



The Eagle

Eastertide 2024

Dear Associates, Oblates and Friends,



Sr. Elizabeth

Alleluia, Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed, Alleluia!

The closing of the Guest House has been foremost in most of our minds since the beginning of January. We ended 2023 with two well-attended retreats. First was the Christmas Retreat led by Sr. Connie

which included lots of singing of Christmas Carols. Then we had the New Year's Retreat, December 31st – January 1st led by me. The Guest House closed the next day.

That was just the beginning of hours and hours of work as sisters decided which furniture to keep and put into storage, which could be used elsewhere, and which we could sell or give away. We used the opportunity to get rid of furniture from other areas of the convent where it was no longer needed. The Associate Directors went through the Associate Library to decide which books should be kept and which could be given away because they were hardly ever read. Some of the paintings that had been used in the Guest House (or elsewhere in the convent) were also set aside for the sale. We are extremely grateful for all the work of organization by Katherine Corbett, our Director of Operations, and for all the hours spent moving furniture by our maintenance team, Don Allen and Tenzin Rigden.

Our Renovation Sale took place on Saturday, March 9th. We had an early Eucharist at 8 am, and then prepared for the people who wanted to browse and buy. Before the sale we sold some furniture to some of our staff members and were also able to gift two refugee families with furniture. One couple bought a hospital bed for a parent who was living with them and needed a special bed.

Lots of people bought books, framed paintings, items of furniture, and all kinds of smaller items.

The Conference Room was full of furniture,



Furniture and sports equipment in the Conference Room

sports equipment, and knickknacks. We sold lots of bookcases, bureaus and desks. The corridor outside the Conference Room had a hospital bed, three comfortable seats that could act together as a couch, and a very attractive love seat and chair. These were all sold to very appreciative buyers.

St. Margaret's Chapel was full of books and artwork. All the books that were left over were picked up by someone who volunteers at the Trinity



Books for sale in St. Margaret's Chapel

College book sale in the fall. Archbishop Fred Hiltz, co-convenor of the Capital Campaign Committee, spent the whole day of the sale at the convent, helping out in a multitude of ways. Before leaving, his car was filled to the brim with items to take to a charity shop.

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Packing up Abp Hiltz's car after the sale

Another big event for the Community was the First Profession of Sr. Florence on the Feast of St. Brigid which was also the first day of the Week for World Harmony. The Rev. Joanne Davies, chaplain at St. John's Rehab where Sr. Florence works, was both the presider and homilist. It was truly a joyous occasion and celebration for the community.



The Rev Joanne Davies blesses Sr. Florence

On a sad note, we had to say good-bye to Sr. Suzanne Marie who is now with the Society of Sr. Margaret in Duxbury, MA, right on the edge of the ocean. She is enjoying being with that community, but we still miss her here.

As a way of sharing information about our renovations of the Guest House, we have been visiting a number of churches, beginning with St. Paul's Cathedral in London, Ontario, on November 19th. Sr. Constance Joanna preached



Sr. Suzanne Marie cuts her farewell cake

at the Eucharist and Sr. Dorothy set up a display table for people to look at after the service. Then in the Diocese of Toronto, on January 7th we visited St. Thomas, Huron Street with whom we have had a very long association. The sisters used to walk to St. Thomas' from the old convent on Major Street to attend

services. A few of us attended all three services: 9:30 am, 11 am and 5 pm. At the 5 pm there was a wonderful procession with three of the clergy in copes. As we were waiting, I suddenly realized that one of the copes, the oldest one, looked as if it had been embroidered by one of our sisters, possibly by Mother Hannah, our Mother Foundress, or Sr. Joanna, another gifted seamstress.

On February 4th St. James Cathedral had an SSJD Sunday and several sisters attended both the 9 am and the 11 am service and handed out information at the reception following each service. On March 17th many sisters attended a 4:30 pm service at St. Jude's Wexford, sponsored by the Scarborough Deanery, where Sr. Doreen preached the homily.

In January at the convent we had our Epiphany Tea for Associates and Oblates for the first time in several years. We once again hosted the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius at the convent. After a short sung Orthodox Liturgy and light supper, Svetlana Panich spoke about Mother Maria Skobtsova – now recognized as Saint Maria of Paris – who died in a German concentration camp on the 30th of March 1945. On February 9th Archbishop Linda Nicholls joined us for our celebration of Mother Hannah, our Mother Foundress, and preached at the Eucharist (see homily, pg. 3). This is our 140th year since the Sisterhood was founded in 1884.

During Lent, Sisters Connie, Doreen and Elizabeth Ann have all been leading Quiet Days, either in the Greater Toronto area, online or in Sudbury.

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Sr. Wendy Grace

Although the Guest House is now closed, we are still having “Food for the Soul” events. Sr. Wendy Grace led a Quiet Day in February on Praying with Icons which was much appreciated. Sr. Doreen produces “Creative Musings” for our website every Saturday, and we

continue to have Saturday classes for our Companions. We enjoyed having Elizabeth Walker, Companion, join us for a week in February, and Magdalena Jennings, another Companion, joined us for Holy Week. Opportunities like this give all the sisters a chance to get to know

the Companions better.

Sisters Brenda and Helen Claire have both recovered well from their surgeries. A few of us have had colds or Covid but most are fully recovered.

May God bless you throughout Eastertide. We hope some of you will visit us for Evening Prayer followed by a “Talking Supper” on a Sunday evening. Just email Jeanette a few days in advance to let her know you’d like to come. (Jeanette Strong: guesthouse@ssjd.ca.)



Sr. Doreen

Sr. Elizabeth Rolfe-Thomas, SSJD
Reverend Mother

Homily by the Most Reverend Linda Nicholls on February 9, 2024, the Feast Day of Mother Hannah, Foundress of SSJD

“If I believed the world were to end tomorrow,
I would still plant a tree today.”

That is a quotation allegedly from Martin Luther ... though it is unlikely he said it. Whether he did or not, it expresses a grounded hope that speaks to me in these days of uncertainty, anxiety and fear.

We look at our situation in the world today – and wonder...

- The world is so full of pain and suffering – wars in Ukraine; Israel/Gaza/West Bank/Iran.
- I receive daily e-mails from refugees stuck in impossible situations with little food; no hope; desperate to come to Canada believing I have the magic key.
- Closer to home in the church we see decline – precipitous drops in attendance and participation – parishes struggling; bishops anxious; will we die? Was the 2040 headline more predictive than we had hoped?
- Even closer to home here – religious communities are very small and getting smaller



Painting of Mother Hannah

– they are elderly with only a few testing their vocations ... and I know that there are fears of what is ahead – OHC is selling the Priory; the Sisters of the Church have dispersed – and you

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have faced deaths and departures that leave this community uneasy.

- Will SSJD survive? Even as we celebrate its birth today through the ministry of Mother Hannah.
- Of course that is the wrong question – the purpose of the community is not ‘survival’ – it is not to find the most participants; or last the longest – like that bumper sticker – ‘The one with the most toys when they die wins!’
- Our call is to praise God and to serve – That is why the quotation speaks to me – it is rooted in this moment – here, now – no matter what happened yesterday – or what will happen tomorrow – ‘whether I live or I die’ to quote St. Paul – Today and always – I am the Lord’s.
- Today – I live – and I will live fully now in hope for the future. I will plant a tree I may never see grow. I will love a neighbour who may move or leave tomorrow – I will give thanks today for all of God’s gifts – and share them now.
- It is a way of living that is fully present to the gifts of God that are not mine to own – but to enjoy. Summed up in the Ignatian Exercises as the practice of being ‘indifferent’ – not that they don’t matter – but they don’t ultimately matter – they are to be enjoyed if present – and released as necessary – never grasped and held as essential – for the only essential is the love of God in this moment to be lived and shared now.
- That is the call of the Rule of Life for this community.

“The Sisters of Saint John the Divine, in the spirit of their patron, are called to live to the glory of God in fulfilment of the two-fold law of love. Each sister will seek to do everything as one who has been baptized into Christ’s death and has entered the new life of his resurrection, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

“We are committed to lifelong conversion and to growth in union with God through the life of prayer and the undivided service of Jesus Christ. In Christ we are both called and sent to be open and responsive to the needs of the church and of the world, and to pray and work for peace, justice, unity and the integrity of creation.”

Mother Hannah answered God’s call to create a community that would love God and neighbour – wherever needed – that led to hospitals; long term care; guesthouses; homes of prayer; schools.... Mother Hannah would have had no idea of the twists and turns in the life of the Community – but in all – there has been this faithfulness to the moment – to living now – even as houses/schools/hospitals opened and closed or changed hands As the community grew or shrank –

I know there are disagreements at times about the direction of the community as some are ready to leap in one direction while others want another – as the direction of faithfulness is not as crystal clear as we might like!!

However, I have walked alongside this community since the 1980s as a guest – then Associate and spiritual director – and recently as episcopal visitor. My first contact was actually, I believe, through Sr. Doreen in the 1960s during a Sunday School visit she made to my church in Vancouver! And I have watched a resilient community that listens to God’s voice and call in the moment and responds. Whether the community lives or dies – it has planted trees. Now you are renovating the guest house to meet the needs of current guests – and continuing to live the life of prayer centered on God and neighbour.

That is all that is asked or needed. Mother Hannah can be truly proud (in the best Christian sense) of what has been built - sustained – and is being handed on into an unknown sometimes scary future that is eternally rooted in God.

Thanks be to God!

The Most Reverend Linda Nicholls
Episcopal Visitor to SSJD

Beyond Easter musings

Jesus said: “Reach out your hands, Thomas...”
Thomas replied: “My Master! My God!”
(John 20: 27 – 28)

If we choose to follow Jesus, in every circumstance in our life this is the place of the gospel, the good news. This is the place where the marks of Jesus are visible, where people hear their names called with love, where people break open their lives to share them, where people bear witness. This is where Jesus finds us, knows us, loves us, heals us, set us free and calls us to follow. The place of the gospel is the world.

Beyond Easter we know the place of the gospel is the world, where all of us prodigal folks are called to show what it means to be generous in human relationships, where we show we are trying to live together with differences, where we seek to heal what is broken, reunite what is separated and re-create the face of the earth.

“Beyond Easter we know the place of the gospel is never abstract or academic, nor is it theoretical and dogmatic. It is always the place of engagement with the world. It is the place where the Word becomes flesh, where we can see the marks of the nails in the side ...” – Kathy Galloway, Iona Community. She follows this comment with a poem called “Thomas” written by Kate McIlhagga. Part of that poem I share:

“...Put out your hand, Thomas,
Touch, Thomas, the gaping wounds
Of my world.
Feel, Thomas, the primal wound
Of my people.
Reach out your hands Thomas,
And place them at the side of the poor.
Grasp my hand, Thomas, and believe.”

Beyond Easter we are to put out our hands, to be set free from narrow nationalism, blind ideology, superstitious and lazy religion, servitude to violence within and war without, the deadly division of race and class and ideology – the anger, the violence, the exploitation of this broken and beautiful world. Beyond Easter, now it is our task to live out, in hard, hard work – and yet joyful discipline, the gift of new life in the midst of the suffering of the world, with God’s help.

It is hard, hard work as we are often like the



walking wounded, the ones who need to be reminded that there is a Love that will not let us go. I am reminded of one of Dr. Seuss’ books “On Beyond Zebra” in which he writes “In the places I go there are things that I see that I never could spell if I stopped with the Z. I’m telling you this because you’re one of my friends. My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends!”

Beyond Easter, Jesus’ story continues with us. Easter is not the culmination of the story, but the beginning. We are to keep looking for new words and worlds to describe the untiring, inclusive, and tenacious love of God that breathed us into being. A God who holds us as we walk through the circumstances of our days and welcomes us when we have fallen with open arms of compassion and forgiveness. After Easter, the message is that everything becomes an altar of forgiveness and belonging.

In the prologue of the Rule of St. Benedict, “With the good that is in us we must obey God at all times”, Joan Chittister writes in a short commentary: “The gifts we have been given – our abilities, our personality, our feelings – are given to us for the good of others. That we ‘love one another’ and care for them and give life to them is the will of God that we’re meant to obey.”

Beyond Easter – perhaps St Teresa of Avila said it most clearly:

“Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassionately on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.”

Sr. Doreen, SSJD

Reflections of a Companion in Residence at St. John's Convent

Online Companions are invited to spend a week at the convent during their ten-month program. I was delighted to share with the sisters in prayer, work, worship and recreation for a week in February during time away from my home in Berwick, NS.

Before arriving at the convent, Companion Dawn Pretty and I met for the first time in person at St. Paul's Bloor St. for an Ash Wednesday service. Bishop Jenny and the rector warmly welcomed us, as did some good friends I hadn't seen in many months.

It was a beautiful day, so that afternoon Dawn and I walked to the Daniels building on Spadina Cres. to view the Inuit exhibit "Towards Home". One of the most arresting exhibits was a video of two Inuit women describing the impact of colonization on their land and their lifestyle.

Although the sisters were involved in an all-day meeting on Friday, February 16, I was warmly welcomed and invited to settle into spacious "St. Benedict's" room.

The rhythm of life at the convent includes time for individual prayer, during which I continued my daily reading of St. Benedict's Rule and Common Prayer - A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals. These are the texts currently in use by Companions under the guidance of Sr. Connie, who is leading our weekly Zoom classes.

Mealtimes, although taken in silence, begin and end with prayer led by a sister. The quietness allowed me to appreciate the taste and texture of the food (which is plentiful) and also to observe what was going on in the garden.

My work assignment involved moving dozens of carefully sorted pictures from the guest house chapel to a second floor room in the sisters' enclosure under the direction of Sr. Dorothy. I was assisting two regular volunteers who have been emptying the guest house in readiness for renovation. One of these volunteers is also named Elizabeth; we missed the opportunity to include her in a group photo.

Four daily services of worship included longer periods of time for meditation, which was very calming. By the end of my stay, I think I finally observed the correct pauses when chanting the psalms but I couldn't have managed to find all the

correct canticles and antiphons without a sister's guidance.

I appreciated meeting Archbishop Fred Hiltz for the first time and also renewing acquaintance with Bishop Peter Fenty when they came to celebrate the Eucharist.

After hearing me sing during the first few services, Sr. Connie invited me to 'switch sides' to sit with the altos. I enjoyed this so much that I'm thinking of joining a community choir, something I haven't done in decades.

On a Grace Day, I took an hour-long walk in the neighbourhood of the convent with Sr. Elizabeth - each of us watching for icy patches and slip/trip hazards. On another fine day I walked alone along the ravine behind the convent.



The four Elizabeths - Sr. Elizabeth Ann, Sr. Elizabeth, Elizabeth Walker and Sr. Anne

Several evenings I was invited to join the sisters in their community room. I watched as nearly all worked on a craft - some sewing or knitting - while they conversed quietly with one another and with me.

I couldn't resist requesting a group photo of Sr. Elizabeth Ann, Sr. Elizabeth, myself Elizabeth Anne Walker and Sr. Anne, whose given names are also Elizabeth Anne!

My week living with the sisters was a wonderful experience - thank you all for your hospitality!

Elizabeth Anne Walker, Companion

A HOME FOR THE HEART UPDATE – APRIL 2024



How is the Capital Campaign Coming?

Thank you to all our wonderful friends for your great support of our “Home for the Heart” campaign. Our goal has been to raise \$4 million which, in addition to the sisters’ draw on their endowment fund of \$2 million, will come close to meeting the expenses of what is now a \$6.3 million project budget. As of this writing, we have raised (in pledges and cash) a total of \$5.5 million, thanks most recently to a \$500,000 donation from the Sunnybrook Foundation.

Construction News

Will the construction EVER start? Not only our readers but the sisters themselves have been asking this question. It seems like such a long-drawn-out process. But YES – it will start, and our hope is that it will be underway by the end of April. Four contractors are bidding on the project, and they will be interviewed, and a decision made in April.

What Will the Construction Look Like?

The first step will be demolition – this will include three major areas:

Demolition of some walls to reconfigure some spaces, including four new fully-accessible ensuite bedrooms. In addition to being used for guests with special physical needs, they will also be used (at a slight premium increase in cost) for those who may want a larger room with ensuite bath.

Demolition of the current “stall” washrooms and shower rooms will make way for shared three-piece bathrooms. We had hoped to have more ensuite rooms, but we would have lost too many bedrooms had we done that.

Demolition of closets in the single rooms will

allow for space-saving wardrobes with room to hang clothes on one side and shelves on the other – eliminating the need for separate dressers. The new rooms will be much more spacious.

Other renovations will follow those early demolitions will include new heating and cooling system with individual controls in the bedrooms, new easy-to-open and secure casement windows, a new roof, a new accessible entrance to the Guest House with a Welcome Centre off the vestibule, and new fire safety systems.

There is more to the renovation than we have space for here, but more details will be posted on our website, and a timeline, after we have identified our General Contractor.

Retreats and Events During Construction

While the Guest House itself is closed for approximately a year, we continue to invite groups and individuals to join us for daytime individual or group retreats. You can also attend our chapel services any time. To reserve space for a daytime retreat, please phone our hospitable and efficient Guest House Administrator, Jeanette Strong, at 416-226-2201 ext. 305. Or you can email her: guesthouse@ssjd.ca. Please see our website for details about upcoming retreats in person and also on Zoom. There are lots of interesting programs coming up in 2024.

We Still Need Help!

We invite you to help close the gap between \$5.5 million already raised and another \$800,000 still needed. And that amount could increase after we receive the bids from the contractors. We will keep you posted via our regular e-mail updates which you can subscribe to at www.ssjd.ca/subscribe. And above all, please continue praying for our campaign.

Sr. Constance Joanna
Co-Chair, Capital Campaign



The Sisterhood of St. John the Divine

www.ssjd.ca

St. John's Convent

233 Cummer Ave., Toronto, ON M2M 2E8

416-226-2201 FAX: 416-226-2131

email: convent@ssjd.ca



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