



Sisters of Saint Francis

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interchange

It depends on your perspective!

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Dear Friends,

Frequently, we hear from guests, former students and friends visiting Assisi Heights, how they have been impacted by the Rochester Franciscan Sisters. If you see something through someone else's eyes, it can change your perspective on that particular situation.

In this issue however, we see how three of our Sisters were impacted by others, as they share how their spirituality was deepened when seeing the world from another person's point of view.

We hope you enjoy these reflections!

Kathy Gatliff

Editor, Director of Communications

Through a Different Lens

by Sister Therese Jilk

Looking back in our files, **Sister Mary Lonan Reilly** chose to respond extensively to two of the questions given her by the Congregational History Task Force in November 2007: the first question focused on Spirituality and Prayer opportunities significant for her spiritual growth; and second question asked for two examples what she deemed was particularly meaningful or fulfilling during her years of ministry.

In response to the second question, she indicated that visiting Native Americans in the Crow and Cheyenne Reservations, in 1973, made a significant impact on her life. At that time, the two tribes lived in Yellowstone River valley, covering areas in Wyoming, Montana and North Dakota. Mary Lonan sums up the ten-day experience like this: "It was truly an emersion experience, and had a significant impact not only on my teaching but on my personal understanding of those who 'were different' as well."

The second event that made an impact and brought new meaning into her life took place event in February of 1979. While enjoying the life and culture in New Orleans with a group of students from the College of Saint Teresa, she embarked on a bus ride with many black passengers... only to realize that she was the only white person on board. Her reaction was heartfelt: "I was not frightened or dismayed...but I did understand at last why a person of a single ethnic background or race might be uneasy in such a setting. No longer was I a part of the majority; I had become the 'different' one."

She learned to see the world through different eyes.

And of Spiritual Growth, Mary Lonan chose her participation in a Franciscan Pilgrimage in 1986. She summed up this experience in the following words: "...to walk the streets that Francis and Clare trod, to finger the walls...they probably touched, pray in churches in which they worshiped, to beg for mercy before the original San Damiano Crucifix...experiencing first hand the interior of the Portiuncola, the little church repaired by Francis...what gifts, treasures, blessings!"



Not surprisingly, just over 10 years later, Mary Lonan claimed teaching to be her greatest gift, receiving it as a call through her own Mother and Aunt, who were teachers. Mary Lonan taught in country schools and Catholic schools, favoring 5th-6th graders, if she had her druthers.

Summing up our conversation, Mary Lonan said her parents gave her the best advice, no doubt not as much in words, as in the "teaching lives" they lived. Now, Mary Lonan resides at Assisi Heights, "teaching" us by the fruits of her life-learning ways. Thank you, Sister Mary Lonan Reilly!

Well "Suited" for this Ministry

by Sister Therese Jilk

Sister Avis Schons has fond memories of how things used to be, and so many stories to share from the various places she has ministered and lived.

Avis is a people-person, and no doubt most of us, her Franciscan Sisters, have benefited from that lovely part of her being. Her early years in mission and ministry were spent in education; teaching primarily first graders in a variety of places. In Colombia, South America, she was also the principal of the grade school. Because she had learned Spanish and wanted to keep using it, she sent her resume to places where our Sisters in Spanish-speaking places were serving. One of those places was Vista, California, where she enjoyed serving in Saint Francis Parish for 10 years (and eventually within Catholic Charities). In the year 2000, she accepted a role in our Congregational Leadership. In addition, she spent many years devoted to social work and outreach ministries.



Avis believes her greatest gift has roots in "a fun childhood," growing up in a family of eight, along with her identical twin, Alice. She is a self-professed "people-y" person with a good sense of humor. To illustrate this, she shared this humorous memory. As she was reading a book to her first graders after lunch, a little boy, well-schooled in misbehavior, was being very antsy and disruptive. So Avis, in full habit at that time, had him sit directly in front of her. When the child couldn't sit still, she told him to stand. He stood staring at her, eyes riveted to her person. His question was, "How did you get into that suit?" I can't help but wonder if the "suit" (habit) she wore included an apron, knowing all the years and places she's ministered serving others.

Avis recalled the best piece of advice received from her Dad was at the time she announced her desire to become a Sister. He said, "I don't understand it, but it's your life. Just don't come home the first time you feel like it." Truly a piece of wisdom from her parents; like many of that time: not much formal education but a lot of common sense and wisdom learned from life itself.

One of her favorite books is *Finding God Beyond Religion*, by Tom Stella. The gist of the book can be summarized as follows: "Forget all you've been taught in catechism, all those memorized answers....Get to know God in your life and how you've lived it." Looking back on her own life, Avis sees the life of our Franciscan Community as the gift of having many Sisters who support one another and thus help each other in putting our lives into that place where our desire to serve meets the needs of our times. She recalls a quotation she read from Mechthild of Magdeburg: "The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw, and knew I saw, all things in God and God in all things."

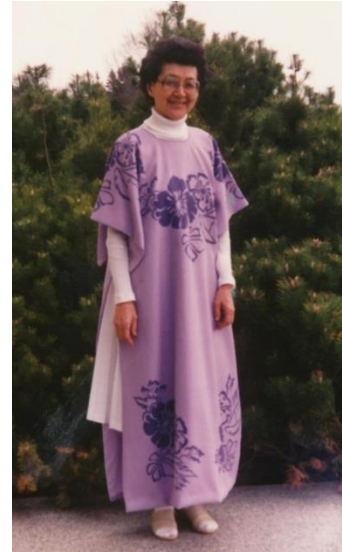
Sister Avis' life has experienced many spiritual awakenings, and I find it important to make special note that however she "got into that suit," it ended up being a great fit!

Following God's Lead

by Sister Therese Jilk

I had just added **Sister Casilda Chavez** to my list of Sisters to interview, when I spotted her sitting outside in the shade. I walked to the Inner Court and asked her if we might chat a bit. She was happy to accommodate me, and we spent 90 minutes together. I opened our conversation with the question, "In what ministry are you currently active?" Her response: Prayer Ministry. What followed was her broad and deep awareness of the present political world and her agony and anguish for the profound needs of our country and the global effects that are becoming more obvious and lethal to the human race. As we talked, we both realized that part of our prayer these years is also for ourselves - that we remain sane in our seemingly helplessness in the face of the daily revelations - calling for new ways to grow in faith and hope.

Sister Casilda remembered quite clearly the dates of October 11 to November 13, 1987, when she was privileged to make a 30-day retreat at the Sacred Heart Jesuit Retreat House in Sedalia, Colorado. She stated, "My retreat director was Father Daryl Cornish, a kind and deeply spiritual man, who led me through the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. I met with Father daily. The rest of the time, I spent in silence... relaxing, reading, thinking, praying and taking daily walks outdoors, enjoying God's beauty in the peaceful surroundings of the Retreat House. This experience led me to a deepening of God's life in me, and filled me with gratitude as I listened to the voice of God speaking to me in the deeper stillness of my heart and leading me to a deepening of God's love and life in me. I am grateful for this experience."



And what about her past ministry? "Teaching! I loved teaching first grade!" Casilda shared a story from a former first grader. It began with the little boy's desire to share the important things in life with his teacher. The child made a special trip to the convent to remind Sister Casilda not to miss the TV show that evening about "Rudolf!" The next day, the little boy asked her if she had watched the program. "Yes," she answered. "Do you believe in Rudolf?" "Yes!" he said. "Do you?" Again, she answered, "Yes." A bit later the child was again at Casilda's desk. "Do you believe in Santa?" he asked. "Yes. Do you?" she questioned. "Of course." And then he approached her a third time. "Do you believe in God?" "Yes. Do you?" He answered affirmatively, stating that it was all right.

As I re-read my notes this morning, I noticed a connection between Casilda's years of teaching ministry with her special love for first graders and her current ministry of prayer. There is a beautiful innocence in little children. And our connection with their simplicity and innocent wisdom offers a relief and goodness that is of God; this is a real unity of thought and feeling which certainly fosters a sense of sanity in one's approach to life!

We also discussed how Sister Casilda came to join our Congregation. Casilda's parents both died when she was very young. She was the middle child of seven siblings. She knew, in her heart, that she had a calling to become a Sister when she grew up. Her oldest sister, Patsy, didn't like to hear of that, which made it difficult and challenging to pursue this vocation. But when Casilda met with the pastor of her parish and mentioned it to him, he approvingly named several different orders of Sisters, among them, the Franciscans. That is the one order Casilda remembered and pursued. When she was told by Mother Aquinas that her dowry was \$200, she kept a vigorous count of her meager earnings. Although it was later stated that she was so quickly taken in by the Rochester Franciscans, "it was enough, whatever she earned."

As Casilda looks back, she reflects on how she seemed to be guided; and her younger sisters, Lola and Loretta, noted that she had a dedicated persistence in following God's lead. And we, her Franciscan Sisters, are so happy that Sister Casilda only remembered one order from the list of choices given by her pastor, that being the "Franciscans!"

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