

philanthropy and the SSJ mission

by Stephanie Hall, Director of Communications and Public Relations

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph is rooted in initiating change as a response to need. Marius Nepper, S.J. described the Sisters of St. Joseph as *“Standing on tiptoe, eyes alert, ears attentive, sleeves rolled up”* because of their willingness to take on tasks others didn't. However, it wasn't always easy and they often depended on the philanthropy of others.

In its earliest form, philanthropy, from the Greek philanthropia, meant love of mankind. The meaning has evolved, but human civilization has long depended upon kindness directed towards strangers (National Philanthropic Trust). Philanthropy has always played a significant role in the Sisters' mission and service in the Erie Diocese.

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Following the Civil War, Mother Agnes Spencer wanted to use her family inheritance to purchase land and build an orphanage and convent in Meadville, PA. However, because of discrimination against Catholic immigrants, the bank refused to deal with a woman wearing a religious habit. Undaunted, she put on lay clothes and returned to complete the transaction. Soon after the orphanage and convent were established, there was a train wreck, and the sisters opened their doors to the injured. Seeing the need for a hospital, Mother Agnes received permission from Bishop Joshua Young to canvas the city seeking funds to build St. Joseph Hospital.

Philanthropy was essential to the establishment and operation of Villa Maria Academy. Father Thomas Casey, Vicar General of the Erie Diocese, gave the Sisters a parcel of land and provided funds to construct a school to provide young women with a Christian education. Later, Mother Eugenia Quirk encouraged the Sisters to ask 20 relatives or friends to give five cents a week for one year, or \$2.60, and to ask an additional ten people to do the same. The money would help fund an addition to Villa Maria Academy. In addition, the donor was assured of prayers and monthly masses as long as the school stood. More than \$100,000 was collected.

The chapel at Villa Maria Academy was named in memory of Bishop John Mark Gannon's mother in gratitude for his many gifts to the sisters.

Another gift to the congregation was the former Reed estate. Mary Bateman, sister of Mother Helena Dillon, donated the property to the Sisters, and in 1938, it was blessed by Bishop Gannon and christened Maryvale. Throughout the years, it was used as an extension of the elementary school, Villa Maria Academy, and the Villa Maria Conservatory of Music. It was also home to Maryvale Pre-school. In the mid-1990s, it became a vocation/formation house and hosted novices from throughout the U.S.

Saint Mary's Home of Erie has endured because of philanthropic support. The original skilled nursing building was possible because of donations from the Erie Diocese and the community. In addition, significant gifts funded a dedicated Alzheimer's unit at Saint Mary's East (now Nightingale Nursery and Rehab Center). Numerous rooms and wings, including the chapel, library, and exercise room at Saint Mary's at Asbury Ridge, are named for individuals and families who have generously given to the ministry. A donor's bequest established a benevolent care fund.


In 1993, a gift from Edna Londregan allowed the Sisters to establish Bethany House ministry. Londregan donated a home in Erie with the provision it be used for ministry. At the time, there was great need

for women's transitional housing. The ministry was designed to help women regain self-esteem and re-enter society following treatment.

The Sisters held fairs to raise funds for the orphans at St. Joseph Orphanage. Sisters also asked family and friends for money to purchase needed items for the children. The fairs continued for many years.

Though not specifically for ministry, generous gifts also provided vacation and retreat locations for the Sisters. In 1916, Reverend Joseph M. Cauley presented the Sisters with ten acres of lakefront property near North East, PA. An additional gift helped fund the construction of a modest cottage on the property. It was named Villa Joseph in honor of the donor. In 1946, the congregation was given a nine-acre country estate in McKean, PA, from Dr. G. W. Schlindwein. The estate was named Villa Rosa in honor of his wife, Rose. In 1967, a bequest from the Estate of Thomas J. Dillon deeded a parcel and cottage across from Villa Rosa to the Sisters; it became known as Villa Regis. These gifts provided wonderful places for spiritual retreats and relaxation.

Philanthropy makes it possible for the Sisters of St. Joseph to continue responding to needs just as they did during their earliest days in the Erie Diocese. Ministries including the SSJ Neighborhood Network, St. James and St. Patrick's Havens, and Saint Mary's Home of Erie serve the dear neighbor because of donations and philanthropic support. In addition, initiatives such as the SSJ Annual Thanksgiving Appeal, Erie Gives, the SSJ Mission and Ministries Foundation Appeal, and the Mission Haiti project generate thousands of dollars in gifts each year. SSJ

partners in mission—the benefactors who support these ministries and offer their time, prayers, and financial resources—ensure that the SSJ mission endures. 



ABOVE (top to bottom) 1) The original Villa Maria Academy, built on land donated by Fr. Thomas Casey. **2)** Maryvale, a gift from Mary Bateman. **3)** (l-r) Dr. Joann Painter with Srs. Dorothy Wilwohl, SSJ, and Mary Claire Kennedy, SSJ. **4)** The Sisters of St. Joseph and its sponsored ministries benefit from the generosity of many each year through Erie Gives Day. **5)** A resident is welcomed in the early days of Saint Mary's Home of Erie, a ministry that has been supported through philanthropic efforts.



Patron Saint of Philanthropy St. Katharine Drexel (1858-1955)

Mother Katharine Drexel of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament came from an affluent family that gave generously to her congregation. She was the sole heiress to the Drexel family fortune.

The newly established federal income tax was a graduated one and led to exceedingly large tax bills for her order. Concerned about the effect on the congregation's charitable work, in 1924, she and her family successfully lobbied Congress to establish what was known as the Philadelphia Nun Provision. The provision allowed anyone giving 90% of their income to charity for the previous ten years to be exempt from paying income tax. Ironically, she was the only U.S. citizen who qualified for the provision. According to "Sharing the Bread in Service: Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament 1891-1991 — Volume 1," the "Philadelphia nun provision" was essential to the operation of the order in the years after the provision became part of the law. Although the Philadelphia Nun Provision no longer exists, it is credited as the precursor to the present-day charitable deduction.