



This mandolin was used by Sr. St. Hilde Monnet of St. Joseph of Medaille. She taught music for 65 years across the Midwest. Other items shown here include a silver trowel, sewing tools for sandals and a typewriter and fillet to decorate book covers.



Various classroom items used by nuns include a bell, a clicker, textbooks, a ruler, a protractor and a compass.

Traveling Exhibit Showcases Catholic Sisters Meeting Needs

“Women & Spirit” Captures Women Religious’ Contributions Toward Health Care, Education and Social Justice

CINCINNATI — In 1996, when the Catholic Health Association produced the book and documentary *A Call to Care*, my only regret was that there was no accompanying exhibit. I firmly believed that the extraordinary contribution of women religious to our nation belonged in that consummate American museum, the Smithsonian. So it was with great delight that I learned last year that the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) was creating an exhibit about the contribution of Catholic sisters to the nation. Not only would the exhibit go to the Smithsonian, it would travel around the country. Hallelujah!

In June I went to Cincinnati to see “Women & Spirit” for myself. Four years in the making, the \$4 million project heralds the contributions of Catholic sisters to health care, social justice and education in the United States. It exceeded my wildest dreams. It’s big, it’s dramatic and it’s not to be missed. Perhaps that is to be expected, given that it was designed by Seruto & Company, the firm that also produced “Titanic: The Official Movie Tour”; “Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs” and “CSI: The Experience.”

The exhibit space is decidedly feminine and welcoming. The rounded display panels, combined with lots of open space, invite meandering from one module to the next, with large photographic images as drawing cards. Up close, the material is spellbinding. Stories, photographs, letters, artifacts, video, audio, and news footage

make the case that Catholic sisters’ contributions have been extraordinary. From the bloody battles of the Civil War to today’s battles on Capitol Hill, the sisters have been a presence and a voice for the hurting, the marginalized, the outcast.

Theirs was not a life for everyone. Not far from the entrance to the exhibit is this advertisement inviting young women to join the Presentation Sisters in the 1800s:

We offer you no salary, no recompense, no holidays; no pensions, but much hard work; a poor dwelling and few consolations; many disappointments; frequent sickness, a violent or lonely death.

Despite such assurances of hardship, hundreds of thousands of women became sisters in the



This sewing instruction manual designed by Sr. Mary Loretta Gately was part of the curriculum at Sisters of Providence schools throughout the Pacific Northwest in the early 1900s.



BY SUZY FARREN

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ALL PHOTOS BY BRYAN ERDMANN

EXHIBIT SHOWCASES CATHOLIC SISTERS

United States, and their stories are integral to the development of a nation. These seemingly ever-flexible women educated the nation's children and cared for the ailing, always with a special concern for those least able to help themselves. Example after example to the people of this nation shows that they built hospitals, orphanages or schools, cared for people during epi-

demics and natural disasters, or did what they could to meet the needs of the times.

Among the poignant stories is that of the New York Foundling Hospital. As the exhibit panel states: "On a fall night in 1869, three sisters found a baby girl on their doorstep. Sarah H became the first of several hundred thousand children cared for by the New York Foundling Hospital." It is estimated that 30,000 children were orphaned or abandoned on the streets of New York in the years that followed the Civil War. With \$5 and a donated building, the Sisters of Charity of New York opened their hospital. They placed a wicker basket on the porch, and a baby could be left there, no questions asked. Parents too numerous to count entrusted their babies to the sisters, often with desperate notes pleading for the sisters to care for the little one.

There's a heartbreaking 1878 telegram to Mother Odilia, a mother superior in St. Louis who sent sisters to Memphis during a yellow fever outbreak. Signed by a Fr. Aloysius, the telegram announces the death of one of the sisters and bears the news that three others had fallen ill. "Send no more sisters," the telegram begs. In spite of the plea, Mother Odilia did indeed send more sisters — not only to Memphis, but also to Canton, Miss., when the fever broke out there. In all, five sisters died. The oldest was just 28. The sisters went where they were needed, risking that the cost could be their lives.

Less dramatic but no less compelling is the Alzheimer's study of nearly 700 School Sisters of Notre Dame. By agreeing to be examined annually and to donate their brains at death, participants have contributed to a growing understanding of the causes of Alzheimer's disease. In one fascinating outcome, researchers determined that they were able to predict with 90 to 95 percent accuracy which sisters would develop Alzheimer's



This wicker basket was on the porch of New York Foundling Hospital for parents who decided to give up their babies for adoption.

HOW IT CAME TO BE

According to Sr. Helen Garvey, BVM, chair of the LCWR history committee that put the exhibit together, the idea for an exhibit was one of many generated by the LCWR membership to celebrate its 50th year. "It just rose to the top," she said. The first thing the committee did was approach the Smithsonian, which encouraged the group to have a "charrette." Sr. Helen had no idea what they were talking about, but

she quickly figured it out. At its most basic, a charrette is a meeting of designers to solve a design problem. In this case, it involved historians and media people who, over several days, roughed out a design for the exhibit.

The next step was finding material. LCWR asked every religious congregation in the nation for their five best artifacts, and a wealth of material was e-mailed in. Subsequently, the commit-

tee worked closely with archivists across the country.

Then there was the money issue. They had no money. But they weren't afraid to ask. Through a \$1 million grant from the Hilton Foundation, \$500,000 from CHA, and generous contributions from health systems, congregations and other donors, they raised \$4 million. "We have been blessed by generosity," Sr. Helen said.



The *Soul of DNA* by Dr. Jun Tsuji documents contributions to the discovery of DNA by the Sisters of Mercy in a Kansas hospital in the early 1900s. The mortar and pestle (replica) honor Sr. Xavier Hebert, America's first woman pharmacist and one of the first Ursuline sisters to arrive in America in 1727.

based on autobiographical essays they had written on entering the convent. The sisters' willingness to engage in such an intensive study adds another dimension to their gifts.

Many of the women showcased in the exhibit were familiar to me from *A Call to Care*:

- **Sr. Henriette DeLille**, an African-American who founded the Sisters of the Holy Family. At their Lafon Home, the sisters took in elderly slaves who had been cast out by their owners.

- **Rose Hawthorne Lathrop** (daughter of Nathaniel Hawthorne) who, after her husband died, founded a congregation — the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne — and a home for poor people with cancer. She never charged anyone for care.

- **Mother Marianne Cope**, a Franciscan nun who went from Syracuse, N.Y., all the way to Molokai, Hawaii, to care for lepers and stayed the rest of her life.

- **Mother Joseph Pariseau**, a Sister of Providence who “jumped the beams” (she actually jumped up and down on the beams to be sure they were strong) of the hospitals she built in the West (and whose statue stands in Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C.). Her trunk is surely one of the most striking of all the artifacts on display.

- **Sr. Mary Ignatia Gavin**, a Sister of Charity of St. Augustine who was among the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous.

- **Mother Alfred Moes**, a Franciscan sister who told Dr. Mayo and his sons that she would build a hospital if they would provide care. Their collaboration led to the founding of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

Although health care makes up a good portion of the exhibit, education and social justice are well represented. Among the sisters' many contributions in the educational realm was the founding of Xavier University of Alabama, the first Catholic college for African-Americans. So too the sisters educated women to become professionals long before women won the right to vote.

On the social justice front, photographs show sisters protesting segregation and the Vietnam War and marching in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. In a news clip from 1965, Sr. Antona Ebo, a Franciscan Sister of Mary and the sole African-American sister to march in Selma, Ala., with Martin Luther

King Jr., explains that she is there to bear witness as a Negro and as a nun. Pretty courageous stuff.

Certainly one of the strangest artifacts is the tiny wax infant Jesus figure carved by Mother Joseph. She sold these wax figures to raise funds for the Sisters of Providence. That it remained



In the winter of 1817-18, Mother Philippine Duchesne, a 48-year-old French sister of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, opened the first Society of the Sacred Heart in St. Charles, Mo. The Catholic Church declared her a saint in 1988.

intact all these years is a miracle. Another unusual artifact is a “plug” of tobacco from the medical bag used by Sr. Anthony O’Connell in the Civil War. She offered tobacco to wounded soldiers.

“Women & Spirit” is aptly named. To accomplish what they have, the sisters had to be spirited women. And of course it was their abounding faith in the Spirit that drew them to minister to others.

EXHIBIT SCHEDULE

May 16, 2009 – August 30, 2009

Grand Opening at The Cincinnati Museum Center (Cincinnati, Ohio)

September 2009 - December 2009

The Women’s Museum: An Institute for the Future (Dallas)

January 2010 – April 2010

S. Dillon Ripley Center at the Smithsonian (Washington, D.C.)

September 2010 – December 2010

Statue of Liberty National Monument/Ellis Island Immigration Museum (Liberty Island, N.Y.)

February 2011 – April 2011

Mississippi River Museum (Dubuque, Iowa)

Other sites are currently under consideration. Go to www.womenandspirit.org for more information.

In an introductory video near the entrance, a sister remarks: “As one of our founders used to say, ‘Just give me 12 women and we can make a difference.’” Well, make a difference, they have. As the exhibit reminds us, before women could legally own property, execute contracts or assume loans, women religious figured out that by incorporating themselves, they could do all of that. Sr. Blandina Segale (a Sister of Charity of Cincinnati who allegedly befriended Billy the Kid) summed it up well, describing herself as a “fit into any assignment sister.” The description seems appropriate for so many of the women showcased.

Near the end of the exhibit is a display called “The Core,” which shows contemporary sisters speaking about religious life in the 21st century. The video images — set against the vast backdrop of the wood panels — appear small by contrast, and the sisters look almost ghostly. The display seems to represent the morphing of Catholic sisters into their next phase. As an accompanying document observes: “This is not the end of the story, but the opening of a yet-to-be revealed chapter. ... Those living in this moment do not try to figure out what role they will play in history. They simply read the signs of the times and find ways to respond.” ■



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