

# *True to the Spirit of Elizabeth*



*Contemplate how you are being asked to give your heart  
to God amidst your everyday activities.  
- Elizabeth Ann Seton*

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Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati  
Associates in Mission

1973-2008

# Preface

*Preface by Mary Jo Mersmann, Director of Associates*

It has been a privilege to be a part of writing this book on the history of the Associate relationship with the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati because it allowed me the opportunity to learn about so many remarkable people who have been faithfully dedicated to the virtue of charity. These women and men have made an impact on the world that can never be measured but is definitely experienced.

I became an Associate in Mission in 2001 and since that time this relationship has given me the support and the community so vital to living out my faith every day. The role models I have read about, known and ministered with have helped to deepen my faith and grow in my understanding of God and my Christian responsibilities in this world.

Although the name changed many times over the years, the “call” to commit to the mission of the community was always the same. Whether Auxiliary, Co-member or Associate, more than 400 lay women and men have accepted the charism (spirit) of charity into their very lives and allowed it to shine through them into their families, their churches, their ministries over the past 35 years.

S. Magdalen Stengler, OSU, Director of Associates in Saskatoon, SK, Canada, said it well. “Being in partnership with the community does not mean taking on more projects. As a ‘group with a purpose,’ Associates continue to do the work they are accustomed to do in the home, the workplace and the secular community but with a different motive. By participating in the ministry of the

Church as Associates, the charism bubbles up and their work is transformed from a job into a ministry. In this way, Associates use their personal gifts and talents to extend the mission of the Church and build up the Kingdom of God.”

A project like this is only possible as a team effort. I acknowledge the enthusiasm, work and support of so many in the community who have made this book possible. Below are the names of groups or specific individuals who shared their gifts and talents. I apologize to anyone whom I have forgotten to mention by name.

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Associates in Mission



Associate Liz Maxwell  
volunteering as a  
Eucharistic Minister at  
Mother Margaret Hall.





# Forward

By Cathy Schwemer, PHJC, Executive Director of NACAR (North American Conference of Associates and Religious)

History has shown that new expressions of religious life are born in response to major social and cultural shifts, even as others die. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the fastest growing religious movement within the Roman Catholic Church of North America is not vowed members of religious communities but communities of committed lay people who have heard the call of the Spirit in their lives – communities of Associates.

The concept of associations of laity connected to religious communities is, strictly speaking, not a new one. It has taken various forms since at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Third Orders, secular societies, and Oblates are some of the various types of associations that have been approved by the Church over the years. In addition, many religious orders and congregations began as a lay association but, through either desire or church pressure, became approved religious institutes shortly after their founding. These associations were and are strictly governed and structured by the Church.

However, our current expression of religious/lay collaboration, which we call Association, is unique from its historic counterparts. Its beginnings are rooted in a unique and powerful moment in Church and world history, a time of major social, cultural and spiritual shifts, the Second Vatican Council

(1962-1965). It is by examining the implementations of Vatican II's emphasis on the identity and mission of the laity and the call to renewal of religious life that we see the groundwork for the theology and development of the current form of religious/associate relationship, which has been growing over the last 40 years.

It would be Vatican II's emphasis on the Church as the whole people of God and on the primacy of baptism and on the mission of the Church as belonging to the whole people of God, which would demand a rethinking of the concept of lay ministry. As a result, the image of the mission of the laity was that of fellow citizens and journeyers, collaborating with people of good will to improve the world. Their baptismal consecration itself made the laity subjects of rights and duties, calling them to take on specific roles and ministries and to use each one's spiritual gifts and charism for the cause of God's kingdom. Baptism, not orders or vows, would be the instrument by which the faithful entered into holiness and into the mission of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the inspiration for the Associate Movement, which has grown over the past few decades, is deeply rooted in the Council's theological understanding of the role of the laity in the modern Church. It was also due to the Council's directive to religious communities to renew themselves in the light of the charism of their founders that

opened the possibility for this type of mutual associate/religious relationship to flower. Joan Chittister, OSB, made this comment in her keynote address at the 2002 NACAR Conference in Milwaukee, WI. She stated:

*"Associates Programs enable lay and religious to strengthen the gifts of the other and to learn from the gifts of the other at the same time. Associates bring to a congregation the gift of immersion in another whole dimension of life – with all its insights, and its understandings, all its muddy complications and its cry for our awareness, our involvement, our voice. Religious bring to Associates the lived experience of long standing tradition that has withstood the test of time..."*

In other words, we complete and compliment each other's gifts and call to mission.

As we look over the history of the association of religious and laity, we find that although the concept is old, Vatican II's new understanding of the theology of mission, the gift of charism, and the dignity of call has broadened and challenged us to own and share our unique experience with one another for the benefit of all.



# Introduction

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The current expression of collaboration between vowed religious and the laity, which we call “Association,” has its beginnings rooted in a unique and powerful movement in Church and world history.

Pope John XXIII convened Vatican Council II (1962-1965) in a time of major social, cultural and spiritual shifts. Vatican II’s emphasis on the Church as the whole people of God, on baptism as the primary call and on the mission of the Church as belonging to all people, demanded a rethinking of the concept of lay roles in the Church.

It made clear that baptismal consecration itself calls the laity to accept this responsibility of participation, calling them to take on specific roles and ministries and to use each one’s spiritual gifts for the unfolding of God’s kingdom.

The Vatican II document *The Church in the Modern World* clearly states: “As worshippers whose every deed is holy, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.” The Council opened the windows of Church history inviting a fresh breath of the Spirit to enter and to plant the seeds for a new expression of mutual associate and vowed religious relationship.

Associate Ken Horney (Cincinnati) is a dedicated volunteer for Working in Neighborhoods.  
*Photo by S. Marty Dermody*



*“As worshippers whose every deed  
is holy, the laity consecrate  
the world itself to God.”*

– The Church in the Modern World  
Vatican II Document

# Chapter One

## Sisters of Charity Spirit and Founders

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, widow, mother and convert to Catholicism, pronounced religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience on July 19, 1813. With these vows, Mother Seton, as she was called, brought the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac to American soil to live and work with the poor and underserved.

She and her small group of women, the Sisters of Charity, traveled to Emmitsburg, Maryland where they established St. Joseph's Academy. "The dedicated, self-sacrificing, concern for others that was Mother Seton's spirit pervaded her Sisters," writes S. Agnes Rita McDonough, SC. And it lives today in the many communities

of Charity throughout North America and the world.

This spirit of charity "consists in the love of Our Lord, love of the poor, love of one another, humility and simplicity," said Vincent to the early members of the Community of Charity. Elizabeth exemplified this charism (spirit) of charity as her community continued to grow and extend beyond the confines of Emmitsburg. "Does our charity extend to all," she asked, "is our love for all in our Jesus; do we unite it so closely with him that life – body and soul – are all devoted to him?... Do we indeed give him the true service of the heart without which whatever else we give has no value?"



Elizabeth was a woman strengthened by the many tragedies in her personal life and the struggles as foundress of the new community. She combined the spirit of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac with an "American practicality, generosity and informality based on hard work, a vast hope, unconquerable optimism, a warm heart and always a friendly smile. She believed in the future greatness of America and the future greatness of the Catholic Church in America as surely as did the western frontiersmen in their vision of the Promised Land." (S. Agnes Rita McDonough, SC)

Elizabeth Seton died in 1821 but the spirit of charity did not die with her. Many Communities of Charity carried on her spirit and work. One of those communities was headed by Margaret Ferrall George, one of the founding members with Elizabeth of the Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg.



The Stone House (circa 1750) was the first permanent home of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, Maryland.



Margaret served as treasurer of the community for several years. She taught, directed academies and cared for orphans in various cities during her religious life. In 1845 she was missioned to Cincinnati, Ohio, where she and six other Sisters of Charity served at St. Peter's Orphanage and School.

Several years later, the Sisters' superior, Rev. Louis Deluol, SS, without consulting the Sisters, began preparation for the American Sisters of Charity to become members of the French Daughters of Charity. When the announcement was made, Margaret and some of the other Sisters in Cincinnati, "after much agonizing, soul searching and discernment, expressed their reservations about this change to Archbishop John Purcell. They felt strongly that in order to remain true to the vision of Elizabeth Seton, they needed to remain an American community able to respond to the needs of the American church. When six Sisters decided to leave the community rather than become Daughters of Charity the Archbishop offered to support the establishment of a diocesan community of Sisters of Charity in Cincinnati. Thus,



John B. Purcell, second Bishop (1833-1850) and first Archbishop (1850-1883) of Cincinnati. He was a close friend of the Sisters of Charity throughout his episcopate.  
*Courtesy Archives, Mount St. Joseph*

March 25, 1852, the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati was established and in February 1853 Margaret George was elected the first Mother. Despite her 65 years, her wisdom, experience, enthusiasm, and drive attracted others and the community grew rapidly." (S. Judith Metz, SC)

The Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati call on the wisdom and spirituality of all of these founders to enliven what every Christian is called to do in living the Gospel. As their charism statement conveys:

*True to the spirit of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Margaret Cecilia George,  
and all who share our heritage, we Sisters of Charity  
are called to be faith-filled women of the Church.  
Like Elizabeth we are called to be vitalized by Scripture and Eucharist;  
with her we are called to fidelity to the Church,  
to reliance on the Spirit, and to life through love and friendship.  
We vow our lives to our God with whom we walk  
in humility, simplicity, and charity.  
As pilgrims we pray for the wisdom  
to know the needs of our sisters and brothers  
and we dare to risk a caring response.*

“Throughout the first century of its existence, the Congregation grew in membership and diversified its services. From its firm base in Cincinnati, the Congregation sent Sisters in all directions to perform the spiritual and corporal works of mercy as the United States of America enlarged its boundaries and developed its resources and cities. With the maturing of the American Church, the Sisters of Charity were called to look beyond national boundaries. The community responded by opening an orphanage and hospital in China in 1928. Since then, Sisters of Charity have continued to minister internationally.” (S. Judith Metz, SC)

And so this Community of Charity, in the spirit of Elizabeth Seton, has continued to respond to the times by serving where the needs were greatest for more than 150 years.

In 2008, the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati have more than 450 vowed members and 170 Associates in Mission. The Motherhouse is located at Mount St. Joseph near Cincinnati, Ohio. The Sisters minister throughout the United States and in Guatemala as teachers and religious educators, health care professionals and wellness providers of all types, social workers and counselors, environmentalists and consciousness-raisers in many areas of society. Sisters can be found working with migrants in Florida and Colorado; reaching out to AIDS victims in California; working as pastoral ministers in Michigan and New Mexico; staffing clinics in Ohio and Texas; educating adults in public housing projects and through innovative college programming.

They also sponsor institutions and programs that address education, health care and social service needs, with particular concern for building a more just society and providing direct service to the poor.

The Sisters of Charity, nourishing first a prayerful, contemplative spirit, are action people – highly committed to excellence in all that they do. They are convinced of the importance of the role women play in the modern Church and in today’s world. They bring the womanly characteristics of compassion, sensitivity and dedication to a wide variety of works. They support other women in their efforts to develop their talents and skills and to realize their full potential.

They are committed to the Mission Statement written and accepted in 1979:

*Urged by the charity of Christ,  
we Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati,  
strive to give compelling witness  
to Christ’s active presence  
by doing justice, expressed as loving trust  
shaping all our relationships,  
and as sharing our individual and  
Congregational resources  
for the liberation of the oppressed.*

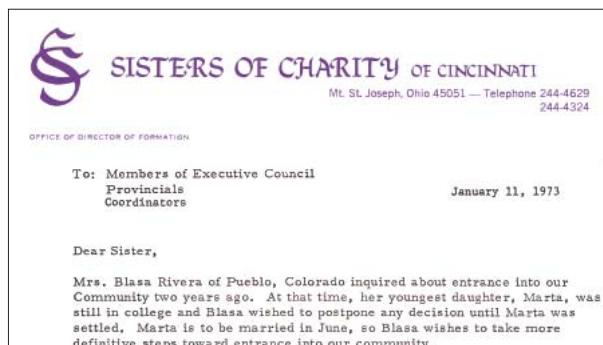
Throughout its history, the spirit of the Sisters of Charity community has been summarized in its motto – “The Charity of Christ urges us.”

Mount St. Joseph Motherhouse  
Photo by Don Denny Photography



# Chapter Two

## 1970s – The Relationship Begins



The above letter written by Sister Mary Christopher (Jane) Grosheider in 1973 set in motion a conversation which would change the face of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. Sister's suggestion was to begin a relationship with individuals in the Christian Community which would "provide support and encouragement to persons who share our values and vision of life." From the very beginning, the Associate relationship was seen as a "unique companionship" – Sisters and lay people walking the journey of faith together. And so it began as a two-year experiment, inviting individuals to extend the membership of the community in a non-canonical relationship.

Within days of a tentatively favorable response, S. Mary Christopher's summary and research were on its way back to the Governing Board members and in the spring of 1973 approval was given. As with so many actions in the Sisters of Charity, the "Auxiliary Program" as it was known then, became a reality because of a need. This relationship paralleled what was

happening in the parishes following Vatican II with lay involvement forming various commissions, becoming Eucharistic ministers and lectors, and taking communion to the homebound.

Blasa Rivera made her commitment to the Sisters of Charity as the first Auxiliary member on September 5, 1973, in Pueblo, Colorado, and with it the relationship officially began. Two other women followed soon after, Jean Rancoilta of Trinidad, Colorado, in October and Flo Carris of Colorado Springs, in December of the same year.

In interviews in 1993, these three pioneering women reflected on their relationship with the Sisters of Charity. Blasa said, "It is here that I found spiritual support and the desire to learn and try to understand God's plan for me."

"Their care and concern for people; their happiness and the courteous and respectful manner in which they treat people," were the reasons Jean was attracted to the community.

Flo added, "I was ripe

for an enriched opportunity to broaden my faith and still remain loyal to my Protestant heritage." In addition to being a mutually enriching spiritual relationship, one of the intentions perhaps was to encourage Auxiliary Members to become involved in the ministries of the Sisters. The reverse also occurred.

Flo Carris wrote on her evaluation in 1975: "Approximately eight months ago I contacted a nursing home, inhabited primarily by welfare patients and mentally retarded or disturbed young adults, to offer an evening's entertainment and fellowship and to provide an outreach for some Sisters of Charity. Now each month Sisters volunteer to show a movie, lead singing and talk with the patients."



The three first Associates: Jean Rancoilta, Blasa Rivera and Flo Carris.



The experiment proceeded slowly and ideas of what this new relationship could include were being discussed.

The canonization of Elizabeth Bayley Seton in 1975 gave impetus to the community and in the spring of that year the Chapter approved the concept of Auxiliary membership. Soon after, women made their commitment in Cincinnati, Dayton, Michigan and the West. Initial guidelines stated “the pilot program of Auxiliary membership is limited in scope at the present time to five in each province.” The congregation was divided into five provinces at the time. Each province had its own Auxiliary Membership Committee, its own organization and its own activities. Slowly the Provinces began sharing ideas and working together. The Cincinnati Auxiliary Membership Committee sent S. Margaret Elizabeth Donnelly and S. Trish Mirsberger to Dayton in 1977 to discuss the program with the Dayton Committee. They discovered that the Dayton area “is experiencing problems that we have not encountered.” These “problems” were male applications and geographic expansion.

The new documents of the Second Vatican Council challenged religious communities to review their mission, directives and entire way of being in the world. In response to this, religious communities were questioning



(From left to right) S. Barbara Mary Busch, Associate Sally Hart and S. Maureen Heverin at Sally's Commitment Ceremony (1987).

their lifestyles, their dress and many deeper issues. This was a time of tremendous change, of “opening the windows” to new life, but also a time of fear and anxiety. During this tumultuous period, some Sisters and Auxiliaries alike experienced hesitation and often resistance to the program. Joan Axt, an Auxiliary in the 1970s said, “I would say it was a time of confusion, uncertainty and definitely a lack of education as to what the relationship was or its purpose. Much of this can be due to the changes and turmoil that the community had just been through.”

And yet, the Auxiliaries were a lifeline for some. S. Delia Sizler who entered the Sisters of Charity in 1965, said, “I was able to stand with our Associates (Auxiliaries) who helped me keep a balance and stay faithful within all of the turmoil in the vowed membership. I personally relied on this extended membership for support and because of them have stayed in my vowed life.”

In spite of the confusion and resistance, the program continued to grow and a number of students from the College of Mount St. Joseph joined as well. Some Sisters living in remote areas invited women to join as support for their prayer life.

“The desire and hunger for a deepening of prayer, privately and with others, were the bonding forces that attracted many women. What they longed for, they found in us,” said S. Joseph Marion Shappelle.

Each Auxiliary had a Contact Sister who introduced them to the mission and values of the community, brought them to meetings and gatherings and met with them on a regular basis to pray and discuss issues of faith. These relationships developed into much more than casual monthly connections. These were the heart of the relationship and life-long friendships often began.

In 1977, with the program “well enough established,” communications were sent to those parishes with a Sisters of Charity connection, advertising the program and inviting parishioners to join.

“The Auxiliary Program had been set up to have the Sisters in the area serve the spiritual needs of men and women outside of an institutional form. It has

progressed to be a broadening of the human experience for the Sisters. The Auxiliary Membership Program may be used as a stepping stone to entrance into the community or may lead to a temporary commitment but it must be understood that this is not our intention, nor our thrust,” state the minutes of the Membership Committee in 1978. As history will show, however, the Auxiliary Program did serve as a



Group of Associates in the 1970s.

springboard for a few individuals to recognize their call to vowed religious life.

Whatever the intention, the groups continued to grow in all parts of the country and the Auxiliaries demonstrated their persistence in building connections with the Sisters. For instance, the relationship developed into a side-by-side work experience during the summer of 1978 when three Auxiliary Members served with S. Marie

Amadea Heaney doing direct social service with the poor in Lyons, Georgia.

The Auxiliary Program had organic beginnings. It was not the executive leadership that directed how the relationship grew but the Sisters and Auxiliaries themselves. All of the province programs grew independently of one another and some Sisters, trying to serve in coordinating positions, felt strained and wanted more

organization of the whole. The Cincinnati Provinces' Auxiliary Membership Committee recommended to the Governing Board that a part-time community coordinator for Auxiliary Membership be established.

An Ad Hoc committee on Co-Membership was appointed by the Governing Board and they conducted a survey on attitudes towards Co-Membership and willingness to accept and support individuals at this level of membership.

The range of responses to the survey indicated the diverse feelings which existed in the community. “A source of strength and encouragement,” “broadening our vision,” and “help in furthering the SC work” were balanced by comments such as, “weaken our ideals,” “bring world into our convents” and “loss of our charism.”

“We have 44 members... all having one thing in common, a deep desire to find real Christian community and opportunities for

personal and spiritual growth. And that is precisely what the Auxiliary Membership Program is designed to offer,” suggested the Ad Hoc Committee established to evaluate the past four years of the Auxiliary relationship.

The Ad Hoc committee “with concerns, suggestions and comments in mind” proceeded to “prayerfully and carefully develop a sound Co-Membership Relationship” and submitted a proposal to the Chapter of Affairs of 1979.

This proposal offered a second form of non-canonical membership. “The new experimental program is referred to as the Associate Program. S. Mark Neumann, Director of Life Development, stated the biggest difference between the Auxiliary and the Associate is the Associate Members live in Community.” The Chapter of 1979 approved both forms of membership and a Congregational Non-Canonical Membership Committee responsible for implementing the program was appointed. S. Mary Barbara Busch, chairperson, S. Patrick Marie Bernard, S. Margaret Elizabeth Donnelly, S. Wanda Manos (each representing a geographical province) and S. Mark Neumann served on this committee at its inception. S. Mary Gemma Gunn, S. Beverly Ann Bereda and S. Magdalena Linneman were soon added. Others who served on this committee over the years were S. Rita Hawk, S. Kay Tardiff, Co-Member Mary Kay Bush, before becoming a vowed member, and Co-Member Joan Axt.

# Chapter Three

## 1980s – Organization, Education, Growth

In January 1980, the newly formed Co-Membership Committee began its work by setting a timeline and goals for formulating policies and procedures, developing information packets and brochures, making plans for initiating the program in each province, and sending this information to members of the congregation and interested laity. The work of organization was quickly underway.

Program Directors for each Province began communicating with Sisters and Auxiliaries in their region. In her first communication, S. Patrick Marie Bernard invited the Auxiliary Members and Contact Sisters in the Denver Province to the Spring Provincial Meetings at which “a lyrical slide-tape presentation depicting an overview of the Auxiliary Program” will be given. She wrote that “all our Sisters will benefit by hearing and seeing how, as Auxiliary members, you truly share and extend our SC mission and ministry.”

Albuquerque Auxiliary Evie Baca-Kight made her commitment in 1980. “I worked with Sisters of Charity as a nurse for almost 40 years. I didn’t feel a vocation to vowed membership but wanted a more formal connection, and when I heard about the Auxiliary relationship, I knew that was the answer.”

Women and men continued to

inquire about the relationship and in September 1980 James P. Moore, an ordained deacon, became the first male Auxiliary member.

S. Sandy Alvin and S. Shirley LeBlanc were among a few Associate members living in community, which started them on the road to vowed life. When asked “What drew you to the Auxiliary program?”

The answers were “as varied as the individuals but with common motive,” wrote S. Mary Patricia Wagner in the March 1980 *Intercom*. “A desire to become closer to Christ, to deepen and enrich their spiritual lives, to share in the kind of community and loving support they see in the Sisters, and to make some kind of formal commitment to Christ consistent with their lifestyle were the most common reasons given.”

Auxiliary member Kathleen Blank said, “Without consciously thinking about it, being an Auxiliary has made me ask the questions – Who am I? What values do I really stand for in my life?”

Cincinnati Auxiliary Rita Brandewiede remembers, “Groups were small enough to

meet in homes (in the 1980s). There were monthly meetings hosted by Contact Sisters and Auxiliary teams. The agenda was

prayer and a talk by a Sister. Contact Sisters were appointed as new people came into the relationship and monthly meetings with them were encouraged. This gave the new person an opportunity for spiritual growth, sharing,

praying together and involving the Sisters in this process ... It wasn’t important to me whether or not I felt like a member of the community or a separate group. I felt part of a group of women who were attempting to grow spiritually.”

The Co-Membership Program mirrored the thrust of the documents established by Vatican Council II. Maryland Anderson, an Auxiliary Member stated, “The Co-Membership Program is a unique way of the Church recognizing the role of the laity only found in modern times and in our modern structures.”

A Valentine’s Day party for the Sisters in Mother Margaret Hall, a renewal weekend in Colorado, a retreat in Michigan and the Elizabeth Seton celebrations in

**“Without consciously thinking about it, being an Auxiliary member has made me ask the questions – Who am I? What values do I really stand for in my life?”**

**- Kathleen Blank**



all cities were some of the ways that Auxiliary members and Sisters interacted by praying and socializing together. At Guardian Angels convent in Michigan, the Sisters invited the Auxiliaries to renew their annual commitment at the same ceremony that the Sisters renewed their vows. In the Dayton region, Sisters led days of prayer for Co-Members and Contact Sisters celebrating Mother Seton's birthday in August.

Sisters who lived at the Motherhouse were invited to pray for a particular Co-Member. This gave the Sisters an opportunity to be a part of the program and sometimes started up friendships with the Co-Members.

The Community publication, *Intercom*, was filled with stories about Auxiliaries and how they served the mission of the Sisters of Charity in their families, hospitals, schools, parishes and civic communities as employees or volunteers.

Elenora Miles, Cincinnati Auxiliary, said, "I am more aware of the needs of my parish and civic community" because of my association with the community of Charity.

Michigan Auxiliary Mary Jo Inman made the comment, "I most appreciate the feeling of belonging when I see a Sister or Co-Member. It's like greeting your own sister!"

Questions still arose about involvement of Auxiliaries in matters of the community. From the Dayton group, "One question that was addressed was the active

involvement of Auxiliaries in the small groups of the Sisters or the formation of small groups of the Auxiliaries since this was the form of government followed by the community. It was agreed Auxiliaries were free to join in the small group discussions, if interested, especially for discussion of issues such as world hunger or nuclear disarmament, etc. However, in matters concerning Chapter or the governing of the Community, it was preferred that the Sisters meet in a separate group." Defining the boundaries of involvement and integration continued to surface in the years following.

"The spirit of the Co-Membership Program was complex because there were Sisters who were 100 percent in favor of the relationship and then there were others who were 100

Sisters. Behavior was watched ... it didn't always feel comfortable. On the other hand, most of the Sisters were excited and so thrilled to have annual Auxiliary participation."

The Co-Membership Committee's report to Chapter 1983 stated: "We believe that community is the quality of relationship that impels us to be for others. Therefore, we, Sisters of Charity, extend our membership to persons who share our mission and spirit and who wish to belong to the Congregation in a non-canonical relationship. This extended Christian community provides mutual strength, enrichment and support for its members."

This was reflected in the appointment of two Auxiliary members to the Congregational



Associate Bonnie McLaughlin visits with S. Eugene Mary Donohoue in Mother Margaret Hall.

percent against it. Out West the majority was supportive but didn't quite know what to do with us," Lynnessa Gallagher, Albuquerque Auxiliary, shared. "There was some fear that we would be too 'forward' and think that we were

Co-Membership Committee – Cincinnati Auxiliary Joan Axt and Pueblo Auxiliary Blasa Rivera. This committee continued to brainstorm and engage in long-range planning. Each region reported on their plans and

shared this information with the Congregation at the Fall Regional meetings. This committee also developed a Co-Membership Handbook and other resources. They created brochures and slide presentations, reviewed and revised policies and procedures, and supported the on-going education of the congregation regarding Co-Membership.

By the middle of the 1980s, the first married couple became Co-Members, Ruth and James See. In January 1985, the state of Florida joined the Co-Membership Program by accepting three Auxiliary members, and by January 1986, Dayton had doubled the size of its group. There were 65 members in 1986; a Handbook for Contact Sisters was finalized and workshops were held for these Sisters.

A parallel group was beginning to take shape around the same time. Former vowed members of the community recognized their "common sisterhood" and hoped to form an Extended Community. Each felt that they were still Sisters of Charity in their hearts and wanted to maintain a connection with the community. These women continued to meet socially and were invited to special events but were not an officially recognized group.

In the Four Year Report of 1987, the Congregational Co-Membership Committee reported the Auxiliary relationship had grown from 57 to 83 members. This number included three mother-daughter members, one married couple and four men, two of them priests.

The Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati wasn't the only religious community to have Co-Membership relationships, many calling them Associates. In 1988 the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) gave the results of an Associate Relationship Questionnaire that they had conducted among all LCWR congregations.

The conclusions arrived at included, "There is real value in Associate relationship and great hope for the future." It went on to state, "Solid programs, vibrant directors, greater efforts in committing resources, monies, time and energy seemed necessary to a large percentage of the 226 congregations responding to the questionnaire."

This period of time, however, was not without its confusion and upset in the Cincinnati-based community. Sisters and Auxiliaries alike were unsure of the boundaries of appropriateness in meetings and functions. It was through trial and error, frustration and hurt, dialogue and resolve that the relationship continued to develop and grow.

"When I came into the program (in 1986)," Texas Auxiliary Viola Elizondo recalls, "there were some Sisters who were eager to connect with the outside world. They sought the support and involvement of women and men who were strong in their commitment to God and God's work in the world. But the general feeling of this relationship was guarded. Some Sisters were afraid that the Auxiliaries were looking



S. Margaret Ebbing, Associate Elaine Krotine and S. Ann Hunt (1984).

for financial support ... We would pray, eat and play together but information that the Sisters thought would jeopardize their financial responsibilities was kept apart ... some of these times were very hard. We must have stayed through God's grace."

With 93 members in the winter of 1988, *Intercom* reported the "most significant change within the program during this time is the growth in membership and the connectedness that has developed between the Sisters of Charity and the Co-Members."

S. Rita Hawk, who had worked with the program since its beginning, said, "The primary focus of the program is for Co-Members and Sisters to exchange prayer, energy and support with one another in their commitment to live the Gospel, especially with regard to a shared vision of the church and womanhood."

S. Mary Barbara Busch, who stepped down from her role on the Co-Membership Committee in 1988, wrote, "Our journey together these many years has been a joy for me. We have grown from an experimental program to an accepted and supportive part of the Congregation."

# Chapter Four

## 1990s – Formation and Convocation Builds Relationships

The Chapter of Affairs 1990 began another “chapter” in the Associate Program as well. A letter in April 1991 from the Congregational Associate Membership Committee to Associates stated, *“At the Chapter, strong support was given to the existing ‘Co-Membership’ program and the development of other alternative forms of membership. Terminology related to alternative membership was adjusted. The term ‘Associate’ will now be used to indicate two alternative membership possibilities. **Associates in Mission** are persons who share in the mission and spirit of the Sisters of Charity and who express their relationship on an annual basis. **Associates in Community** are persons who share in the mission, spirit and lifestyle of the Sisters of Charity all living in a local community. These persons express their relationship on an annual basis.”*

Sisters and Associates continued to meet regularly in homes to pray together and to discuss life issues, often serving as a support group to one another. Associates brought a different perspective and the mutual relationships challenged growth in spirituality and friendship. They found a sense of community and belonging often not found in their parishes. This fellowship filled a gap in their spiritual growth it seemed.

The 1990s would be the years of rapid change and development.

The first Associate Pictorial Directory was published in 1991 and in 1992 the Spirituality Center formed an Advisory Committee and invited two Cincinnati Associates to be members, Betty Berwanger and Karen McMichael. The same year, Leadership Council gave the approval for the first full-time Director of Associates. S. Rita Hawk hit the ground running in January 1993 and by March she published the first “Associates Connect” newsletter. For the next five years, this publication informed Associates and Sisters alike about activities, events and more importantly about the Associates themselves.

Quickly, S. Rita formed an Advisory Committee made up of Associates and Sisters representing various parts of the country. Their tasks were several: to assist in developing policies and procedures, to assist with the education of the congregation, to help in development of resources, to advise

in the development of enrichment programs, to assist in the integration of Associates within the congregation, and to collaborate with the ad hoc committees in developing a variety of Associate relationships. At one of their first meetings, S. Rita asked the committee members to consider, “How is God transforming us – particularly through the Associate program?”

S. Judith Metz replied, “I see the community being enriched by Associates as well as Associates being enriched by community. Associates and Contact Sisters mentor each other and the congregation is becoming a different community as we are blended.”

Among many other things, this committee helped to create an Associate Handbook, which included an orientation program and a section on the privileges and responsibilities of Associates.



First Advisory Committee of the Associates Program (1993): Associate Madelyn Sellinghausen, Associate Donna Gagliardi, S. Judith Metz, S. Rita Hawk, Associate Cookie Vogelpohl, Associate Rita Brandewiede and S. Darlene Wojtowicz.



Prior to this time, “there was no education or training on what it means to be an Associate. You simply attended the monthly meetings and then decided whether or not you wanted to be connected with the Sisters of Charity,” said Ruth Meyer. This Handbook and the Handbook for Contact Sisters were to act as resources to aid in this new formation process.

As the Chapter mandated, the Advisory Committee began to explore alternative forms. The Associates in Volunteer Ministry Program became a viable option. A letter to the community from S. Rita in 1995 shared that “the first Associate in Volunteer Ministry, John O’Connor, would begin a six-week experience as a tutor and recreation organizer in migrant ministry in Tipp City, Ohio.” Since its inception, more than 20 Associates in Volunteer Ministry served as full-time volunteers at ministry sites of Sisters or Associates.

As S. Rita traveled across the country meeting and talking with Associates. She became aware that Associates felt connected to the community but not to each other. Her hope to change this reality came in the form of an Associate Convocation in July 1995. The objectives of the convocation as stated by the Advisory Committee were: Associates would clarify, identify and intensify their relationships with the Sisters of Charity; Associates would be more in touch with the Sister of Charity roots, charism, spirit, ministry and prayer; this convocation would further a sense of mutuality between the Sisters and Associates;



Group from Trinidad, Colorado, (1995): S. Mary Christine Falsetto, S. Gertrude Brunelli, Margaret LaCrue, Jean Rancoilta and Angela Spicola.

and the Sisters of Charity as individuals and as a congregation would have an opportunity to pray with, socialize with and become more acquainted with the Associates. The convocation theme was *Come Share the Spirit: Bread Breaking to Bread Sharing*.

More than 140 Associates and Sisters gathered at the College of Mount St. Joseph and the Motherhouse to pray, listen, share, learn and get to know one another. The schedule included walking tours through the Motherhouse, breakout sessions, prayer time, liturgies, a picnic supper, ice cream social, small group sessions, a banquet and a talent show.

In her reflection at the Liturgy, S. Mary Ellen Murphy, SC president, said, “In a few moments we will all stand and, in one voice, renew our commitment to the charism and mission of Charity, fully aware that daring to live out our beliefs and be a sign of contradiction in our world are calling us to do the uncomfortable things in life. What is the Lord urging of you this year? As you answer that question, remember

that none of us is alone in this as bread breaking leads to and is made holy by bread sharing and we are not without the God we know in this sacred breaking and sharing of the bread!”

The convocation deepened relationships and brought a renewed sense of commitment and involvement.

“We don’t need any more activities. Just being here together we go forth with renewed energy and commitment. Where we go and to whom we go doesn’t really matter but what is important is doing it with the Charity Mission in our minds and with the ‘Legacy of Love’ in our hearts.” This comment on an evaluation form was one of many that shared the importance of this convocation.

In a letter published in *Update* in 1995, Associate Flo Carris wrote, “The first convocation for the Associates was a very rich experience. I am certain that I speak for all of the Associates when I say how welcome we felt. In these days of violence, fragmented families and hunger for community, being a small part of

the Sisters of Charity strengthens our spirituality and gives us a sense of Christian fellowship.”

The convocation seemed to be a high point in the Associate history. Events became more integrated and language was more inclusive. Associate photos were included in the Sisters 1995 Pictorial Directory and Associates Commitment Renewals were included in annual Elizabeth Seton celebrations.

Simultaneously a much broader organization of Associates was forming. NACAR (North American Conference of Associates and Religious) began in a small office in New York. Through its leadership, religious communities across the United States and Canada gathered at a conference held in the summer of 1997 to share insight, joys and struggles concerning their Associate relationships.

The Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati became involved in the establishment of this new organization, financially and through their presence on the Board.



Standing from left to right: S. Ann Elizabeth Von Hagel, Associate Mary McHale, Associate Diane Scholtes and Associate Joan Axt. Seated from left to right: Associate Barb Raymond and S. Annina Morgan.

The Federation of the Sisters of Charity also began a conversation about Associate Programs. Through a questionnaire sent to all Charity communities, it was learned that 10 of them had Associate Programs and this encouraged directors of those programs to make some connections.

S. Rita Hawk discerned in 1997 that it was time to move to another ministry, and S. Mary Ann Humbert was appointed to the position as Director of Associates. Her interest in providing this leadership was boosted eight years before when she responded to a call from a lay board in Lexington, Kentucky. They asked her to assume leadership in a Spirituality Center in Lexington which “catapulted her into the hopes and dreams of men and women dedicated to addressing the spiritual needs of the laity.” She brought to her position as director the belief that “God is calling the Sisters and

the laity to stand side-by-side in ways which can feel unfamiliar to us all.”

Each director brought unique gifts and experiences to the leadership position, and S. Mary Ann’s ecological dedication to

reduce the use of paper and mailings contributed to changes in the Associate Program. She worked with the Communications Office to incorporate Associate information into *Update* and *Intercom* publications.

The interaction of Sisters and Associates was evident at the Gathering in 1998. During this homecoming, times of reflection, input and education were permeated with a spirit of prayer.

“Sixty Associates participated, signaling clearly the bountiful blessings resulting from tending, watering, weeding and fertilizing a new idea planted 25 years ago,” wrote S. Mary Ann.



S. Mary Ann Humbert

As the world entered a new millennium, questions concerning the future of all religious communities and the participation of Associates in that future were being raised. In an *Intercom* article in May 2000 S. Mary Ann wrote, “Just as the early church was a church of the laity, consider association as a vehicle for encouraging laity to resume leadership in today’s church. Imagine the power of the Spirit working through Associates transforming each family, each relationship, work setting, meeting and activity. How can we cooperate even more fully with this inspired work of the Spirit? Are we willing to allow God to stretch our definitions and hopes for the future beyond the familiar?”

# Chapter Five

## 2000s – Living and Growing into the Future Together

How will Associates impact the future of religious communities? Will these relationships help move communities beyond the familiar to the unknown?

These are only a few of the many questions being raised all across North America about the future of religious communities. Certainly Associates already had and would continue to have an impact. Results of two distinct surveys concerning Associates were published in Spring 2000. One was a national survey conducted by The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) and one survey was conducted within the Sisters of Charity community.

CARA results sent to NACAR were outlined in a report entitled “Partners in Mission: A Profile of Associates and Religious in the United States.” A total of 812 communities responded to the questionnaire and of those, more than one-half reported that they currently have Associates. One-half of these communities began accepting Associates in the 1980s, one-quarter began in the 1990s and 43 more planned to invite Associates in the future. Respondents reported nearly 25,500 Associates across the country at the time, suggesting the Associate relationship continues to grow.

What did the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati think of their own Associates almost 30 years after beginning?

S. Mary Ann Humbert, director, invited Sisters and Associates to respond to a questionnaire, which soon became a survey model for other religious communities in the area. Of 385 surveys returned, the following “picture” became clear. There was strong affirmation for the Sister-Associate sharing of the SC charism, mission and ministry and of the shared journey. There seemed to be uncertainty around expanding the Associate-Sister relationship and diversity in responses concerning increasing Associate leadership.

The written comments reflected the wide range of ideas. Sisters’ comments included the following:

“Associates are a gift/blessing.”

“I know of an Associate who has made the SC’s mission viable because she was working where there were no Sisters of Charity.”

“I strongly support expanding the role of Associates but the difference between Associates and Vowed Membership should remain distinct.”

“I really don’t understand the Associate Program. It is my own fault because I haven’t made any effort to find out.”

Sisters were not the only ones with varied opinions. Some Associate comments were:

“I think any Associate has to have regular and close contact with Sisters of Charity – or at least one SC or there is no point to the whole movement.”

“For me, having faith sharing opportunities with the Sisters and Associates is very important. I want to live the ‘Spirit of Charity’ in any workplace and in my family.”



Associate Erna Gray (left) ministers at Marian House Soup Kitchen in Colorado Springs with S. Joan Crocker (right).



One Associate got to the heart of it all. “I have always seen the emergence of the Associate relationships with religious communities as a means by which God was calling people to grow. It goes without saying, each of us are confronted daily with opportunities and challenges to walk through the unfamiliar, unknown and untried simply because growth requires change. Our willingness and preparation to meet the new is a crucial factor in learning more about God, ourselves and others.”

The survey did give strong support to continuing the relationship, and more than 85 percent of Sisters and Associates saw “association as a viable way of sharing in the charism, mission and ministry of the SC congregation.”

Traditionally Sisters served as “connectors” or liaisons between local groups and the director. In an *Intercom* article in 2001, S. Rose Marie Burns said, “I believe as we move into the future we need to join with those who are committed to our mission and vision. I believe the future of religious life lies in being connected with our Associates.”

Integration of Associates in publications and celebrations became more apparent. The names of Associates who had died were listed among the Sisters’ deaths in 2001 *Life Cycles*, and Associate 25<sup>th</sup> anniversaries were among the Sisters’ jubilarian names.

The survey responses in 2000 indicated having an Associate as the director was not approved by many. However, actions are louder than words. In June 2002 Mary Jo

Borgman, an Associate, was hired as the next director. Her many years of experience as a director of religious education and in lay pastoral ministry and her life-long connection and friendship with the Sisters of Charity made her the viable choice.

The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary year (1852-2002) of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati began with the Gathering 2002 at which more than 560 Sisters, Associates and former members of the congregation and Vincentian Sisters of Charity came to the Motherhouse for five days of reflecting together, praying together and playing together. Associates were part of many committees involved in making the plans of the Gathering a reality.

In 2003, the community marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Associates as a part of the congregation. An oak tree was planted in the Motherhouse cemetery in honor of this celebration and a donation was made to the Heifer Foundation by the Associates in gratitude to the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati.

Percolating under all these activities and others since February 1998, the Vincentian Sisters of Charity (VSC) of Bedford, Ohio, had begun pursuing the possibility of a merger with several religious communities, including the

Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. In 2002 they decided to stop merger possibilities with other communities and continue with the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati.

“Under a beautiful blue sky dotted

with billowy clouds at Villa San Bernardo in Bedford, Ohio, on June 27, the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati and the Vincentian Sisters of Charity of Bedford took the final

and decisive step in a multi-year merger process.” (*Intercom* July/August 2004) During an afternoon ceremony, the 49 Vincentian Sisters of Charity took vows as Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati.

Signing her commitment at the same ceremony, VSC Associate Joyce Yorkievitz, joined the 139 SC Associates to a round of welcoming applause.

“As a community of charity ... we will strive to be persons who ... journey together toward wholeness,” states the Vision Statement adopted in 1990. How do we live this statement in the years to come? Projected statistics were sobering signs of a future world with fewer vowed religious.

The Future Planning Process presented at the Fall Congregational Days in 2004 attempted to include all Sisters and Associates who desired to dream and imagine what the future might hold. By

**“I believe the future of religious life lies in being connected with our Associates.”**

**– S. Rose Marie Burns**

participating in the five Focus Committees – Membership, Mission, Community, Earth and Advocacy – Associates revealed their deep desire to help carry on this legacy of love with the Sisters.

“I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the Sisters of Charity for their ecumenical spirit,” Associate Gary Campbell passionately explained. “Their lives and friendships have been an important part of my faith journey. It was these personal experiences that drew me to become an Associate. I continue to try to be faithful to that spirit.”

The numbers continued to grow. In 2004-2005 new Associates made their commitment in Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, Texas, Ohio and Alaska. “The seven new Associates [in Colorado Springs] were images of grace. Experiencing the meaning of their lives was like looking into a mirror. We SCs could see our own beauty and goodness reflected back to us through them,” said S. Grace Ann Gratsch, who was present for the ceremony.

To prepare for their commitment, Candidates participated in the Formation process with Companions walking alongside. These Companions, Sisters, Associates or both, met regularly with a Candidate, a person who had applied to become an Associate, helping them to become familiar with the founders, history, spirituality, charism and mission of the community. The Companions encouraged the Candidates to build a relationship with the entire community rather than just



Associate Maureen Maxfield (left) works closely with S. Sally Duffy for the SC Ministry Foundation.

one-on-one as often happened with the Contact Sisters. Prayer partners within the community changed from only Sisters praying for Associates to a mutual prayer support of all members praying for one Sister or Associate throughout the year.

“I’ve met many Sisters of Charity in my life journey. I see them as the doers, movers and shakers who are there for others. Why wouldn’t I want to be more officially part of this ‘Gospel living’ group!” said Associate Joanie Schaffer at her commitment ceremony in 2006.

At Gathering 2006, the Future Planning Focus Committees presented through word, music and drama their introductions to the goals and action steps they developed as ways to enliven the Vision Statement over the coming years. “Sisters and Associates,” were linked together in all aspects of the discussions, presentations and social times.

“It seemed like a historic moment to me sitting in the chapel and hearing

our names said as one so often and by so many,” remembered Mary Jo (Borgman) Mersmann.

At Chapter 2007 the following Directional Statement was accepted unanimously by the delegates: “The Chapter supports the Associate Program as a vital part of the Charity charism. We recommend that Sisters and Associates develop greater knowledge and support of the Associate Program and its three forms of commitment: Associates in Mission, Associates in Volunteer Ministry and Associates in Community. We also recommend that the Leadership Council ensure opportunities for education and dialogue about canonical membership and non-canonical association.”

Over the next four years, the Membership Focus Committee was committed to clarifying the role of Associates, offering varied ways for the community to meet Associates and presenting suggestions for alternate forms of membership. Delineating the role of Vowed Members and

Associates was an important part in this clarification. Recognizing the differences between canonical rights and responsibilities of lifetime Vowed Members and the non-canonical commitment of Associates, helped in the understanding that although both forms had a vocation and were focused on the charism and mission of the community, there were drastic differences in how each was lived out. To aid in this delineation a new Handbook for Associates in Mission was completed and approved in January 2008.

“I feel much more supported in the ministries I am doing,” said Associate Kay Clifton. She said most of the people she works with know she is an Associate, and she values that connection. “I am responsible to three entities – God, the Sisters of Charity and the Women’s Division of the United Methodist Church, as a deaconess. We are all working toward the same goal – to spread the Kingdom of God wherever we are,” she remarked. (*Intercom* Summer 2007)

Although the Sisters of Charity community has one of the longest Associate programs in the country, the process of clarifying who Associates are and why these men and women continue to respond to the call of the Spirit is an ongoing process. Through dialogue and prayer, Associates and Sisters continue to build a mutual relationship in the present and look to the future with hope.

“In the church and religious life, we notice the (paradigm) shift as numbers decrease. Women

have more opportunities now and they have other doors open to them rather than religious life. They search for meaningful spiritual life but aren’t called to a vowed life. The shift is obvious as the Associate Program grows. Also, women are looking for ways within the Church to use their leadership gifts. They aren’t always finding an inclusive, welcoming attitude so they are using their talents elsewhere,” stated Associate Mary Wall. (*Intercom* Winter 2007)

In the years from 2000 to 2008, more than 120 women and men made their commitment as Associates in Mission. The role and relationship continued to be clarified, always with the charism and mission at the center.

“It would be quite a task to name

every Associate and the ways they share the charism,” wrote Mary Jo (Borgman) Mersmann, “but no matter where they live and work, no matter what they are asked to do, no matter how they are called to serve, Associates believe in the mission and vision of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati and do all they can to make it a reality.” (*Intercom* Annual Report 2005)

There is a familiar saying, “We don’t know what the future holds but we know who holds the future.” Over the next 35 years, without a doubt, changes of great magnitude will take place in the world. As a Community of Charity, Sisters and Associates, will continue their journey of faith together as described in the Mission Statement, which was accepted by Leadership Council in June 2008.

### ASSOCIATES OF THE SISTERS OF CHARITY OF CINCINNATI MISSION STATEMENT

We Associates of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati  
are women and men striving to live the Gospel values.

Called by God,

we choose to be in mutual relationship

with the Sisters of Charity

guided by their Mission Statement.

We commit ourselves to participate in this mission  
through our individual life situations.

### SISTERS OF CHARITY OF CINCINNATI MISSION STATEMENT

Urged by the charity of Christ, we Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati,  
strive to give compelling witness to Christ’s active presence  
by doing justice, expressed as loving trust shaping all our relationships,  
and as sharing our individual and Congregational resources  
for the liberation of the oppressed.



# *From the President*

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## **S. Barbara Hagedorn, SC September 2008**



The 35-year history of the Sisters of Charity Associate program is a fascinating and evolving journey. As you read in the pages of this book the story involved an idea, a congregation who took the risk, Sisters who believed in the program, and many dedicated women and men throughout the years willing to commit to the Associate relationship.

The Sisters of Charity congregation was a pioneer community in developing an Associate program. It is no wonder then that the beginning times of the program consisted of so many twists and turns, questions and confusion, plans and revised plans. Through it all the charism of the congregation founded by Elizabeth Seton persisted as the underlying factor to bring an idea into being.

In the past 35 years the Associates have been part of so much of the life of the Community. Our congregational documents say that “Associates are persons who share in the mission and spirit of the Congregation in a variety of ways...” (SC Directives) The women and men who have shared in this Associate relationship have done so through prayer, a variety of gatherings, participating on committees and at many events. They have been educated in the history of the community and learned what privileges and responsibilities come with being an Associate. In turn the Sisters have been enriched by the presence of these women and men of faith who in their own special ways are committed to our spirit and mission. Some Associates have chosen to become Associates in Volunteer Ministry, working side-by-side with Sisters for a period of time to serve those in need. Several others have been Associates in Community and shared life together with us in a community living situation. Each expression of association has been rich in blessings for the Associates and for the Sisters of Charity. The Associates’ contributions over the years to the Charity spirit and mission have been invaluable and a source of great blessing.

To all of the Associates, past and present, I offer our heartfelt gratitude and appreciation in the name of all Sisters of Charity. As we journey together into the future may we always be open to discerning the new ways God is calling us and continue to support one another. May this 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary be a special time of celebrating the Associate relationship!



*Sisters of Charity*

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