

Pilgrims of Hope



In Mission 2025

Inside this issue...

Steadfast hope	3
Reflection on teaching as a pilgrimage at St. Francis Girls School, Kiptere, Kenya	4
The nun study: A prescription for hope	5
We are Pilgrims of Hope	6
Hope in religious education	7
Associates' covenant and commitments Hungarian Province	8
Global Education Commission	9
PPD Rumo Norte: 23 years promoting inclusion and opportunities	10
Nova Gorica and Gorizia European Capital of Culture 2025. Capital, not capitals	11
The Holy Doors at the four papal basilicas in Rome	12
Nine-Year-Novena in preparation for the 200-year anniversary of our congregation	13
Rooted in love, branching into the world: a reflection on the Cover Design	13



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School Sisters
of Notre Dame

Steadfast hope

by Sister M. Dominica Michalke, SSND, General Superior

The wonderful invitation to be pilgrims of hope given by Pope Francis for the Jubilee Year 2025 sounds challenging against the background of what is happening on our planet Earth: global warming without the necessary efforts to reduce our influence on the climate; wars and civil wars in many countries, often unknown to us; discrimination and exclusion of people due to religion, origin, gender, health, wealth, etc. politicians who seem to be incapable of leading their countries for the wellbeing of all, and much more.

There is so much that can diminish our hope if we look at the global reality. There is the danger to be discouraged and to turn away from all the distress. However, we listen to Jesus' words: "Don't be afraid, have courage, I have conquered the world." (John 16:33)

Reading the articles of this publication *In Mission* shows that it is possible to sow seeds of hope in our daily lives. I once read a story about "luck" that comes to my mind, and I change it to "hope."



Two children set out to search for hope. They walked the entire day and at night reached the house of a kind old man who invited them to stay overnight.

After supper the

children asked the old man if he could teach them about hope. The man brought them into another room with two small chairs and with a chain and a rope hanging down from the ceiling. "Here you may find the answer," the man said. The children sat in the room for a long time but did not know what the chain and the rope would tell them about hope.



Sister M. Dominica Michalke, SSND



The next day, the old man shared his wisdom with them: Many people look at hope and see hope as a chain. Many rings form the chain, and if one element is broken the entire chain is useless. So, if something happens in their lives, people lose hope because of one broken ring.

Other people see hope like a rope. It is formed by many threads, interwoven with one another. If one thread is weak or torn, there are still all the other threads that allow the rope to be used. So, if something happens to these people in their lives, they keep their hope because only one of many elements is damaged, but all the others remain.

Our community as School Sisters of Notre Dame is such a rope in our world, together with many other groups rooted in Christian values. Our rope can connect two ends, can give guidance or protect you from danger on the other side of the rope. Even with meager resources we hear the call to be prophetic witnesses of universal communion in our world today and walk the steps we are able to go.

See the rope – and live the hope!

Reflection on teaching as a pilgrimage at St. Francis Girls School, Kiptere, Kenya

by Sister Ruth Nyanchama Mose, SSND, Province of Africa

As a School Sister of Notre Dame, I describe my teaching experience at St. Francis Girls Junior and Senior Secondary School in Kiptere, Kenya, as a profound pilgrimage. This journey involves walking alongside young women, nurturing their development, and igniting hope for their future. Education at the school transcends mere knowledge transfer; it focuses on shaping character, fostering resilience, and instilling purpose.

Central to my approach is teaching with compassion, recognizing students' varied learning paces and multiple intelligences. Patience, offering extra support, simplifying concepts, and celebrating small victories are key principles. I strive to create a loving classroom haven where students feel safe, valued, and motivated. This environment encourages teamwork, peer teaching, mutual respect, and healthy competition, allowing students to push themselves without fear of failure, embodying the school patron St. Francis' adage about progressing from the necessary to the impossible.



Sister Ruth teaching

During challenges, I offer encouragement, framing failure as a stepping stone. I share personal stories of resilience and use the Ghanaian 'sankofa' symbol – a bird looking backward while moving forward – to teach students the importance of learning from the past to build a better future. Hope serves as their anchor.



Sister Ruth with students

I believe education extends beyond academics to character building. I encourage kindness, empathy, and conflict resolution, fostering bonds that extend beyond the classroom through group work and peer mentoring. Encouraging practices like reflection and gratitude help students appreciate life's blessings and build resilience. I also impart the crucial lessons of hard work and the urgency of time, urging students to live intentionally.

To conclude, this teaching pilgrimage has been transformative. Guiding students through struggles, celebrating their triumphs, and nurturing their hope reaffirms teaching as a sacred calling. It involves lighting the path for the next generation with love, patience, and faith in their potential to shape a brighter future for Kenya and the world.

The Nun Study: A prescription for hope

by Lauren Ciotti

Director of Communications, Atlantic-Midwest Province

In a quiet, brightly lit room at UT Health San Antonio, plastic containers holding 678 sacred specimens line the shelves. The specimens belong to 678 School Sisters of Notre Dame who donated their time, efforts, and, in the end, their very brains to support pioneering research studying Alzheimer's and related dementias that is still yielding insights nearly 40 years after it was begun.



Sisters Gabriel Mary and Norita

The Nun Study on Alzheimer's was launched in 1986 by researcher David Snowdon, PhD, who hoped to light the way toward what he called "a prescription for hope." Today, this study lives on in the lab of Margaret Flanagan, MD. Researchers continue to use these critically important data collected from convent archives, Sister interviews, medical reports, and the participants' brains in the effort to uncover new hope in the fight against Alzheimer's.

Discoveries made by the study include:

- **Cognitive resilience and neuropathology:** Analysis of donated brains showed that some participants had visual identifiers of disease but displayed absolutely no symptoms. This discovery showed that a certain amount of cognitive resilience to disease is possible despite the presence of Alzheimer's diagnostic markers.
- **Genotypes and dementia risk:** Researchers identified a specific gene that increases the likelihood of developing Alzheimer's disease, as well as a gene that may reduce the risk.
- **Early-life predictors of cognitive health:** Scientists have found that high idea density and grammatical complexity in young adulthood correlates with a lower risk of cognitive impairment in later life.
- **Comorbid neuropathologies and dementia risk:** Most cases of dementia involve the coexistence of several different pathologies. This suggests that multi-targeted therapeutic strategies may be an effective tool to combat disease.

New technologies in scientific research have brought new life and new hope to the study and its impact combatting the disease. Digital pathology and artificial intelligence are reshaping the study of Alzheimer's and related dementias and are providing researchers with the ability to make huge advancements in prevention, early onset diagnosis and personalized treatment for individuals suffering from cognitive decline.

(Continued on page 6)

The legacy continues through the Religious Orders Study

The School Sisters of Notre Dame are continuing the tradition of contributing to dementia research by serving as subjects for the Religious Orders Study being conducted at the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center at Rush University in Chicago. This study is finding that cognitive exercise, including social activities and learning new skills, has a protective effect on brain health and the onset of dementia, while negative psychological factors like anxiety and clinical depression are correlated with cognitive decline.

Even in death, our sisters who chose to participate in the Rush and Nun Studies continue to be educators and provide scientists and families with hope for treatment of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias.



We are Pilgrims of Hope

by Sister Beatriz Martinez-Garcia, SSND, former UN-NGO Representative and Tim Dewane, *Shalom* International Coordinator

"The virtue of hope is beautiful; it gives us so much strength to walk in life." These words from our beloved late Pope Francis, speaking at the General Audience on December 28, 2018, encapsulate the 30-year journey of the *Shalom* International Network animation since its founding.

Hope inspires and sustains not only our commitment to daily embrace *Shalom* as our way of life but also to be a *Laudato Si'* Congregation. We are delighted and inspired when we learn about the stories and testimonies given by our sisters, associates, and colleagues who are committed to protecting our Common Home through our *Shalom*/ UN-NGO Newsletter. Together, we strive to make social justice, peace, and the integrity of creation possible for ourselves in the present and for future generations.

March 21, 2025, became a milestone for our Congregation. Sisters and associates worldwide gathered via Zoom to commemorate, acknowledge, and honor Blessed Antonina Kratochwil, Patroness of the *Shalom* International Network, and 32 other SSNDs martyred during WWII. All of them were women of faith and hope whose lives and sacrifices can motivate us today as we strive for a just world.

The Call of the 25th General Chapter of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, encourages us to come before God willing to be changed; to accept our mission more intensely, and to respond to God's continuing call to mission. It is our hope that more new members, associates and colleagues join us in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Call of the 25th General Chapter is deeply rooted in the virtue of hope. As the late Pope Francis stated in his General Audience on December 11, 2024, "Hope is an active virtue that drives us to action." He urged us not only to have hope but also to radiate it.



Hope in religious education

by Sister Adrianna Modelska, SSND and Sister Chiara Burzynska, SSND, Polish Province

The Jubilee Year in the Church under the theme "Pilgrims of Hope" is for us a blessing from God. It shows us the direction in which we should go as a catechetical community of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Nowy Sącz - Poland. We are teaching religion in the public high schools. In this school year, in our didactic and educational work in various ways, we focused on the topic of hope. We aspired to awaken it in our students, open their hearts to God's gift of hope and encourage them to give hope to people they meet every day because some of them may not see the meaning of their lives.

Students of the 2nd class, using the method of visual notes, did a project "Being a sign of hope for others" during religion lessons. First, they visually presented the causes of the lack of hope in human life, and then they wondered where they could draw hope from and how they can give hope to others, helping them experience that their lives have value and meaning.



"Being a sign of hope for others" - visual note

As part of the religion lessons, Sister Chiara organized a meeting for her students with Mr. Grzegorz Czerwicki, who shared with them the story of his life described by him in the book "You are not sentenced". At the age of 19, he was sentenced for theft and spent 12 years in prison. While serving his sentence, he converted

and when he was released, he rebuilt his life. He currently runs a resocialization and prevention activity. During the meeting with the youth, Mr. Czerwicki discussed the topics of liberation from the mental prison, finding hope and meaning in the midst of difficulties, building good family relationships, the power of dreams and friendship with God. After the meeting, the students shared their conclusions which they came to after listening to the testimony of Mr. Czerwicki:

- You have to be in harmony with yourself to create relationships with others,
- You can overcome even the worst problems,
- You should not reach for drugs and stimulants,
- Never give up, you have to fight for your own life,
- Understanding and not judging another person "by their cover" is the most exceptional life lesson,
- It is worth surrounding yourself with good people, because they have a great influence on us,
- It is worth keeping hope.

We hope that the ongoing Jubilee Year will still bring even more good fruits and strengthen our hope, which we will be able to pass on to the next generation.



Meeting with Mr. Grzegorz Czerwicki

Associates' Covenant and Commitments

by Sister. M. Janka Kutas, SSND, Director of Associates,
Hungarian Province



Associate Membership of the Hungarian Province; Sisters Carolyn Anyega and Mary Kerber, General Councilors, were present at the gathering.

In our Hungarian Province, the process of organizing the Associate Program started in the early 2000s. After many years of preparation, it was such a great gift for us that in the summer of 2006, twelve women and men, married and single, like the first apostles, undertook to begin to build the community of Associate Membership in our Province through their covenant and their committed lives, living more intensely their baptismal commitment in the spirit of Blessed Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger.

Associates renew their commitment to the community from time to time (for 1 or 3 years), with a solemn ceremony of covenanting. It is a Liturgy celebrated together with the sisters of the Province in which we give gratitude for their commitment and fidelity. There is a common part of the covenant, whereby they strive to deepen their personal prayer life and recite the monthly prayer of the associates. This prayer was composed together by all the associates following joint discussions in the initial phases and is still prayed by all associates to this day. Depending on their own situation, age and state of life, they also make a personal commitment to the Holy Trinity, in which they pay deeper attention to an aspect of their lives, committing themselves either through action or prayer.

Relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the nourishing and sustaining power of the Eucharist, special attention is paid to the veneration of the Virgin Mary, our Mother, and to the service of those suffering from poverty.

This year, in the Jubilee Holy Year, 29 members renewed their commitment in the community and one new associate made her first covenant.



Sister M. Janka with an associate

We, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, have experienced on many occasions how faithfully the charisms of Mother Teresa are lived out by the grace of God in the daily life of the associates, where the Most Holy One has called them. We are deeply grateful for the grace of the Divine God working in us, which also encourages each of us to continue living faithfully our vows as School Sisters to our faithful God.

Global Education Commission

by Sister Mary Kerber, SSND, General Councilor

“We are educators in all we are and do.” This quotation from our Constitution, *You Are Sent*, expresses our way of being as School Sisters of Notre Dame. The 25th General Chapter called us to explore new avenues of collaboration as educators and asked the General Council to establish a Global Education Commission that will “give life to our educational vision for these times.”

Eighteen very diverse individuals from 12 countries, including sisters, associates and partners in mission, gathered in Rome from February 26 to March 4. Each came with her/his own experiences, expertise, wisdom and questions. They quickly bonded into a community of pilgrimage and hope

SSND wisdom figures, Sisters Miriam Jansen (deceased, June 2025) from the US, Karin Kuttner from Austria and Leeta Hammack in Paraguay, blessed the commission with inspiring sharing on their perspective as educators. The group spent time in a pilgrimage that began with the Holy Doors of Rome and reached out to the peripheries of Rome, as they reflected on an

educational vision for these times. They spent multiple moments of encounter with each other and explored the best direction for the commission to take that will give life to our educational charism. In the last days, the commission organized themselves into four working groups to address:

- the writing of our vision for these times,
- the methods and practices that are essential for the growing of our educational charism,
- conferences that will provide training and collaboration,
- global networking of our educational endeavors.

Associate Stephanie Savik wrote: *It brings me great joy to use my gifts and talents in giving life to the SSND's vision for transformative education in our global community. I am truly humbled to work with diverse representatives from across the congregation to prepare colleagues — who live the charism daily — for leadership in SSND educational ministries as a way to demonstrate God's love for all people.*



Global Education Commission in Rome

PPD Rumo Norte: 23 years promoting inclusion and opportunities

by Liziane Silva Hillesheim, Coordinator,
Province of Latin America and the Caribbean

For more than two decades, **PPD** (Project for People with Disabilities) named **Rumo Norte** — a social project of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND) — has been working in downtown Porto Alegre, RS – Brazil, offering free workshops focused on the development of people with disabilities. With a focus on inclusion, autonomy, and citizenship, the project transforms lives through education and care.

With approximately 20 workshops held each semester and around 300 people benefiting, including registered participants and occasional consultants, we strive to transform lives through welcoming and qualified care, provided by our multidisciplinary team composed of a social worker, psychologist, and educator.



Recently, the institution celebrated two important achievements that further expanded its social impact. The first was the support from the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Germany, which made possible the creation of a new vocational (technical) center. It offers free courses in customizing mugs and T-shirts, creating real opportunities for income generation and entry into the job market.

The second major achievement came with the sponsorship of the Dorina Nowill Foundation, from São Paulo. The support allowed for the acquisition of more than 300 accessibility items, as well as assistive technology equipment, such as canes and materials for Braille writing, directly benefiting the blind individuals served by the institution.



Receiving the visit of HP Company - Celebrating a new partnership, April 2025

Despite daily challenges, PPD Rumo Norte remains steadfast, driven by solidarity and a commitment to inclusion. Any progress is the result of the trust and support of those who believe in a fairer and more accessible world. Because together, we are stronger.



Custom mugs created at Rumo Norte – Mug Sublimation Workshop, May 2025

Nova Gorica and Gorizia European Capital of Culture 2025. Capital, not capitals

by Sister Darija Krhin, SSND, Slovenian Province

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is an honorary title awarded by the European Union every year to two cities from two Member States. The initiative aims to protect the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe, to celebrate the common cultural values of the peoples of Europe and to promote the contribution of culture to the long-term development of a city.

Awarding Gorizia in Italy and Nova Gorica in Slovenia this honorary title jointly therefore means enhancing the identity of two very complex cities, linked to three cultures: Slovenian, Italian, and Germanic.

The history of the creation of Nova Gorica is certainly an important part of the European Capital of Culture. Of course, Nova Gorica presents itself through the ECoC program as the youngest Slovenian city, being now only 78 years old (established in 1947), compared to the more than one thousand-year-old Gorizia (first mentioned in 1001).

It is logical, therefore, that the ECoC on the Slovenian side is inclined more towards the 20th century, even though it is true that Slovenians also historically shared Gorizia, being important co-formers of its social life over the centuries before WWI. Slovenia, after all, even gave it its name (Gorica, which means small hill with vines).

The two cities were divided until 2004 by a wall of steel mesh and concrete: an iron curtain, the product of a long and often tragic history. However, today this is only a memory in these two neighboring cities that look together to a future of collaboration and peace. This collaboration between Italy and Slovenia is an event that represents European values, and will go down in the history of all future European Capitals of Culture.



The cross-border relationship between the two cities is historically unique, a recognition, a symbol of European values and the belief that culture is a force that moves and builds the cross-border relationship between the two cities.

The ECoC project also involves the Church: Culture cannot exist without the Church, which constantly creates cultural events. It is important that Christians get involved in the events in different ways.



School Sisters of Notre Dame living in Gorizia

The Holy Doors at the four Papal Basilicas in Rome

by Sister Maria Iannuccillo, SSND, Congregational Communications Coordinator



St. Peter



St. John Lateran



St. Mary Major

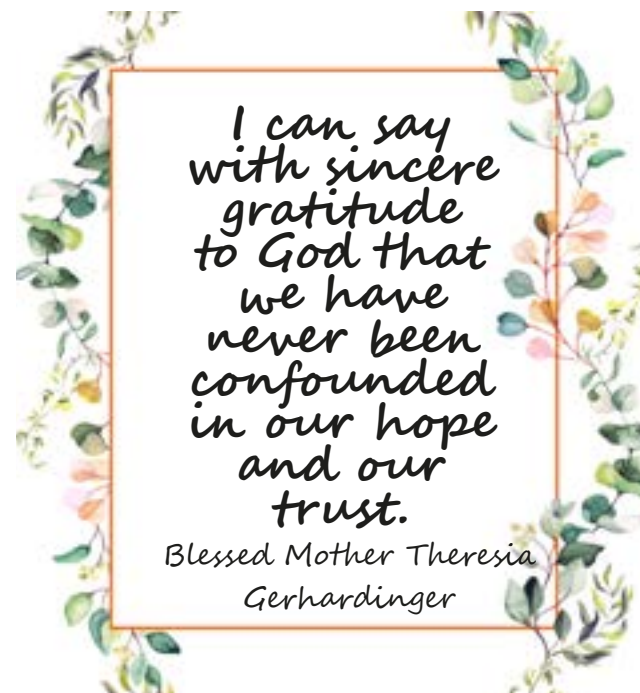


St. Paul Outside the Walls

During this Jubilee Year, in addition to the Holy Doors in Rome, pilgrimage places such as diocesan cathedrals or local holy doors have been designated throughout the world. Perhaps you made a pilgrimage to one or more pilgrimage places. We would like to hear from you...your name, location of the pilgrimage place and your reflection.

Please complete the survey by December 1, 2025. Responses will be shared on [Gerhardinger.org](https://www.gerhardinger.org) on December 8, 2025.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/HolyDoors>



Nine-Year Novena in preparation for the 200-year anniversary of our congregation



Last year, we began to pray the Nine-Year Novena in preparation for 2033, the 200-year anniversary of our congregation.

Sisters were invited to pray the Novena prayer once a week together. Two reflections about St. Augustine and about community life were published during the year, and in June, there was a congregation-wide faith sharing online. May our coming together in prayer and appreciating our sacred history strengthen our bond as SSND on a spiritual level and guide us into the future.

Rooted in love, branching into the world: a reflection on the cover design

by Sister Vera Nagy, SSND, Hungarian Province



Our School Sister charism is the heart, the heartbeat of the world: for educators, mothers, communities. I cannot imagine more beautiful than what our charism offers. The color of blood, heart, love is the golden point of image. The cross of our emblem opens and spreads hope everywhere, towards every direction.

"Surrexit Christus spes mea." In the wake of the Resurrection, the cross blossoms: hope is born from suffering.

Starting from the heart, everything is directed outward. Life springs from our charism: renewal, growth, development. The symbol of female existence is the tree, the root, the foliage, the shoot; but it is also a symbol of our centuries-old community and the organic development of our charism. All this becomes reality in the versatility and diversity of the world, the living world, and it also protects the created world with its embracing arms.



Alix LeClerc - ©Nondisolopane.it

For the second year, beginning October 24, 2025, the focus is on **Alix LeClerc**, foundress of the congregation that taught Mother Theresa as a girl in Stadthof, and on the part of our constitution on **prayer**. There will be a new prayer card,

Transforming the world through education



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



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