

petite Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvania journeys

"Our charism is unity of neighbor with neighbor and neighbor with God, without distinction. You can never forget those two words: without distinction. They make all the difference."

Betsy Wiest recalls the words Sr. Kathleen Blair, SSJ, spoke to her during her year of preparation to become an SSJ Associate. Betsy, who is now an SSJ Agregee and serving as the congregation's social justice coordinator, keeps those words at the forefront of her ministry.

"I will never forget how Sr. Kathleen drilled that into my head," she recalls. "I can still hear her saying it. I understand it so clearly now."

The mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph is rooted in profound love of God and love of neighbor *without distinction*. While that may seem a lofty ideal, it is at the very core of what the Sisters of St. Joseph strive for through their ministries, and especially social justice initiatives, including racism.

Continued inside.



without distinction

by Betsy Wiest, SSJ Social Justice Coordinator
and Stephanie Hall, SSJ Communications Director

We hear stories every day of how systemic racism plays out in our society and contributes to the extreme divisiveness in our country. We hear about George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others, and we see reports of Asian Americans being beaten in the streets. And we are left wondering, “what can we do?”

Awareness and dialogue are fundamental to addressing racism and laying the groundwork for change. Throughout the country, Catholic Sisters are organizing and facilitating programs and hosting conversations to heighten awareness. These courageous conversations can be uncomfortable; they challenge us to look at the effects of racism, what our part in the problem may be, and what we can do – individually and collectively – to affect change.

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One such program, *Open Wide Our Hearts: the enduring call to love*, was prepared by the Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center. IPJC is an organization sponsored by 22 religious communities that collaborates with Catholic, ecumenical, interfaith, and other organizations in carrying out its mission of acting for justice in the church and the world. *Open Wide Our Hearts* is a four-session process based on the USCCB Pastoral on Racism.

The process aids in understanding individual and systemic racism. It allows for listening to each other’s stories and for being moved to restore right relationships. The process helps to unpack white privilege and to work toward ending discrimination.

For more information, or to obtain a copy of *Open Wide Our Hearts*, visit the **Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center** at www.ipjc.org

The SSJ Administrative staff incorporated the *Open Wide Your Hearts* process into its weekly prayer gatherings during Lent. The experience was eye-opening and, at times, uncomfortable. The honesty, openness, and growth were evident as participants discovered how systemic racism and white privilege plays a part in their lives. “The conversations led to a deeper understanding and taught us how to ‘walk with’ those affected by racism,” said Rosemary O’Brien, SSJ. “The discomfort is the very reason these conversations need to occur. This is just the beginning, and I realized just how much I don’t know.”

Exploring these issues requires us to look at our own subconscious racism and the racist practices of institutions and organizations within our society. Even religious congregations are looking into their histories and acknowledging their sometimes racist pasts.

Another program, *Exploring Intersections: Catholic Sisters on Racism, Migration, and Climate*, was launched in March

2021 (see back cover). This program brings together Catholic Sisters and other panelists for an entire year of monthly discussions on different social issues. The conversations will explore how various issues intersect with racism, migration, and climate in a thought-provoking and engaging format.

We often look at things as isolated, stand-alone issues and don't consider them interrelated. But they are. "We live in an interconnected world," said Betsy Wiest. "It's critical that we know how one issue affects other issues and how one response or effort can cause change to occur in many areas. It's a ripple effect."

For More Information

There are numerous resources to help us open our eyes, ears, and hearts to the problem of systemic racism. We invite you to consider embracing the call to reach out to the *neighbor without distinction* and enrich our understanding of all God's people.

We have compiled many resources for you to explore. You can access them in one convenient location on our SSJ Erie website. Please visit:

ssjerie.org/without-distinction/.



Statement on the Derek Chauvin Verdict

We join with the U.S. Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph in making the following statement:

The trial of former police officer Derek Chauvin concluded with a guilty verdict on all counts of murder and manslaughter. In the wake of the decision, the U.S. Federation of the Sisters of St. Joseph and its partners call for peace and nonviolence for all who wish to be heard.

We remember in prayer the grieving families of George Floyd and other victims of law enforcement violence and systemic racism.

We recognize this as a pivotal time to engage whole-heartedly in the difficult work of unraveling systemic racism and biases that fuel unjust treatment of people of all colors.

We join with the voices calling for law enforcement reform including ending the use of life-threatening forms of physical restraint in the absence of resistance or when already in custody.

The Sisters of St. Joseph believe in and work for unity and reconciliation. With God's guidance, we seek to recognize one another with dignity and love as we move forward in building a better future together. In this collaborative work, we ask God for deep healing of all communities, and improved relationships with the people who serve them.



by Dotty Hanna, Development Director

Let's face it. It's been a long, difficult year. Together but apart, we endured a global pandemic, social isolation and civic unrest. Many of our neighbors faced hunger, food insecurity, job loss and homelessness.

For certain, these are radical times. And radical times call for radical hope – not wishful thinking, but dynamic, life-giving hope; hope that inspires us to live courageously, to take action and to expect great things.

It was radical hope that inspired the early Sisters of St. Joseph to build orphanages, hospitals and homes for the elderly, to build and staff schools, and to open their arms to the area's most excluded dear neighbors.

And it is the same radical hope that moves us today. It calls us to act – especially in difficult times like these, when we know that there is hardship ahead for so many.

radical hope

For these neighbors, hope is a beginning – a glimpse of what's possible. In fact, hope may be the greatest gift we give through our ministries. When we build community and revitalize neighborhoods, we give hope. When we feed the hungry and house the homeless, we give hope. When we welcome the immigrant, we give hope. And when we reach out to the lonely, the anxious, the grieving and the marginalized, we give hope.

As we welcome spring and celebrate this season of hope, we ask you to consider a gift to the SSJ Mission & Ministries Foundation. With your help, we can and will respond to the needs of our dear neighbors – with radical hope, profound love and life-changing action.

*To make a gift, visit us online at
www.ssjerie.org or use the
enclosed envelope.*



Villa Alum? We miss you!

Did you graduate from Villa Elementary, Villa Maria Academy, or Villa Maria College? If so, please join our new Facebook Group:

Villa Alum/SSJ Erie Connections www.facebook.com/groups/villassjerie/

If you're not on Facebook, no worries. You can still be in the loop by going to our website and completing a short Villa Alum form. This will help us stay connected and let us know what you would like to see from the Sisters.

Access the form at: <https://ssjerie.org/villa-connections/>



message from leadership



(L-R): Carol Morehouse, SSJ;
Mary Drexler, SSJ; Phyllis McCracken, SSJ

Dear Neighbor,

It's graduation time. Congratulations to all students who have successfully made it through a very challenging year.

We'll hear about some students who have excelled and are graduating *with distinction*. What an honor. Being recognized *with distinction* for what you've accomplished is a good thing. But being singled out just for being or looking different isn't good and can be the root of prejudice and racism.

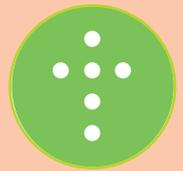
"Without distinction" is an inherent part of the mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph — to *not* single out people because of differences. We must face where that happens, even if it's in ourselves. Are we judging people because of the color of their skin rather than the content of their character?

"The Sister of St. Joseph moves always toward profound love of God and love of neighbor without distinction." (Consensus Statement)

Our neighbor is the person we accept whether rich, poor, homeless, black, brown, white, or crossing the border searching for security and freedom — without judgment of any kind. The neighbor without distinction is whoever is in need, whether or not it is convenient for us to respond.

This is who we are called to be and what we are called to do. We are being called to understand racial bias, white privilege, and social unrest in a way that lets us move forward, treating the neighbor with the same love and care that Jesus would — without distinction.

On behalf of Leadership,
Mary Drexler, SSJ



we remember

Deceased Sisters:

Joyce Lowrey, SSJ

December 8, 2020

Mary Kay McNelis, SSJ

December 21, 2020

Kathleen Kirsch, SSJ

March 25, 2021

Deceased Associates:

Arlene Barlekoff

March 31, 2021

Mary Grace DeGeorge

April 14, 2021

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exploring intersections

*Catholic Sisters on Racism,
Migration and Climate*

This collaborative project of several religious congregations focuses each month on a social issue and explores how it intersects with racism, migration and climate in a thought-provoking and engaging conversation. Host Charish Badzinski—writer, communication consultant, strategic planner, and public relations professional—will skillfully steer the conversation among panelists who each offer unique perspectives, notable achievements and invaluable insight on a particular topic.

You can join in the discussion in several ways, including live on Zoom or YouTube, or you can watch it

later at your own convenience. There are opportunities to connect and continue the conversation, as well.

Throughout the 12-month series, the following topics will be covered: Gender Equity, Care of Creation, Migration, Racial Justice, Ending Human Trafficking, Eliminating Gun Violence, Economic Justice, Food Security, Restorative Justice, Affordable Housing, Education Justice, and Equitable Access to Healthcare.



EPISODES

All episodes are held at 4 PM (EST).
Visit exploringintersections.org for more information and to register for the live conversations.