alumnae Association, St. Casimir Alumni, and Knights of Lithuania.

Rich in spirit, you all give from the goodness of your hearts, and God's Providence multiplied your generosity to abundantly bless our Sisters and those we serve. Without your gifts of love, the history of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God would have been drastically different. Our Sisters are eternally grateful.

Our Franciscan Story

The Founding of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God

“You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.” John 15:16

God has chosen us to be Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God for these last 100 years. Faithful to our Franciscan mission, we strive to be attentive to the Gospel and respond wholeheartedly to a loving God and live fully the mystery of ongoing Incarnation. God chooses us each and every day to share in the marvelous dynamism of Trinitarian love. We follow Jesus Christ after the examples of Francis and Clare of Assisi – seeking to see God’s presence in everything and in every person. We know that even in times of darkness our God continues to be our Light, and calls us to be beacons of Christ’s extraordinary love.

In our Centennial year, we celebrate so much more than the passage of time. We celebrate a Provident God who has been and continues to be the Center and Source of our lives. Presently, our Sisters serve in the United States and Brazil where our ministries include serving children, seniors, those experiencing poverty and others in need, as well as efforts to care for the earth and work for peace and justice. As a vowed religious community, we are also committed to nourishing the spiritual lives of our Sisters, Associates, those seeking a closer relationship with God and others. We also continue to support and care for our Sisters from their time as novices until the moment they are called to their eternal home with God.

Recognizing God’s Providence in all that we’ve accomplished and continue to do today, we give thanks



Members of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth (c. 1920s) with Lithuanian heritage, who ministered to Lithuanian Catholic communities in the United States.

and remember those who have gone before us, on whose shoulders we stand. Because of their faith and sacrifice, we are blessed to go forward into the next century with renewed commitment to care for our common home and our common heart.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s in the United States, there was an influx of immigration from Europe and many communities formed around shared language, culture and faith. Reflecting the times, religious communities were comprised of members with the same ethnic roots and backgrounds, many of whom were second generation immigrants. With no established Lithuanian



Monsignor Michael Krusas of St. George in Chicago, IL and Rev. Magnus Kazenas and Rev. John J. Sukaitis of St. Casimir's in Pittsburgh, PA were instrumental to our founding.



Our pioneer sisters are pictured in 1923 with Mother M. Chrysostom Krill (seated). For her contributions to our founding, she was given the Grand Duke Gediminas Medal by the Lithuanian government in honor of her service to the greater Lithuanian community.

religious communities, women of Lithuanian heritage interested in religious life were entrusted to the Polish congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in Des Plaines, IL. Thus, our pioneer Sisters' long journey to secure autonomy began.

As Lithuanian communities continued to grow in Pennsylvania, Illinois, Michigan and Connecticut, there was an increasing need for Sisters who understood the language and culture to serve in the parishes and parochial schools that were heart of these communities. World War I reignited tensions between Lithuanians and Poles making it challenging for Polish orders serving in Lithuanian parishes. Seeking a peaceful resolution, in 1917, Rev. John J. Sukaitis of St. Casimir Parish in Pittsburgh, PA first sought the authority to organize a Lithuanian Province of Sisters to serve these parishes, but was denied. In 1918, during a Lithuanian priests' retreat at the Motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Francis of Millvale (then a German Community) in Pittsburgh, PA, Rev. Sukaitis, his assistant Rev. Magnus Kazenas and other priests made inquiries about housing and training a new Lithuanian community in the Franciscan way. Rev. Mother M. Chrysostom Krill was favorable to the idea, but the time was not providential for such an undertaking.

In 1919, witnessing escalating tensions in parishes, the Lithuanian Sisters themselves unsuccessfully petitioned the Mother General of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in Rome for permission to establish a separate province. Monsignor Michael Krusas of St. George Parish in Chicago, IL also intervened for separation by applying to other religious orders in Chicago, Milwaukee and other places. All his requests were denied. For the next two years, the Sisters were counseled to wait after both they and the Lithuanian priests petitioned Archbishop George Mundelein, who promised to present their case to Pope Benedict XV within two years.

In 1922, our Sisters once again petitioned the Mother General in Rome, who sent her Assistant Mother M. Clara Netkowski to investigate, and she proved to be gracious and sympathetic. With knowledge of the Lithuanian priests' earlier conversations with Mother M. Chrysostom, Monsignor Krusas quickly departed Chicago for the Sisters of St. Francis Motherhouse in Pittsburgh. Joined by Rev. Sukaitis and Rev. Kazenas, he formally presented the petition to receive our Sisters, train them in the Franciscan Order and enable them to establish a new Lithuanian Congregation.

On March 12, 1922, the Lithuanian Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis of Assisi was officially founded when – with the unconditional support of Pittsburgh Bishop Hugh C. Boyle and encouragement of Mother M. Chrysostom, the Sisters of St. Francis of Millvale agreed to assist our fledgling community and train our fifteen professed Sisters, nine novices and two postulants to follow the Franciscan way of life. At the age of 64, Mother Chrysostom was elected a councilor and appointed novice mistress of both her community and our Sisters as they arrived from Chicago.

The transition into an independent Congregation was often challenging, and Monsignor Krusas was instrumental in negotiations with the Sister of the Holy Family of Nazareth. According to records, three of the founding Sisters were in their 40's, four in their 30's, nine in their 20's and eight still in their teens. Bravely embracing an uncertain future, the novices left for Pittsburgh immediately, but professed Sisters had to wait to be dispensed from their vows in the Nazareth community, then they had to repeat the novitiate at the Sisters of St. Francis.

Throughout the transition, our pioneer Sisters continued to serve at St. Casimir's in Pittsburgh and St. George

[Continued on page 6](#)



After the purchase of the Pittsburgh Motherhouse property, the Sisters maintained the active farm that provided fruits, vegetables, eggs, milk and other staples. In 1926, the first lay person was hired to assist the Sisters.

Our Franciscan Story (continued from page 5)

in Detroit. With initial guidance from the Millvale Franciscans, our Sisters were soon served as administrators and teachers at St. George's in Philadelphia, PA, St. Peter's in Kenosha, WI and Holy Trinity in Hartford, CT. Originally residing in St. Casimir's convent on Pittsburgh's South Side, the fledgling community grew to 59 Sisters in three years and a Motherhouse was needed. Thanks to the generosity of clergy, parishes, family and friends, the Sisters purchased 33 acres of farmland in Pittsburgh's South Hills for \$16,000 in 1925 (equivalent to about \$254,904 in 2022). Rev. Kazenas was instrumental in negotiations with William and Catherine Abbot, whose farm would become "Mt. Providence." Our Sisters officially moved into their new Motherhouse on August 12, 1925, the feast day of St. Clare of Assisi.

In September 1925, Bishop Hugh C. Boyle appointed Mother M. Chrysostom to take charge of the new sisterhood for three years. She found her new home much different than the orderly and established Mt. Alvernia. The plaster in the new Motherhouse was scarcely dry in the new building and the second and third stories were not yet habitable. Only five novices were available during the school year to take care of a fifty-room Motherhouse and farm. There were few furnishings. Each Sister had only a cot to sleep on and an orange crate for belongings. In the refectory, planks on wooden horses served as tables.

After being elected Mother Superior of the Sisters of St. Francis of Millvale in 1928, Mother M. Chrysostom left our now fully autonomous community that had grown independent under her prudent, wise and faithful counsel. Well organized and disciplined, our Sisters had been reborn with the Franciscan spirit, embracing its customs and rule.

Mother M. Baptist Laurinaitis was appointed provisional Superior for one year. Our community held its first elections on July 16, 1929 and choose Sister M. David Pocius as Mother Superior with Sisters M. Baptist, Francis Mangert, Aloysia Yurgutis and Paul Vaiskelonis as Counselors. In a letter to Sister Francis, Mother M. Chrysostom wrote: "May God bless you and all the sisters, make you His own body, mind and heart. May you all love Him perfectly, honor Him devoutly, invoke Him fervently, and rejoice with Him eternally."



After Mother M. Chrysostom returned to her Community in 1928, Mother M. Baptist Laurinaitis was appointed Mother Superior by Bishop Hugh Boyle.

Mother M. David Pocius (right) served as the first elected General Superior of the community from 1929 until 1935. She was elected again in 1941 and served until 1948 during a time of great growth and expansion of our community and ministries.



Our young community continued to grow and bear fruit as Sisters answered the call to serve parishes, schools and institutions in Pittsburgh and throughout the United States, including the coal towns of Pennsylvania, urban neighborhoods of Detroit, Philadelphia and Brooklyn, and rural communities in Michigan and Wisconsin. Missions were also established in Lithuania and Brazil. In 1949, our Congregation's name was officially changed to the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God reflecting our expanded mission to serve persons of all backgrounds through, education, healthcare, parish and pastoral services and variety of ministries throughout the next 100 years.



The Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God in 1935.

Igniting the Franciscan Spark in Brazil

By Dennis Wodzinski

Editorial Note: Mr. Wodzinski is our former Archivist, who wrote a version of this article for the Whitehall Franciscan in 2013, which has been edited with updated information about present-day Brazil. Mr. Wodzinski presently is the Archivist for the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

After twelve days of sea and sky, this morning at five we were near enough to see the coast of Brazil.”

Such was the greeting to Mother M. Aloysia Yurgutis from “Your missionaries, Sr. M. Julia and the rest” on August 25, 1938, the day the community’s reach extended to Brazil. Ever since then, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God have had a continuous and vibrant ministerial presence in this South American country.

The 1930s were an auspicious decade for the new Lithuanian religious community. St. Francis Academy was nearing a decade of service and yearning for a new academy building, and the community had already sent Sisters to Lithuania in 1935, before sending five pioneer Sisters to Brazil.

The impetus for sending missionary sisters to Brazil arose as the South American country became home to an ever-increasing number of Lithuanian immigrants who began to arrive in the country in the late 1890s. When Mother M. Aloysia Yurgutis was able to connect ministry plans with Fr. Pio Ragazinskas, the pastor of a Lithuanian parish in São Paulo, the idea and possibility of a Brazilian mission was born.

After careful deliberation with the General Council and considering the advice of Monsignor Michael Krusas (who saw the need for the Lithuanian religious community in the 1920s and who also personally travelled to Brazil in 1938), the decision was made to send five sisters to establish and promote the Lithuanian Franciscan mission in Brazil.

The five pioneer Sisters chosen for this task were Sr. M. Julia Ado-

maitis (who would act as superior), Sr. M. Caroline Straiter, Sr. M. Marcelline Bernott, Sr. M. Evangelista Calvin, and Sr. M. Norberta Svirskas.

On Saturday, August 13, 1938, these five sisters, bags in tow and not a word of Portuguese in their vocabulary, set off from New York City on a twelve day trip that would forever alter the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God.

Upon reaching Brazilian soil, a soil introduced to Catholicism in the 1500s, the Sisters were welcomed into temporary lodgings with a group of Salesian sisters in São Paulo. It would be months before the pioneer sisters would have a place to call their own in Vila Zelina, near Fr. Pio’s Lithuanian St. Joseph’s Church.

From these seeds planted in 1938 by five pioneers and a handful of believing and trusting friends, a beautiful tradition of Franciscan education, hospitality, and care has grown into an indelible vestige on the Brazilian landscape. Schools like São Miguel Arcanjo, Nossa Senhora do Carmo (Our Lady of Carmel) (St. Michael the Archangel) Pio XII (Pius XII) and the Escolinha (the Little School) would educate thousands of Brazilian youths regardless of economic and societal background. Efforts like the free milk program at the community’s maternity hospital in Pedro Leopoldo would aid in the well-being, both physical and spiritual, of many others as well.

Embracing the challenges of distance, language and culture, all our



The pioneer Sisters to Brazil when they first arrived via boat in 1938. Pictured from back to front are Sister M. Julia Andomaitis, Sister M. Marcelline Bernott, Sister M. Caroline Straiter (Strelauskas), Sister M. Norberta Svirskas and Sister M. Evangelista Calvin.

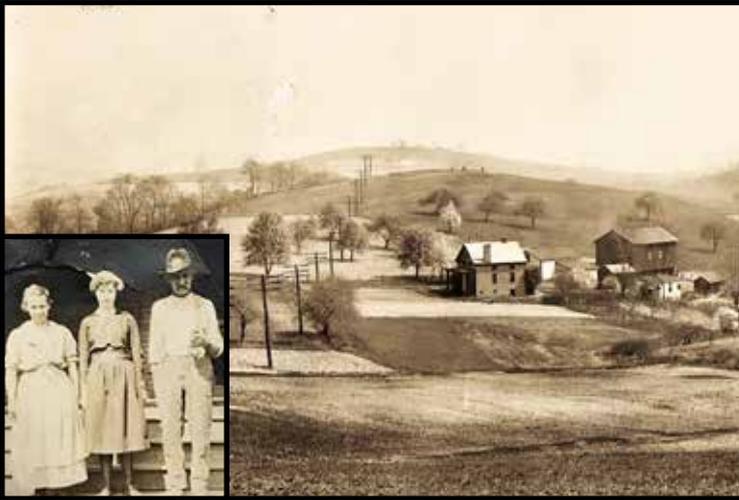
Sisters - North and South - are united in Franciscan simplicity, love, and care for all of God’s people. Growing in Providence, Brazil became home to our Generalate in September 2017. Today, the spirit of our pioneer Sisters is alive and well in Brazil, especially with recent ministries to Óbidos in the remote Amazon region, as well as sponsoring the St. Francis of Assisi School in the impoverished city of Barbacena.

Editorial Note: In addition to our archives and past issues of the “Whitehall Franciscan,” “A Celebration of Franciscan Spirit: Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God 1922-2000,” by Eileen Leindecker Gimper, PhD (2000) and “Sisters of St. Francis (Millvale History) by Sister Clarissa Popp, OSF (1939) were sources of historic information in this issue.

Remembering Mt. Providence

In 2015, our Community made the bittersweet decision to move our Sisters and offices to more sustainable spaces for our aging community in the United States. Yet, our presence remains, as several Sisters continue to live in townhouses on the property and our Franciscan Child Day Care Center remains in the St. Francis Academy building. Join us as we remember with gratitude this 33 acres of farm land transformed by Providence into our home for over 90 years. We pray that those who now call this space home, South Hills Square and our new Grove Point neighbors, be equally blessed.

Abbot Farm



The Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God purchased 33 acres of farmland from the Abbot family through the Lithuanian Priests Association. At that time, Whitehall was made up of farmsteads under family names including Schneider, Englert, and Hoffman. The plots of land that surrounded the property were called "George P. Hamilton's Plan of Farms," for which Hamilton Road is now named.

1925



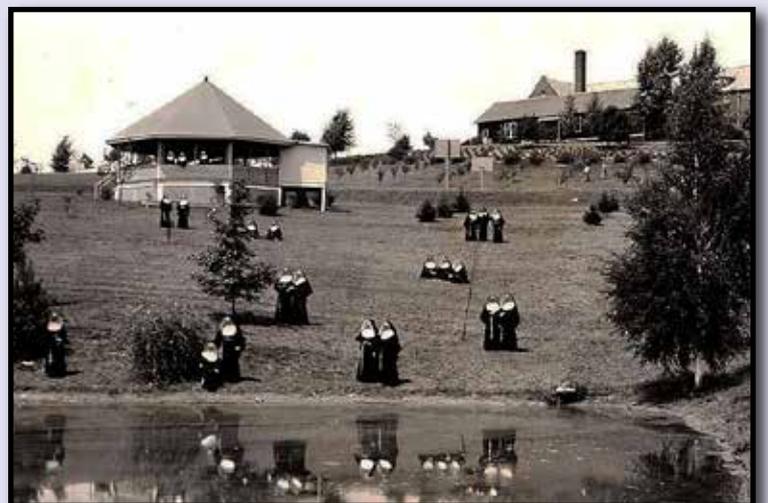
The Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God Motherhouse (convent) was officially dedicated by Bishop Hugh Boyle, who christened the property "Mt. Providence." The site served as the headquarters for up to 254 Franciscan Sisters, a training center for new members, and infirmary.

1929



St. Francis Academy opened in the Motherhouse building as a grade and high school, and was the first all-girls Catholic high school in Pittsburgh's South Hills. In 1941, the St. Francis Academy building was completed and officially dedicated by Bishop Hugh Boyle during the annual Fourth of July picnic. The Academy served as a bastion of Catholic high school education for young women for another fifty years, closing in 1991.

1930



The Sisters constructed a pond on their property, which served as a peaceful spot for prayer, reflection and recreation for Sisters and visitors. Stocked with perch, carp, and catfish, it was a favorite fishing spot of Bishop Hugh Boyle. The pond was filled in during the 1950s, yet the property remained a haven for local wildlife, including deer, foxes and numerous bird species.

A Franciscan Haven



Embracing Franciscan simplicity and reverence for the Earth, the Sisters expanded the cultivation of modest crops of tomatoes, fruit trees and other staples. Rev. Joseph Skripkus served as the Sisters' Chaplain from 1926-1965 and planted over 14,000 trees, shrubs and plants on the property. A kindred Franciscan spirit, Father Joe taught Sisters and St. Francis Academy students about the features and care of the diverse trees and plants.

1970



A new Motherhouse wing (Assisi Hall) was added and dedicated by Auxiliary Bishop John McDowell. Among other features, the building added fifty more bedrooms to the Motherhouse and space for formation of new members.

1992



Ground was broken for a major campus-wide renovation project. Within a few years the property was transformed with a newly designed chapel, improved living spaces, 8 townhouse convents, and 3 hermitage buildings for retreats.

1959



St. Clare Hall was constructed to house prep girls attending St. Francis Academy. It was repurposed over the years into low-income senior housing (1976-1991), the Franciscan Child Day Care Center (1982-1994), then the Franciscan Spirit and Life Center (1995-2015.)

1990



Mt. Providence was dedicated as an official Peace Site faithful to the promotion of peace through education, reflection and action. Encouraging those living, working on and visiting the property to embrace peace as a way of life.

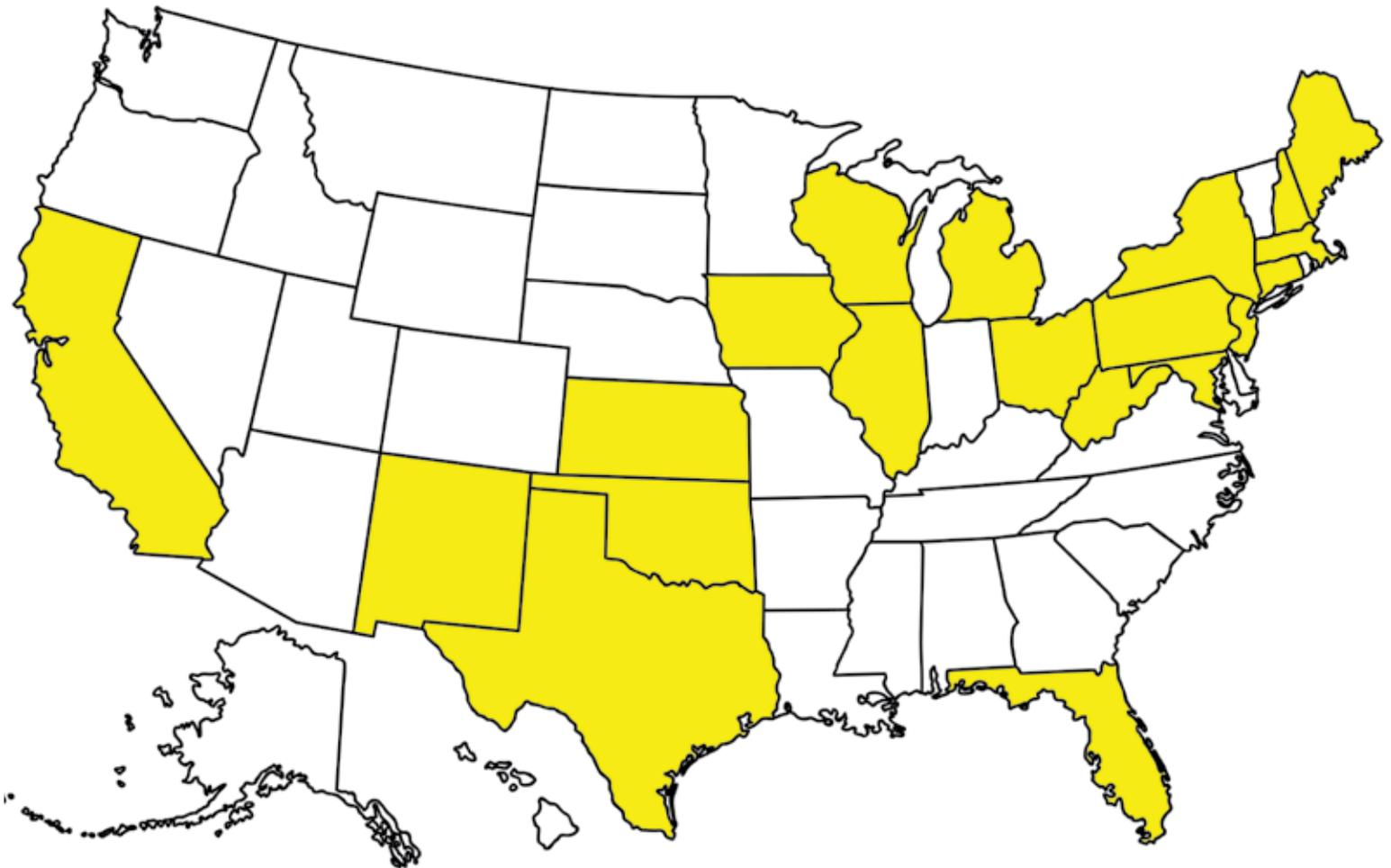
1994



Due to growing enrollment, the Franciscan Child Day Care Center moved to the St. Francis Academy building. Celebrating their 40th anniversary in 2022, the Center continues to offer programs for infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers

God's Providence Called Us to Serve...

UNITED STATES



LITHUANIA



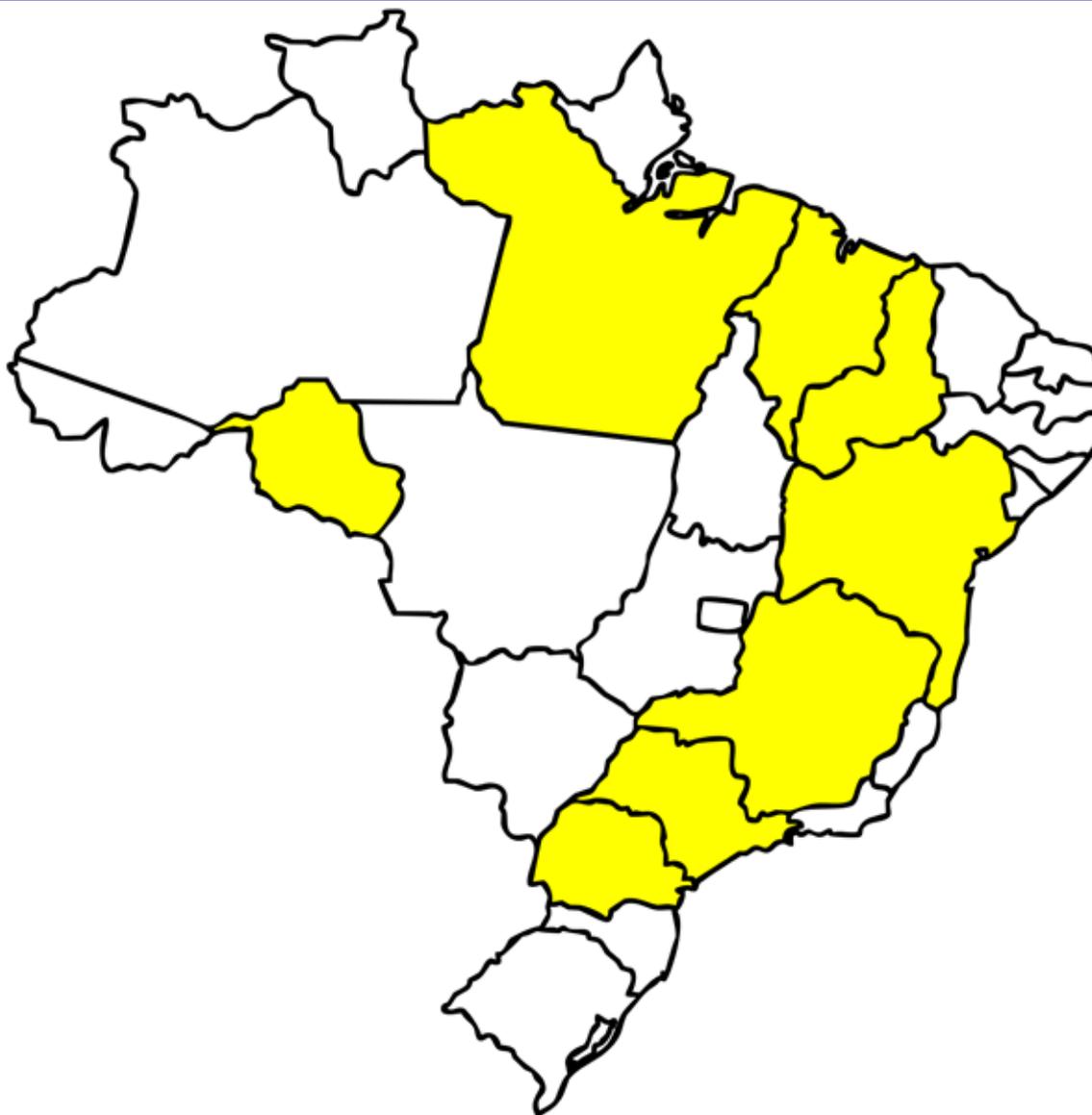
Our first mission to Lithuania was in the mid-1930s. Unfortunately, the rumblings of World War II forced our Sisters to return to the USA. Sister M. Virginia Pask is pictured with students.



In 1992, a year after Lithuania's independence from Soviet rule, Sisters Michele Garas (left) and Dolorita Butkus (above), volunteered to teach religion in the Saule Catholic School in Utena. Other ministries included initiating a food program for the poor; and Sister Dolorita helped found St. Clare Hospice. Other Sisters who served the mission throughout the next 20 years included Sisters Miriam Racas, Ruth Maria Ratkiewiczus and Marianne Walters.

Confidently, Joyfully, We Go Forward!

BRAZIL



BOLIVIA



For more than 13 years, our Sisters served in missions Bolivia – first in Guanay, then Riberalta, where Sisters served children and families through the program Niños de la Calle (Street kids). Sisters Antônia Maria da Silva and Elenice Maciel da Costa are pictured above.

Sister Maria José da Conceição (center, in yellow) and Lúcia do Nascimento (right) with parishioners after a Palm Sunday Mass in Guanay, Bolivia.

Our Sisters also ministered in

CANADA

CARRIACOU

ETHIOPIA

HAITI



Sisters of Saint Francis of the Providence of God

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Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God

CENTENNIAL GALA

Save the Date and join us for a special Autumn Gala celebrating our 100th anniversary!

October 2, 2022

at the South Hills Country Club

Reception with Raffles at 3:00 PM ♦ Meal & Program at 4:00 PM

All proceeds benefit the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God.

**For more information or ways you can participate,
please contact Robyn at (412) 885-7232 or info@osfprov.org**