

# The melting pot of providence

Exploring two centuries of Catholic sisters welcoming the stranger

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Correspondent

"It was June 7, 1876. As I stood on the dock to board the Scholten for New York, my heart was pounding and my legs were unsteady. I thought I might be spared the trip by losing my balance and tumbling over the side of the swaying gangway. But God had other plans for me. We pushed and pulled our valises onto the ship, and then the six of us turned for one last look at our beloved Germany. I could not have dreamed of the great adventures that lay ahead."

What lay ahead for the Sisters of Divine Providence — including Sister Francis Borgia Schröck, who chronicled the arduous transatlantic journey to America — and other Catholic sisters was ultimately a profound call of challenges and opportunities to minister to the overwhelming wave of European immigrants fleeing poverty, job shortages, political conflict and religious persecution in the mid-19th century. More than 15 women religious communities settled in western Pennsylvania as Pittsburgh was transforming into a melting pot of ethnic cultures and traditions.

Attracted by jobs in the steel mills and coal mines during an unprecedented industrial expansion, waves of immigrants settled in the region, arriving from Ireland, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Italy, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Serbia and other Euro-

pean countries. With courage and compassion, Catholic sisters responded to the overwhelming need in the region to educate and care for immigrant families, establishing a foundational and influential network of schools and hospitals.

Sisters of Mercy opened the first hospital in Pittsburgh on Jan. 1, 1847. When a typhoid epidemic afflicted the city a year later, 15 of the 19 immigrant patients admitted to the hospital with typhoid were restored to health, but four of the five young sisters died.

In 1865, the Sisters of St. Francis of Millvale established their hospital in Pittsburgh's Lawrenceville neighborhood to care for German immigrants. In 1875, the Sisters of the Humility of Mary opened a clinic for workers injured while building a nearby railroad that would connect Pittsburgh and Youngstown, Ohio. Likewise, the Sisters of St. Joseph helped care for injured steelworkers at St. Joseph Hospital, which they founded in 1904 on Pittsburgh's South Side.

Pioneering Catholic sisters — many of whom were immigrants themselves — were instrumental in caring for and educating tens of thousands of children of immigrant families in the region in schools and orphanages. Felician Sister Mary Cajetan, an innovative and resourceful teacher, wrote a textbook of lessons in Polish and English for elementary students in 1894.

A year later, nine Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth recalled how they traveled by train from Chicago "through the smoke and soot" to Pittsburgh to teach 900 children of Polish descent at St. Stanislaus Kostka parish school. Sisters also housed and hired immigrants to help them farm their lands to sustain them-

selves and those whom they served.

Through their presence, prayers and advocacy, Catholic sisters across western Pennsylvania continue today to minister to immigrants and refugees.

"Like all our sisters, past and present, my inspiration is the Gospel: feed the hungry, welcome the stranger ... My heart has been touched by the suffering of others," said Sister Elise Mora, of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God, who since the 1980s has ministered to Latinos through her advocacy, immigration services, and parish and prison work. Her community has a long history of reaching out to immigrants from Lithuania.

Responding to the increasing needs of Latino immigrants making their home in the Pittsburgh region, the Sisters of St. Joseph established Casa San José seven years ago as a multi-service resource and welcome center.

"I find within the Latino immigrant people a strength wrought of faith and suffering and a love of family that is richly powerful. This richness enters our lives when we welcome them," said St. Joseph Sister Janice Vanderneck, director of engagement for Casa San José.

A member of the School Sisters of St. Francis leads a monthly bilingual Communion service for unaccompanied minors who, while awaiting sponsorship in the United States, are being cared for in the Pittsburgh area. The School Sisters of St. Francis first arrived in Pittsburgh from Austria in 1913 to establish schools to educate the children of Eastern European immigrants.

In 2018, the Sisters of Divine Providence and Sisters of Charity of Nazareth began

a collaborative ministry to refugee families who have applied for asylum. The families served — most of whom are from African and Central American countries — are provided with safe housing, food, clothing, health care, transportation and assistance with cultural integration.

Carlow University, founded and run by the Sisters of Mercy, assists Muslim women and hosts prayer space for them in the University Commons. Mercy Corps volunteers also serve with the Pittsburgh-based refugee resettlement nonprofit Acculturation for Justice, Access and Peace Outreach.

Having first ministered to immigrants from Poland, the Sisters of the Holy Spirit later worked with Hmong, Cambodian and Vietnamese families, helping them to get jobs and gain citizenship. Today, they continue to work with several Vietnamese families.

Inspired to serve all of God's people with compassion, care and mercy, Catholic sisters — individually and collectively — continue the work of their founding sisters who, like them, are called to welcome the stranger.

In addition to working with immigrants and refugees, Catholic sisters in western Pennsylvania engage in various ministries and outreach serving children, families, the poor, elderly, the sick and others in need. Collaborative efforts include the establishment of Sisters Place, a supportive housing ministry for single-parent families, as well as advocacy for justice and peace. For information about Catholic Sisters Week, visit SistersOfWPA.org.

*Hecht is director of communications for the Sisters of St. Joseph in Baden.*



SUBMITTED PHOTO

**St. Joseph Sister Jeanette Bussen teaches an immigrant child in McAllen, Texas.**

## Prayer request

Catholic Sisters Week, which runs from March 8-14, shines a light on the spirituality, mission and community building of women religious. During this week, sister in western Pennsylvania are requesting prayers for immigrants and refugees — who have long been cared for, educated and sheltered by women religious.

**MIGRANT CHRIST PRAYER** by St. Joseph Sister Patti Rossi

Creator of the universe, as we observe the pathways of migration in various countries, at this historical moment, in your mercy grant us:

**A pure heart** to see the persons who are immigrants.

**A heart of love** to recognize them as our brothers and sisters.

**A humble heart** to hear their cry for freedom.

**A heart of generosity** that we offer sanctuary in our homeland.

**A heart of justice** to eliminate violence and oppression that causes unnecessary suffering.

**A heart of faith** to respect the dignity of the dear neighbor without distinction.

**A heart of compassion** to realize that we need each other to create a peaceful world.

**A heart of acceptance** as one holy, universal family.

Creator God, being in your presence, we ask to receive, we seek to find, we hope to discover that the pathways of migration will be paved with certainty, as we harbor all who seek refuge in our homeland and beyond. Under your guidance we can make a difference in the world. Amen.