In Mission
2023
Responding
to the signs
of the times for
190 years

Alert to rapidly evolving conditions in a changing society, we discern which world conditions we are called to address.

You Are Sent, General Directory 37

School Sisters of Notre Dame
A Graced Journey of 190 Years

Sister Roxanne Schares, SSND, General Superior

190 years ago, our congregation came to life when Caroline (Blessed M. Theresa of Jesus) Gerhardinger and two other women began a common religious life in Neunburg vorm Wald, Bavaria, Germany. A journey of love was undertaken, one of discerning and responding to urgent, evolving needs in society. It became a graced journey that has encircled the globe.

Through a profound experience of God’s love, a love that could not wait to give everything (MT, 1), Blessed Theresa was impelled to make God’s cause the only concern of her heart and address the urgent needs of her times through education. Her spirit inspired others to live this same love commitment: to be deeply inserted in the world, address its basic needs, lay down their lives so others might live, and bring all to oneness with God (cf. YAS, Foreword, C 33).

These 190 years have been a journey of faith, vision, and courage of more than 20,000 School Sisters of Notre Dame. It has been an experience of the overwhelming love of God, calling forth a bold response of love and fidelity that has touched, shaped, and transformed countless lives around the world even through incredibly challenging and turbulent periods in history.

This issue of In Mission shares reflections of different moments of this 190-year journey, from its earliest beginnings in Europe to crossing oceans and spanning the continents of North and South America, Asia and Africa. The stories highlight attentiveness to evolving situations, discerning God’s call in the signs of the times, and daring to respond in unsuspected ways to critical global concerns caused by social upheaval, war, and climate change.

Together, Sisters, Associates, and partners in mission are addressing the crises of the times and witnessing to the unconditional, universal love of God. It has been, it is a shared, graced journey of love.
After founding the Congregation in Bavaria, Germany, in 1833, Blessed Mother Theresa Gerhardinger came to North America in 1847 with four other Sisters, including Sister Caroline Freiss. After some confusion about where they were to be missioned, the Sisters arrived in Baltimore, Maryland. They started a school for girls, the Institute of Notre Dame (IND). Blessed Theresa, as the leader of her international congregation, had to return to Germany so she entrusted 23-year-old Sister Caroline to lead the congregation’s mission in North America. The School Sisters of Notre Dame met the needs of their time by educating girls, principally in elementary schools, but also in orphanages, day nurseries, and industrial schools. They trained future teachers and pioneered in the development of kindergartens. For girls who were factory workers, they provided night schools where they could receive basic education.

Under Mother Caroline’s guidance, the North American part of the congregation thrived, spreading across the United States and Canada. Now, 176 years after she accepted her mission, SSNDs are still making a difference in these countries and around the world. Some are educating in traditional schools. Others have found innovative ways of educating, such as centers for English as a Second Language and creating homes for women in recovery where they can nourish their minds and their souls. On the grounds of IND, where Blessed Theresa once walked, the tuition-free Caroline Center trains local women for jobs as certified nursing assistants and pharmacy technicians. Blessed Theresa wanted her congregation to teach girls, women and the marginalized, skills that might provide them with a better future. That mission is still carried out in the Atlantic-Midwest and Central Pacific Provinces in North America, spanning many U.S. States, Canadian Provinces, England, Guam and Japan.

Planting Seeds in the New World
By Caelie Haines, Director of Communications, Atlantic-Midwest Province

Mother Caroline Friess and School Sisters of Notre Dame in the early days in North America.
Significant events in the life of the congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame

1833: Responding to the call to teach the children of German immigrants in North America, Blessed Theresa, four sisters, and a novice arrived in New York. Two weeks later, they arrived in St. Marys, Pennsylvania and opened the first SSND house and school in North America. Sisters were soon teaching in three schools in Baltimore.

1847: Mother M. Caroline Fries was sent by Blessed Theresa to open a motherhouse in Milwaukee.

1871: As a result of the Kulturkampf, SSND houses in some parts of Germany were closed and sisters were called and sent to missions in other countries including what is now the Czech Republic, England, Hungary, and Serbia in addition to Austria, Bavaria, Italy, and Romania.

1872-79: Blessed Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger:1797-1879: died in Munich, Germany.

1892: Ministry to Native American children began.

1894-18: World War I: Communications within the congregation were cut off, but SSNDs remained united as one congregation. After the war, SSNDs in war-torn countries were helped by SSNDs from other parts of the world.

1914-18: SSNDs from North America were called and sent to open a mission in Puerto Rico.

1915: SSNDs were called and sent to open houses in Sweden and Switzerland.

1931: Over 10,000 SSNDs in Europe and North America celebrated the congregation’s centenary.

1933: Over 10,000 SSNDs in Europe and North America celebrated the congregation’s centenary.

1933-45: With the rise of National Socialism and the outbreak of World War II, hundreds of SSNDs were dismissed from teaching positions in several European countries. Many sisters took up new ministries at home or in other countries on both sides of the Atlantic.

1935, 1937: SSNDs were called to South America to teach children in Brazil.

1938: Sisters were called and sent to open a mission in Argentina.

1939-45: The rise of Communism in Eastern Europe forced radical change in the life and ministry of SSNDs in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia.

1945: Sisters were called and sent to open a mission in Kyoto, Japan.

1948: Sisters were called and sent to open a mission in Yona on the island of Guam.

1949: Sisters were called and sent to open the first SSND house in Rome.

1950: Sisters were called and sent to open a mission in Yona on the island of Guam.
Significant events in the life of the congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame

1956
Sisters were called and sent to open a mission in El Progreso, Honduras, the first in Central America.

1957
The Generalate-Central Motherhouse of the congregation was transferred from Munich to Rome.

1961
Pope John XXIII called for all communities of women and men religious in the United States to send 10 percent of their membership for mission service in Latin America within the decade.

1961-66
The Second Vatican Council: The decree on the adaptation and renewal of religious life, Perpetuum Conventi, was proclaimed by Pope Paul VI on October 20, 1965.

1962-65
SSNDs were called and sent to Latin America to open missions in Bolivia, Guatemala, Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Paraguay.

1963
The general chapter approved You Are Sent, the new Constitution and General Directory that was written in accordance with the spirit and decrees of Vatican II.

1970
SSNDs were called and sent to Africa to open missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria.

1976
Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger was beatified in Rome.

1985
You Are Sent was approved by the Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes.

1986
The phrase, “making the concerns of the poor our own,” was the theme of the first general chapter held after the approval of You Are Sent.

1987

1989
The first SSND novices were received in Africa.

1990
The fall of the Berlin Wall resulted in radical changes in the countries of Eastern Europe.

1993
SSND was granted NGO status at the United Nations.

1994
Shalom, the International Network for Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation, was initiated.

2002
22nd General Chapter in Freising, Deutschland.

2007
22nd General Chapter in São Leopoldo, Brazil.

2008
SSNDs were called and sent to what is now South Sudan, ministering with Solidarity for South Sudan.

2011
The District of Africa began the Province of Africa.

2012
23rd General Chapter in Arvicia, Italy.

2016
24th General Chapter in Marriottsville, Maryland, USA.

2017
Establishment of the Congregational Novitiate in Rome, Italy.

2020
New Commitment to South Sudan

2021
Decision to become a Laudato Si Congregation

2023
25th General Chapter in Rome, Italy on the 190th Anniversary of the founding of the School Sisters of Notre Dame
São José Hospital
The Foundation and Continuity of a Mission in People's Health Care

By Sister Isolene Lofi, SSND, São José Hospital
General Director, Province of Latin America and the Caribbean

São José Hospital in Criciúma, Santa Catarina, Brazil, owned and sponsored by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, opened in 1936. Over the past 87 years, the hospital has continuously grown, adapted and expanded in response to the signs of the times. Initially the hospital had only 20 patient rooms and some procedure rooms. Today, it includes 47,000 square meters and is one of the city’s largest hospitals.
The world has changed significantly since the hospital was founded, and it continues to accommodate changing needs. A new wing is now under construction to serve the area’s population estimated at more than one million. Now 1,580 employees and 300 medical specialists staff São José Hospital.

As a teaching hospital, São José offers a Medical Residency: approximately 1,000 medical interns pass through its halls each year. Patients receive treatment in a variety of medical specialties in cardiology, oncology, orthopedics, neurosurgery, and transplants each year. Approximately 96% of those cared for are subsidized by the Brazilian government.

São José has kept the SSND charism alive for more than eight decades. Through its highly trained staff and physicians, the Brazilian Sisters take pride in providing an environment of care that is centered on the patients and their specific needs, promoting physical, emotional, and spiritual healing.

As a congregation, we are called to care for the needs of the world and to live believing that the world can be a place of peace, community and health. São José Hospital has faced many challenges over the years and has responded with fidelity and courage. As a result, the hospital is respected and admired throughout the region and state for the services provided.

The SSND community of Brazil believes that the Hospital São José de Criciúma, has always responded to the signs of the times, drawing inspiration from our foundress: “All the works of God proceed slowly and in pain; but then, their roots are the sturdier and their flowering the lovelier”. (MT 2277)

In 2022:
- 216,141 admissions
- 22,237 hospitalizations
- 11,211 surgeries
- 702,057 lab exams

96.12% of admissions and procedures were subsidized by the Brazilian government.

School Sisters of Notre Dame serving at São José Hospital.

https://gerhardinger.org / 7
Associates are lay women and men who live out the mission and spirit of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND) in their everyday lives rooted in the spirit and vision of Blessed Theresa, foundress of the SSND. Together, Associates and Sisters continue this mission.

Associates and Sisters are called to address the urgent needs in our world with courage, boldness and hope. Together, they focus on the needs of women, youth and persons who are marginalized. Sister Kathy Schmittgens, co-director of the Central Pacific Province (CP) Associates, said, “Integral to the SSND Gospel commitment is our work for justice, peace and care of creation.”

“Many of the things we added during the pandemic continue to be used today,” said Sister Kathy. “Associates meet online in between regional in-person meetings. Many feel that the online gatherings have created community in ways that they couldn’t have if they only met 2 or 3 times a year. Spanish speaking Associates have invited Associates around the world to participate in online community events. In addition, we developed a new online orientation program for Associates. Many Sisters are also joining us for these sessions.”

“Associates use their individual and unique talents to help address changing needs, serving in their local communities and beyond,” said Anne. “They have valued the opportunities to participate in the Assembly of the Whole and the dialogues in preparation for the General Chapter. They are called with us to become a Laudato Si’ Congregation.”

The School Sisters of Notre Dame began to explore the possibility of Associates in 1970, as Vatican II called for a more active role of the laity in the Church. The guidelines for Associates in North America were initiated in 1976, with the first six Associates accepted in 1977.

Today, in CP more than 300 Associates live the Gospel and spread the spirit of Blessed Theresa and Mother Caroline in 16 states, Guam and Japan. “As we continue to grow, the needs of our Associates continue to change,” said Anne. “Especially during the pandemic when Associates couldn’t gather in person, we had to be creative in how we could still be together in prayer, community and service.”

“We are crossing barriers and boundaries every day. Women and men 21 or older who want to share their faith tradition in harmony with the SSND charism are invited to become associates,” said Sister Kathy.
What Lies Beyond?

By Sister Beatriz Martinez-Garcia, SSND, UN-NGO Representative

This year, the SSND commemorates 30 years of ministry at the United Nations. The Department of Public Information accepted our Congregation as an NGO in 1993 and the Economic and Social Council granted us the Special Consultative Status in 1998. As an international congregation, these associations enable us to bring the urgent needs of the global community to the attention of UN member states and to bring the gift of our charism and the values of the Gospel to bear on the deliberations and decisions of the United Nations.

For 30 years, we have worked in collaboration with the Shalom Network and other NGOs educating, and advocating for girls, trafficked, indigenous, migrants, refugees, homeless people, for social and climate justice. Sisters Ethel Howley, Ann Scholz, Eileen Reilly, and Beatriz Martinez-Garcia, NGOs Representatives, have accompanied hundreds of Sisters, colleagues and students to United Nations events. The Fourth Women’s Conference in Beijing, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, the Earth Summit in Brazil, Commissions on the Status of Women, Permanent Indigenous Forum, the UN Water Conference in New York are examples of these events.

I would like to describe the work of the SSNDs at the UN with the following words: commitment, risk, trust, love, transformation, struggle, education, collaboration, hope, and advocate. What words would you add to this list?

This is an opportune time to ask ourselves:
How has our presence at the UN influenced our communities and ministries?
How can we collaborate with others to strengthen our presence and voice?
What is God calling us to do or change regarding our ministry at the UN?

International Shalom Network

By Sister Marinez Capra, SSND, International Shalom/JPIC Network Coordinator

Justice, peace and global responsibility are rooted in our charism and central to our life and ministries as School Sisters of Notre Dame. General Chapter Directional Statements have continually called us, locally and congregationally, “to realize a world of peace, justice and love.” (YAS C 17) The Mandate for Action (19th General Chapter) led to establishing in 1994 our International Shalom Network to work actively and boldly to address the urgent cries for justice, peace and integrity of creation in our globalized world, at personal, communal, national and international levels.

In the 29 years of being an International Shalom Network, we recognize with gratitude how our network has collaborated through our five continental branches and other global partners to address peace, justice and ecological education, human rights, migrants and refugees, discrimination, indigenous communities, human trafficking, racism, healing, and poverty. Shalom as our way of life has sharpened our awareness on global issues and challenged us to seek for a more authentic living of the gospel values.

Since our 2021 SSND commitment to become a Laudato Si Congregation, the International Shalom Network continues to address climate change crises to respond to the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. It offers another concrete opportunity for a deeper conversion and transformative action for a more sustainable future.

May our Shalom Network be fire that ignites our passion and hope for the future as we live into a prophetic witness of universal communion.
The Gambia

For Martha Mendy, working with the School Sisters of Notre Dame was a great opportunity for collaboration and giving back to the Notre Dame School, Soma in The Gambia, for the significant impact the Sisters made in her life. The experiences have called her to avail herself to be a positive influence to others. The Sisters were Martha’s teachers who trained her to acquire skills as a seamstress. Since then, twelve years ago, she has worked with them.

Martha shares a mutual relationship with the Sisters who reach out to her, listen to her and guide her in times of challenges. “The Sisters were my teachers who trained me to acquire skills in tailoring and making tie and dye. They have trained others as well. Through this, I earn my living from the training I received from them,” said Martha.

Martha recalled with gratitude the many times the Sisters invited her to join the students for school trips and invited her to pray with them as well as play games. These were all great privileges and fun for her.

Martha shared: “Working with the Sisters for these number of years, I learned the values of justice, peace, unity and love. I also learned how to speak English, though not perfectly. And I am grateful for the good relationship I share with them.” Martha is happily sharing her learnings with the grade-nine students and teaching them etiquette. She hopes to continue working with the Sisters and helping the students where necessary. Martha is enthusiastic about advancing the SSND charism and helping others discover their God-given potentials. “I will continue using the skills and good values I learned from the Sisters,” said Martha.

Ghana

Studying at Notre Dame Girls High School, Sunyani, Ghana, for four years made a tremendous impact in the life of the graduates. One woman recalled with great enthusiasm the serenity of the environment at the school, such a peaceful atmosphere which makes the school environment conducive for teaching and learning. “My Alma Mater was a home of serenity and beauty,” she said.

She recalled with fond memory the bond they shared with the Sisters and as a school community. This was very significant for her. “It felt like a family and so learning was easier for us. The Sisters gave us their best, so we were empowered for the future,” she said.

“The Sisters taught us the value of discipline, truth, honesty and love as young learners; preparing us to be women who are nation builders and role models in the society. These values have been an integral part of my life ever since. What makes SSND education different and meaningful is that it is a holistic experience. “The SSNDs gave us education as well as life and spiritual guidance.”
Reflection of a Former Student

By Kasia, a former student of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in the Polish Province

While at school I stayed in the SSND dormitory. Especially important for me was the experience of community during integration meetings, trips, prayer times, pilgrimages, and excursions. I was happy to experience the Sisters’ support especially during exams.

A great joy for me was the opportunity to get involved in volunteer work with children and young people. I learned how to deal with specific situations with a child, gained pedagogical experience, and also the satisfaction of being able to selflessly help and be a support for others. I experienced sincere care for the whole person and help in discernment; being accompanied by the Sisters was important to me.

The Sisters imparted values to the students through their words and their example. The joyful witness of life with Jesus was evident; the Sisters were always ready to listen, to talk. They willingly shared their life experiences. I learned good habits such as caring for my surroundings, maintaining order, and caring for the environment.

I also came to understand the spiritual dimension of the Eucharist and holidays such as Christmas. Particularly enjoyable experiences were a common Christmas Eve supper and theater performances, where the Sisters played along with us and then after the performances talked about matters of faith. We had our own chapel, where we could go, sit down and simply pray.

The Sisters were able to bring out what was good and beautiful in us. I learned how to continue this in my life and in my relationships with my students. During my stay in the dormitory, I established very deep relationships and friendships that are still a source of strength in my life today.

When, many years later, I defended my doctoral thesis, I invited all the people who were important to me to the defense, and I couldn't imagine the Sisters not being present at that important moment. Finally, I would like to say that I am currently discerning whether the man I met is a good candidate for me as a husband. I would be very happy to bring him to the Sisters so that they can help me with this discernment.
SLOVENIA - Finding New Ways of Being SSND

By Sister Darija Krihn, SSND, Slovenian Province

It was in the year 1886 when the first SSNDs arrived in Slovenia in Šmihel by Novo Mesto. Even though at the beginning they were living in distressed circumstances, they immediately started their apostolate of education, first with deaf and speech-disabled children and then with kindergartens, elementary school and different programs for young women and language courses. Their educational work was prosperous and they opened subdivisions in different places. Our school complex with many educational possibilities was also opened in 1888 in Trnovo-Illirska Bistrica. Sisters were proud to be able to give education to so many children and young adults.

The Second World War completely changed this situation and brought anxieties and concerns to the Sisters and children in their educational institutions. Overnight or in a very short time, they had to leave their schools and almost all their belongings. Sisters from Šmihel were put in an old castle, without water and electricity. Our communist government had hoped that sooner or later they would die out. But no Sister died during that time. They were able to find apostolates in parishes. Since they were teachers, they were asked to teach catechism, lead church choirs, offer private music lessons, and serve as housekeepers in parish homes and in the bishop’s house. To earn a living, they also worked hard...
on the state’s agricultural cooperative and some were employees in state administration. Some of our Sisters were imprisoned for no reason by our communistic government. Intimidation was painful and after they were released, they never spoke of it, because threats were so terrible.

Sisters in Trnovo-Ilirska Bistrica were put in a small part of their big institution. They were allowed to take with them only some of their personal belongings. At that time, they experienced heavy insults from the same children they were educating because children were forced to turn against their teachers. People from the neighborhood were helping them in secret, bringing them food and other items. Despite humiliation, mistreatment and in secret settings, they continued to do their educational work. They also cultivated fields to have enough food. This remains our one and only place where Sisters have been living from the time of their first coming.

After our Slovenian independence in 1991, our confiscated properties were returned to us. Here, in Ilirska Bistrica, we have a retreat house called Mother Theresa’s Home. All ages come for retreat. Some are led by our Sisters; others are in cooperation with various religious. Some of our Sisters take part in our union of religious, others teach religion, serve in pastoral ministry in parishes, offer practical workshops for girls, work with Caritas, lead self-help groups, visit the elderly, etc.

And all of this is just to confirm our conviction that we are educators in all that we are; not being able to have our own schools, we educate in other areas of urgent need.
In 1948, the communist leadership of Hungary nationalised the teaching institutions. Under an agreement between the Hungarian Catholic Episcopate and Communist government in 1950, four monastic orders were allowed to operate under very strict state control in the Communist Hungary. From 1950 onwards, only two convents of the Hungarian Province of the SSND were allowed to house Sisters (only 49 Sisters), in a greatly reduced number, despite the fact that at that time 362 Hungarian Sisters belonged to the SSND. The former provincial leadership was forced to "dismiss" hundreds of Sisters.

In the autumn of 1989, communism was abolished in Hungary. In early 1990, diplomatic relations between Hungary and the Holy See were officially established. Our areas of ministry were expanded, several new convents were founded and some of our former institutions were reclaimed. The long-awaited freedom, however, caused disappointment to many of our fellow Sisters who had faithfully lived their vows outside the community of the Hungarian Province and now decided to return. Until 1948, our Sisters who were forced outside the religious community lived their religious life according to the old pre-Vatican II Rule, the guidelines and the old religious customs. The new organization of our renewed community life and ministries was based on You Are Sent and the directives of Vatican II, which they could accept only with reservations or not at all.

However, the change of regime was a challenge for our Sisters in the community, who lived in a very closed community under constant threat from the outside world. The opening that our two communities had to make was unthinkable for decades. Another aspect is that until 1989, students in our two high schools came from families with Christian values, many of whom would not have been admitted to public high schools because of their parents' political views. After the change of regime, a section of society showed great interest in Christian values and in religious education.

At the same time, however, during the years of communism, almost the entire generation grew up without encountering any form or demand for religious practice. More and more students were admitted to our institutions, enrolled by their parents solely for the sake of a good education although they lacked basic religious knowledge. These children (and their parents) had to be welcomed in new ways, with flexibility and patience.

We had to conquer our own "closedness." We also had to open ourselves to the world outside our schools, to people in the community, to people of other faiths and to people of no faith. We had to overcome our fears and mistrust so that we could cooperate with various ecclesial and secular, cultural, social and other organizations and institutions, so that we could serve those to whom God sends us.

The composition of our teaching staff has changed fundamentally: the number (proportion) of civil colleagues has increased significantly and we are slowly becoming a minority in our own institutions. We had to learn to work with non-religious colleagues based on mutual trust and appreciation. Until 1989, the Sisters in the religious community had been working exclusively with adolescents for decades, so we had to "reprogram" our thinking to serve preschool and elementary school children, and later young adults.

The historical events in our country and in our province constantly remind us of the words of You Are Sent: "Deep faith and high courage urged Mother Theresa to risk already meagre resources to satisfy needs wherever she was called. In her spirit we respond to God’s call expressed in our time." (YAS, C 24)
Sisters of the Bavarian Province Respond to Challenges Caused by the War in Ukraine

By Sister Annemarie Bernhard, SSND, Provincial Councilor, Bavarian Province

On February 24, 2022, the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops began.

Just a few days later, the first refugees arrived in Germany, mainly women and children. The men remained in the country as soldiers.

Housing had to be created quickly; some convents welcomed refugees into their homes. Fundraising and aid campaigns were launched everywhere.

The children suffered particularly from the situation. For them, the care and continuation of their education had to be organized.

A teacher from our Theresia-Gerhardinger-Gymnasium am Anger in Munich came into contact with a Ukrainian-German teacher who was willing to teach in our school with two colleagues. In a very short time, we were able to fill two classes with Ukrainian girls, ages 14 - 16. Language classes began immediately in German and English, but other less language-intensive subjects were also taught, such as art, sports, music.

Ukrainian children also came to our primary school and kindergarten, where they received special language support. For them, school meant a bit of security and normality after the traumatic experiences of war and flight.

The current situation reminds me of the Sisters' reports about the time after World War II. The Nazi government had banned all religious communities from teaching. Immediately after the end of the war, the School Sisters reopened their educational institutions, where many traumatized girls found a home again in the middle of bombed Munich. Former students remember this time with gratitude.

The Sisters and helpers who feed persons who are poor are also experiencing the changed situation caused by the war. Every day, between 40 and 70 people – homeless, poor, refugees – come to pick up a packed lunch. Clothing is also offered. The number of people seeking help has roughly doubled since the beginning of the war in 2022.

Like our Foundress, Mother Theresa of Jesus, and School Sisters throughout 190 years, Sisters are trying to respond to the current need in cooperation with many volunteers.
School Sisters of Notre Dame are in mission in 27 countries:

- Argentina • Austria • Belarus • Brazil • Canada •
  Czech Republic • England • Germany • Ghana • Guam •
  Honduras • Hungary • Italy • Japan •
  Kenya • Nigeria • Paraguay • Peru
- Poland • Puerto Rico • Romania • Serbia
- Sierra Leone • Slovenia • South Sudan • The Gambia
- United States of America

Transforming the world through education