

# REFLECTIONS & *Connections*

MAY 2022



STORIES OF MISSION  
& MINISTRY



**CSA**

Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes  
Promoting Justice, Building Community

# Dear Friends,



A number of years ago at a General Chapter, CSA came to the awareness that, “at the heart of who we are is the desire to be connected at the level of the Sacred.” This realization set the community on a journey that beckoned and deepened CSA’s commitment to proceed “... from the

wellspring of the Sacred [as we] unfold the mystery of all that unites us.” Chapter followed chapter every four years, leading CSA to find new ways to be and build community in its mission and ministries across the United States, in Nicaragua, and even in Siberia. Ministries continued, flourished, and expanded the charism that God freely shared with us. Once initiated by CSA, a particular ministry became its own reality in an ongoing dynamic of giving and receiving with all involved. This extension, with and by others, nurtured seeds sown by a charism that cannot be contained. We are aware that we will never entirely plumb the depths of this mystery that contains us, is beyond us, and of which we also uniquely have a share.

No matter what goal has been chosen over the years, we have been led on a path that invited CSA “... to respond to

those whose faith life or human dignity is threatened” in the very society and culture of this place and time. This defines our way of life, and this way graces the ways in which we interact with others in whatever we are doing or how we are being as Sisters of St. Agnes.

At this time and place, this path has led us to join together as we embrace a transformative journey. We recognize that the journey itself is an end, and the end is a journey. Never alone, always with God and the others with whom we connect along the path, we are on the way to becoming who we are and always have been—pilgrims on a journey that by its very nature is transformative. As one of our founders said, “No step is lost, no drop of sweat is in vain, if one lives in grace and acts through love of God.”

In words adapted from Chapter 2017, the Sisters of St. Agnes, grounded in a contemplative heart, God’s mission, and our charism, face our future with honesty and hope embracing our call with courage as we interweave with the reality of the 21st century.

In the peace and love of Christ,  
Sister Jean Steffes, CSA  
*General Superior*

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*Cover Photo by Mary Christopherson for CSA*

# Celebrating a Century

By Sister Monica Justinger, CSA

The Centenarian Group at Nazareth Court and Center/St. Francis Home welcomed its newest member on March 25, the 100th birthday of Sister Mercedes Geib. In 1922, Sister Mercedes was born in Barton, Wisconsin, one block from the original motherhouse. Throughout her ministry in Wisconsin, Indiana, Kansas, and Ohio, Sister Mercedes was a musician; a primary, intermediate, junior high teacher and principal; a liturgist at St. Agnes Convent, and a Director of Religious Education.

Before retiring to Nazareth Court and Center in 2013, Sister Mercedes spent 20 years in Ohio, 16 of them in Circleville where she was a member of St. Joseph Parish. She was very active in the “Ministry of Neighboring” and well-loved and known for her smile, her caring, her wholehearted hospitality. On her 80-Year Jubilee in 2021 and on her birthday, she received dozens and dozens of cards and messages from the parish wishing her God’s blessing.

I was honored to be missioned with Sister Mercedes for the 20 years she lived in Ohio. We had our differences, our ups and downs, but she was a blessing to live with. We have many stories to tell. She loved the water and the outdoors, water skiing and camping well into her 80s and convincing me to join her. We once made a Wilderness Retreat in Pennsylvania, in a campground with no hook-ups—no water, electricity, or facilities—in a tent. We were with eight other sisters and a Retreat Director. It was a wonderful retreat except when our dog, Happy, ran into a porcupine and got a chin full of spines. With the nearest veterinarian clinic more than 60 miles away, I was tasked with extracting the spines from his jaw while Sister Mercedes tried to hold him down. She was praying and crying, but Happy just looked at her with trusting eyes.

Sister Mercedes is an example of resilience, the ability to spring back, to find creative and flexible ways to move forward with grace and dignity. Like all of our elder sisters, whom I refer to as the “wise ones,” she has true grit because they never give up or lose hope.



Sister Mercedes Geib with cards and notes of love received for her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.



Sister Mercedes Geib with Sister Monica Justinger



# Stewarding the Land

Find more information about CSA land and watch the video of the event at [www.csasisters.org/earth](http://www.csasisters.org/earth)



**O**n April 22, 2022, the Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes welcomed a group of civic, ministry, and environmental partners to celebrate the signing of our Conservation Easement Document, in partnership with Glacial Lakes Conservancy, protecting 237 acres of Earth in perpetuity. As part of the event, Sister Jean Steffes, CSA General Superior, shared some of the history of the land:

*“The land that we conserve today is especially meaningful for all Sisters of Saint Agnes. Native peoples roamed and lived off this land for centuries. Early settlers farmed it and our founder, Father Caspar Rehrl, who came to the Wisconsin Territory in 1845, traversed it on his missionary journeys. One of his stops was at a farm three miles east of Fond du Lac where he found cold springs of water flowing down a hill and he wished that the Agnes Sisters would someday live on this land. This all came to be in March of 1898, when our foundress, Mother Agnes Hazotte, bought 293.5 acres of land from Mr. Wells and, in September of 1899, she purchased an additional 117 acres of farmland re-naming the whole property Saint Joseph Springs Farm. Prizing the land and rejoicing in its beauty and fertility, the sisters found help to till the soil, raise animals, ... grow*

*vegetables, ... build a sanitarium, found a high school, and finally, construct our motherhouse in 2001, St. Agnes Convent, here on this spot, sacred to so many diverse peoples for several millennia and treasured by CSA for the past 124 years. Now we have placed this land in a conservancy with Glacial Lakes in order to preserve its pristine beauty for generations to come.”*



CSA Board accepts a plaque of recognition from the Glacial Lakes Conservancy Board.



**Sister Jean Steffes, CSA General Superior, cuts the ribbon with Glacial Lakes Conservancy Board President Cynthia Northup.**

After the event a small crowd gathered for a ribbon cutting to ceremonially “open” the forests, prairies, wetlands, farm fields, labyrinth, cemetery, nature trails, solar garden, and three stream channels running down the Niagara Escarpment as God provided life giving water in the form of rain.

CSA property is privately owned by the congregation and Glacial Lakes Conservancy partners with the sisters to enforce the terms of the conservation document. As the congregation continued to develop a deeper understanding of the history of the land, the sisters adopted a Land Acknowledgment statement.

**CSA Land Acknowledgment**

The Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes acknowledges our Motherhouse is located on land that is a gift of the Creator. Nestled along the Niagara Escarpment, near the southeast shore of Lake Winnebago in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, this sacred land is the ancestral homeland of the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago), Menominee, Myaamia, Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, and many indigenous groups of North America who have

passed through or called Wisconsin their home at some point in the last three centuries.

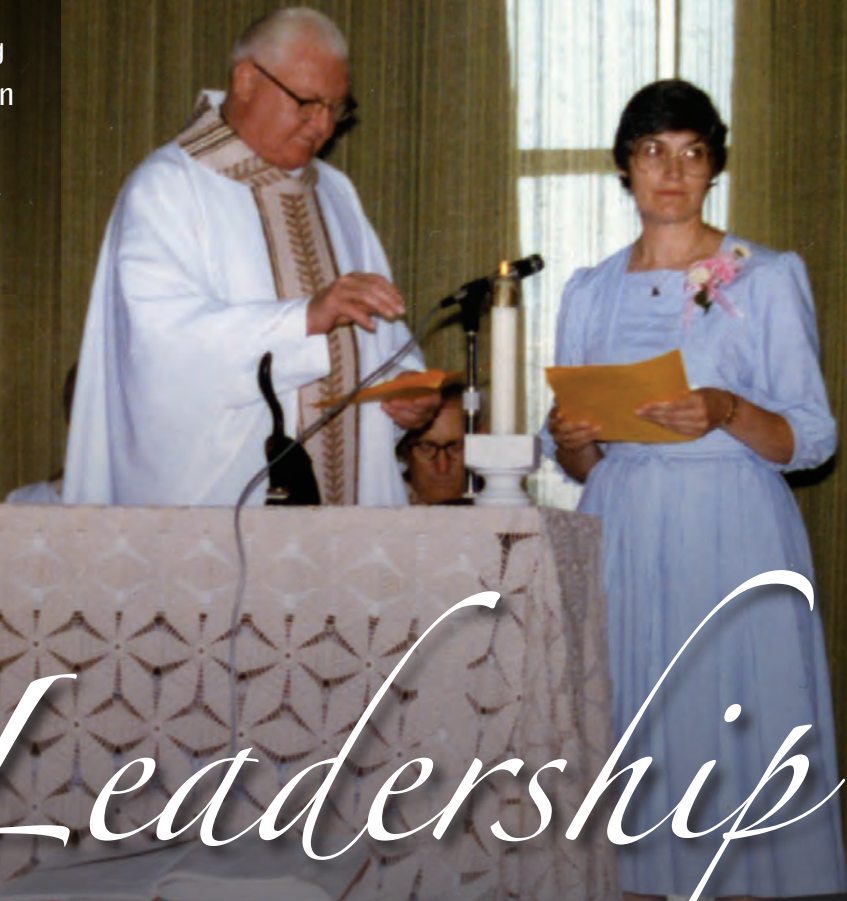
The Sisters of St. Agnes recognize the historical and ongoing realities of settler colonialism. We lament the violence, genocide, broken treaties, efforts to strip our brothers and sisters of their culture and language, and the forced removal of all indigenous peoples from these sacred lands. We acknowledge the First Nations communities who have stewarded this land throughout generations. We respect their past and present elders and continue to learn from their wisdom. We are grateful to pray, study, minister, and live in community on this holy ground. We commit to being good stewards of the land, to showing special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions, and to collaborating with First Nation People today on issues that impact our common home and the common good.

**“All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.”**

— Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (#14)



Sister Jean during her first installation as CSA General Superior in 1985.



A Legacy of

# Leadership

By Jenny Lukomski, CSA Archivist

**As Sister Jean Steffes completes her 17th and final year as General Superior, we look back at her leadership in the congregation.**

Sister Jean was the first of a new generation of CSA's leaders who went through their religious formation as the Church and the congregation were grappling with the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council.

Professed in 1967, she taught English at Immaculate Conception High School in Elmhurst, Illinois, and St. Mary's Springs Academy in Fond du Lac. While at the Springs, she also served as CSA's Novice Directress. Recognizing her leadership potential, Sister Judith Schmidt, then General Superior, asked Sister Jean to become a Regional Coordinator in 1982, where she was primarily concerned with the welfare of the sisters in the eastern part of the country.

Four years later, she was elected to her first term as General Superior. She was reelected in 1989 for another four-year term, after which she served as Vicar for



Sister Jean during her final installation as CSA General Superior in 2017.

Religious and Chancellor of the Diocese of Phoenix. The congregation again called her to leadership, electing her as General Superior in 2013 and 2017.

A talented administrator, Sister Jean embraced the challenge of finding concrete ways to integrate CSA's mission with the larger Church, specifically by answering Vatican II's call for preferential treatment of the poor. During her tenure, and at the behest of all the sisters, CSA has taken on a greater role in advocating for social justice issues including anti-human trafficking, economic equality, rights of women and children, and climate change.

Sisters are encouraged to choose ministries with direct impact on the problems of poverty in the United States and Nicaragua. Sister Jean invited more lay women to join the boards of directors of CSA's sponsored institutions and encouraged employees of those institutions to integrate their spiritual values with their work life. Through a combination of installing its own solar panels and purchasing more from a local community project, CSA's motherhouse is now 100% solar-powered. The nearly complete Katharine Drexel Homeless Shelter in Fond du Lac also is benefitting from CSA's generous donation and purchase of solar panels for their building.

A theme of Sister Jean's time in leadership is transitions and evolution. In 1987, CSA took over sponsorship of Waupun Memorial Hospital from the School Sisters of St. Francis. In 1990, CSA's St. Anthony Hospital merged with Hadley Memorial Hospital in Hays, Kansas. And in 2018, CSA made the emotional decision to transfer sponsorship of St. Agnes Hospital, Monroe Clinic, and its other healthcare facilities to SSM Health.

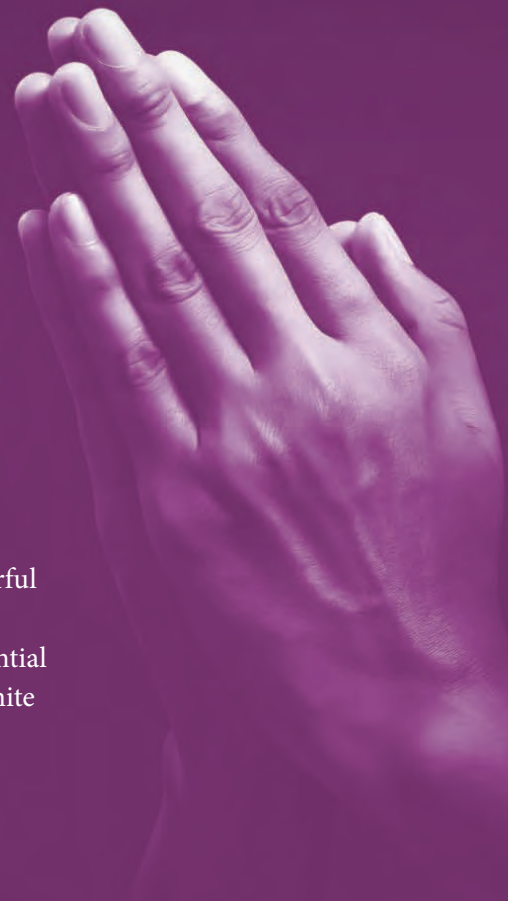
Through it all, Sister Jean has led the community in its evolution toward a future with fewer sisters, but an invigorated sense of mission by continually answering Mother Agnes's call to take on courageous initiatives.

## Legislative

# Prayer Partners

The Legislative Prayer Partners process is a concrete way to fulfill our mission to work for a more just and caring society. As a member of the LCWR Region 9 Legislative Network, CSA joins 194 participants from eight other Wisconsin religious congregations in committing to pray for Wisconsin legislators.

Here's how it works: Volunteers are assigned a Wisconsin state legislator and commit to pray regularly for this person; each volunteer determines how to define "regularly." Volunteers are not asked to lobby on behalf of issues, just to pray. The intent is to support the legislators with prayer that they make moral decisions for the common good. In 2022, CSA has 32 volunteers: 23 sisters and 9 associates. Last year, many volunteers from Wisconsin congregations received personal responses from legislators who appreciated the prayerful support. This simple program has the potential to move hearts and unite polarized politics.





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PLEASE JOIN US FOR  
THE LIVESTREAM OF

*Jubilee Mass*

**Sunday, June 26, 2022  
2:30-3:30 p.m. CDT**

Celebrating our 2022 Jubilarians

See details at [www.csasisters.org/jubilee](https://www.csasisters.org/jubilee)



Doris Klein, CSA