Sisters Advocate for Asylum Seekers

“Whatever you did for one of these least ones of mine, you did for me.”
Matthew 25:40
Dear Friends of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur,

Our Lenten journey in 2023 is marked by our awareness and empathy for so many in our world who suffer loss and challenges in so many ways. As a community we are called to minister with those living in poverty, to bring the Goodness of God wherever we are, and to educate for life. The story of our Sisters in this issue of Good Works highlights the energetic and passionate response to many challenges of “those individuals and groups whose lives are being destroyed by systemic racism and tribalism and those forced to migrate across borders in search of life and hope.”

(CALLS General Chapter 2021)

We invite all our friends to join us in this passionate support for those impacted by enormous challenges to life and well-being as you read here about the ministries and people who rely on your good will and generosity. We see our charism and spirit animated and shared in work with migrants, with Indigenous Peoples, with organizations actively engaged in Justice and Peace initiatives, and in celebration of those who give their lives for the sake of others.

As always, we are grateful for your generous support of our Sisters and their good works, and we pray for you and all your intentions each day as well.

Gratefully,

Sr. Amarachi Grace Ezeonu, SNDdeN
Sr. Mary Johnson, SNDdeN
Sr. Lorraine Connell, SNDdeN
Sr. Evalyne Aseyo, SNDdeN
Sr. Miriam Montero, SNDdeN

Sr. Lorraine Connell, SNDdeN
Sr. Mary Johnson, SNDdeN
Sr. Miriam Montero, SNDdeN

Front Cover: At the Welcome Center in Phoenix, Arizona, Sisters Nancy Wellmeier and Judith Clemens, SNDdeN from the Ohio Province advocate for Asylum Seekers with our Sisters from Base Communities and East-West Provinces. They purchase, collect and bring food, clothing and special needs for people arriving from the borders!

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Sisters Advocate for Asylum Seekers

By Sisters Liane Delsuc, Loreta Jordan, Mary Alice McCabe, Meg Walsh, and Nancy Wellmeier, SNDdeN

When Bishop John Purcell invited the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (SNDdeN) to serve in his growing Cincinnati Diocese in 1840, it was because of his concern for the newly arrived immigrants, most of whom came from Germany. Since then, service to immigrants has been a constant in the ministry of the SNDdeN Ohio Province and has flourished for over 50 years in the Phoenix, AZ Diocese!

In recent years, innumerable individuals and families have sought asylum in the United States to escape violence, extortion, extreme poverty, political, religious and sexual persecution. Motivated by the spirit of St. Julie Billiart to serve the most abandoned, we hear today Pope Francis’s call urging “the faithful to consider the treatment of migrants, asking: Do we welcome them as brothers [and sisters], or do we exploit them?” Today, we do express the goodness of God in our service with asylum seekers.

Asylum Seekers Before Covid

In Arizona, before Covid interrupted group activities, small churches provided basic services of welcome, food, clothing and showers. They also helped to arrange Asylee’s transportation to their family members or sponsors. Sisters Olivia Pacheco and Nancy Wellmeier volunteered at three Protestant churches. Sisters Meg Walsh and Liane Delsuc were doing the same at St. Matthew’s Catholic Church and at a Methodist Church. At each place, once a week, a Department of Homeland Security bus drops off already vetted asylum-seekers to pursue their claim, while being sponsored by a relative or friend in the U.S.

In 2019, the International Rescue Committee established the Welcome Center in central Phoenix and enlisted the aid of an interfaith coalition of volunteers. Sisters Nancy, Olivia, Meg and Liane began volunteering there regularly.

Organizing Team for Volunteers from Three Provinces

As numbers of asylum seekers increased, the need for volunteers at the Welcome Center also grew. SNDdeN initiated a project to invite Sisters from across the U.S. to serve for short terms of two to four weeks. Sisters Liane, Meg and Nancy along with Sisters Loreta Jordan and Mary Alice McCabe became the organizing team from our three U.S. Provinces. Given their passion to serve migrating peoples, they presented the project to the Ohio Province Leadership who were very supportive of this expanded immigrant ministry. In fact, all three U.S. Provinces supported the effort to serve asylum seekers, providing together the financial support for transportation, room and board for Sisters who would live in the Habitat for Humanity community in South Phoenix with Sisters Meg and Liane. They later extended the invitation for volunteers to Associates, SNDdeN staff members, Sisters of other Congregations, family members and friends.

Sr. Nancy Wellmeir organized and taught English for many years to immigrants in Arizona. Her ability and experience have been valuable at the Welcome Center.
Mission to Educate and Advocate

Multiplying hands for the Welcome Center was only one objective: a second was that volunteers would return home with a mission to educate others with accurate facts regarding the “invasion” at the border and to advocate with legislators for comprehensive immigration reform. The reality of global migration has been hopeful at the Welcome Center as people arrive from Russia, Georgia, India, Bangladesh, Central and South America after harrowing journeys.

December 2021 through 2022

Fifteen Sisters of Notre Dame, five former Sisters, two Sisters of another Congregation and four friends travelled to Phoenix to offer service at the Welcome Center.

- Volunteers joined Sister Nancy as she greeted new asylum seekers and provided sandwiches and drinks for hungry travelers.
- Others guided the asylum seekers as they chose one new set of clothing.
- Liane managed the schedule for the showers.
- Volunteers helped Sister Meg pick up and serve the dinner provided by St. Vincent de Paul Society.
- Volunteers also spent mornings at the Habitat Community in washing towels to be returned the next day to the Welcome Center.

Habitat Community

The Habitat Community provides a “home” for our volunteers, and experience of community with prayer and reflection on the reality of immigration. Volunteers share experiences in monthly newsletters, designed by Sr. Terry Davis. Some Sisters and Associates participate in this mission by sending handmade scarves and hats as well as care packages of needed items. Others give financial donations to cover clothing and hygiene items provided at the showers.

The sense that we are all in this together has been quite inspiring! St. Julie is surely proud of the Mission of her daughters:

As we work for justice and peace today, we hold in our hearts... those peoples forced to migrate across borders in search of life and hope.

(CALLS 18th General Chapter 2021 ~ page 1)

We invite you to volunteer or to contribute in any way to this ministry and by contacting: maryalicemccabe@yahoo.com.br
Ministry to Indigenous Peoples in Brazil
By Sister Rebeca Spires, SNDdeN

“I live the life that I love and love the life that I live.”

For more than 50 years, this sentiment has held true for me. What a life it has been! Initially, we emphasized organizing tenant farmers in Maranhão and later we helped migrants to seek land in Pará. With the creation of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) and the Indian Mission Council (CIMI), Sr. Dorothy Stang became representative of the diocese in the CPT and I in the CIMI. Dorothy followed the people migrating west, and I went to the Indigenous People in the north. 

Mission of Evangelization

In the orientation for CIMI members, leaders reminded us that we are not taking Jesus to the people. He is already with them. Our mission of evangelization is to be the Good News and, together with the people, to transform the situations of violence and great need which the people suffer. Guided by the people, with them and in their way and in their language, and respecting their customs, we learn to pray and dance with them.

Working with Missionaries and Indians

The peoples’ request was for a written version of a general language spoken by several different peoples so that the children could learn to read first in their own language. A team composed of ten young people who had knowledge of both general and particular languages became the pre-school teachers. Then those who could came for three to four months a year, and lived in the parish center for very intense study. After five years, nineteen teachers staffed the first classes of elementary school. Every year, we had workshops for the teachers with the help of fine professionals. By the turn of the century in 2000, they formed an organization of Indigenous teachers. Today the schools have almost all indigenous teachers and principals. Many of them have finished basic university and are engaged in graduate studies. Some are becoming doctors, nurses, lawyers.

Spirituality and Celebrations

The Indigenous Peoples are deeply spiritual, in tune with the world around them. As long-time Catholics, they celebrate all feast days, with sung litanies, dancing, and sharing a meal. Together we created celebrations of the Sacraments, the Word and the Eucharist with language, music, gestures, familiar to each group. We studied the Bible and immediately saw the relationship to the myths and stories of the people. Their culture of sharing, caring for and living in harmony with one another is clearly what Jesus taught. Therefore, they feel their worth, embrace and energetically struggle for their God given rights. Some would say that what we are doing is “…just social and political; religious should just preach the Gospel”. However, the social and political aspects are mandates of the Gospel. This way of Mission all over the Americas resulted in a continental surge of “Indian Theology”, initiated by native Christian clergy, religious and theologians who meet periodically to share their vision, to develop theology from the Christian and Indigenous base, in Synodality.
Human Rights and Earth Rights

Everything is interconnected, as Pope Francis reminds us in *Laudato Si*. A good part of the work among the Indians is getting correct and reliable information to them. Now as fake news flourishes, as well as many incentives to work for self instead of the common good, we have turned to publishing various kinds of newsletters and study sheets on politics, theology, Bible, didactic practices, sacraments, and personal growth. We also have a weekly radio program focusing on their situation that broadcasts in almost every state of Brazil. We are now online with a site: www.mensageiroonline.org.br.

Defending the rights of people, the Earth and all the creatures, involves risks, but these are gladly taken, for it is well worth the effort, the cost and the risk. And it is part of what Jesus said from the start.

SNDdeN in Brazil

Through the years, as Sisters have come to Brazil, Notre Dame has been active in six states of the north and northeast, in both rural and urban mission activities. As we strive to be, bold, passionate, and compassionate, we also insist, persist, resist, and never desist in our Mission to announce the Good News and denounce the evils which are destroying our Mother Earth and her children. This Mission is a joint effort with so many who labor and struggle for a world of justice, equality, love and harmony, not counting the cost even should it lead to a violent death.

It is wonderful, beautiful, and grace-filled. You can join us by being here with us, by supporting us with your prayer and/or donation, and by telling others about what and why we do this Mission.

We are all missionaries; we are in this together today and always.
The Africa Faith and Justice Network ~ Forty Years Strong!

By Sisters Maura Browne and Eucharia Madueke, SNDdeN

“When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.”

Dom Helder Camara: Essential Writings

The Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN) is a vital organization founded by U.S. Catholic missionaries who had served in Africa. In October 1983, they met in Baltimore, MD to reflect on the teachings of Vatican Council II, and this led them to ask such questions as, “Why do many people in Africa have no food?” and “What can we do about it?” Their consideration of these questions in light of Gospel values led to the realization that the only way to work for justice would be to establish a structure for fostering just relations between the United State and Africa. Thus, AFJN was born.

In October 2023, the U.S.A.-based AFJN will celebrate its 40th Anniversary of advocacy for social justice in Africa. This event will take place in Washington, DC. Through virtual access to the event, peoples in Africa and around the world will be able to join in the celebration. We believe that St. Julie Billiart, Foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (SNDdeN), would lend her full support to this endeavor. She told her Sisters:

“You must have hearts as wide as the world.”

We know that hearts are for love and love means willingness to change for the benefit of the other, to work with and not only for others. This is why so many SNDdeN have participated in AFJN for these many years.

Today, Sr. Eucharia Madueke serves as the AFJN Women’s Empowerment Coordinator while Sr. Maura Browne works on the AFJN Board as Vice President. From its very beginnings, SNDdeN have been involved in AFJN. Sr. Ann Gormly served on the first Board; Sr. Maura Browne worked for 13 years as Associate and then Executive Director; Sr. Frederica Jacob traveled between Africa and the AFJN in the United States as an advocate; Sisters Mary Margaret and Patricia Chappell served in policy positions. Opportunities for joint advocacy with the Africa/Europe Faith and Justice Network (AEFJN) were made possible through the contributions of Sr. Margaret Clark (Britain) and Sr. Marie Rose Lepers (Belgium). In later years, Sisters Claudine Dumbi and Isabelle Izika (both from the Democratic Republic of Congo) and Eucharia Madueke (Nigeria) offered presentations on African issues at AFJN events.
Women’s Empowerment Project

For the past seven years, as Coordinator of this Women’s Empowerment Project, Sr. Eucharia has worked with Catholic Sisters in seven African Countries: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Nigeria, Shana, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. She provides training in contextual social analysis and advocacy, enabling them to engage effectively against the unjust structures that keep people, especially women and children, in poverty and deprive them of their dignity as God’s children. She accompanies them as they develop and deepen their analytic abilities and advocacy skills while building coalitions of Sisters across religious communities.

The Women’s Empowerment Project has increased the presence of African Sisters in the public square, as more and more realize how important advocacy is to changing unjust structures. Sisters are using their advocacy skills to engage governments, traditional leaders, and policy makers in their various countries. They campaign against all forms of violence against women and children, human trafficking, drug abuse, ritual killings, cultism, domestic servitude, early and forced marriage, as well as other injustices.

Developing relationships with government ministries, policy makers and local communities has helped Sisters to tackle issues of injustice where they see them in their communities:

- **In Tanzania, Sisters** worked with the local community of Muyimbi to regain the only community source of water confiscated by a multinational agribusiness there.
- **In Uganda and Nigeria, Sisters** created a forum for government ministries to meet and set national strategies in the fight against human trafficking, illegal drug use, cultism and ritual killings.
- **In Nigeria, Sisters** influenced the initiation and adoption of Edo State Anti-trafficking law. Their advocacy in Nigeria led to the practical implementation of the Child Rights Act in Enugu State.
- **In Zambia, Sisters** have generated a national awareness of human trafficking, the arrest of dozens of human traffickers, and the rescue of hundreds of victims. The Vice President has acknowledged the advocacy efforts of the Sisters and their advocacy letter was placed on a government website.

AFJN still has work to do, but the progress that has been made in promoting just relations between Africa and the United States, and in improving people’s lives has been substantial. The future is hopeful. Your support and good wishes are essential to our efforts in supporting justice issues and making credible and visible the goodness of God to and with the African people.

Happy 40th Anniversary AFJN!

May you continue your good work well into the future!
Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN: “Presente!”

By Sister Judith Clemens, SNDdeN

At Sr. Dorothy’s burial a friend and farm worker exclaimed: “Dorothy is not buried today, she is planted to bear fruit.”

Reflection of a Friend

Remembrances circulated about Sr. Dorothy Stang on this eighteenth year of her martyrdom in Brazil on February 12, 2005. Sr. Joan Krimm, Dorothy’s best friend, reflected on why Dorothy’s legacy lives on:

“On the afternoon before her assassination, Sr. Dorothy sat on a fallen tree with her two assassins explaining to them what the community of Esperança was all about. She invited them to join the community. Then, as they parted, she blessed them and wished them a pleasant evening.

Sr. Dorothy knew they were going to kill her, so why did she spend time talking with them? Dorothy truly believed that no matter how evil a person seemed to be, deep within that person was goodness. If that goodness could just be touched, the person could change. Living this belief throughout her life, Sr. Dorothy treated each person she met, friend or enemy, with love, compassion and dignity. She may not have liked what a person did, but she always looked for the goodness within.”

Celebration in Springfield, Ohio

Many celebrations of Sr. Dorothy and her legacy are happening this year, as usual, in large venues as well as in small worship communities. One such event took place, as it has for 18 years, at St. Raphael/St. Joseph Parish in Springfield, Ohio. Parish support for Sr. Dorothy’s ministry began many years before her death. It is no accident that São Rafael is also the name of the ministry center in Anapu, Pará, Brazil!

This year’s event at St. Raphael/St. Joseph Parish was the first time since the Covid pandemic that the parish was able to welcome the people to an in-person gathering. The pastor described St. Raphael/St. Joseph Parish as a Laudato Si community, so much in sync with Pope Francis’ Encyclical. In the parish, a creative Pastoral Associate, Katie Sahle is a real blessing. She shares and showcases monthly in the narthex of the church the art exhibits from the parishioners and students from the local Catholic high school. To serve pizza at the exhibition always helps bring success to these projects.

For February 12, 2023, the Beatitudes hung above the entrance to the parish hall. The gathering opened with a special blessing. Around the hall were informational stations about Sr. Dorothy, from current postings on the Ohio Province Website. Katie thought that the station about the owl named for Dorothy was the best attraction. So, owl-shaped cookies were available and decorated by the children in attendance.

SNDdeN Presence and Sr. Dorothy’s Legacy

Sisters Joan Krimm, JoAnn Depweg and Judith Clemens accepted the invitation to join the parish via Zoom and to share stories about their own religious vocations, their community experience with Sr. Dorothy in Coroatá, Maranhão and how her legacy continues to speak to our world today.

Sr. Dorothy’s focus was her mission to the people and their cry for justice. This call found its home in her deep spirituality and ever-evolving relationship with God. She never worried about herself. When she is remembered as an environmentalist it is important to ask WHY.
Sr. Dorothy had a deep love of God and God’s creation. She was passionate about all that God created. Her integrity calls us to the same mission today, as we become Laudato Si communities. 

Sr. Dorothy’s love of her good God revealed itself in her belief in the goodness of everyone she met. Dorothy addressed each in the same manner: her beloved peasant communities of family farmers and also the two men who would kill her the next day. She challenged everyone to touch into goodness. Sr. Dorothy is a martyr and not a victim of murder. A victim’s life is taken away; Sr. Dorothy gave her life as she held her Bible and recited the Beatitudes, proclaiming the saving love of God.

Ongoing Projects

Sr. Dorothy's story continues to attract a wide variety of researchers to learn about her and her legacy. A couple of years ago a young Notre Dame University student asked to learn more about Sr. Dorothy for a theology research paper. She challenged Pope Francis not to engage in the full process for canonization for Sr. Dorothy because young people show an urgency to know the lives of modern-day saints. A Southern California theatre writer and director is working on a novel inspired by her story. He had never heard of Sr. Dorothy, but viewing a video where she is mentioned briefly, he felt called to know more. For his initial research, he used search engines and found much information online and that brought him to contact Sisters Joan and Judith. Through a series of Zoom calls, the Sisters shared more about Sr. Dorothy with him and eventually he forwarded a draft of his novel for input and ideas. He is now in the phase of seeking a publisher.

Who knows where Sr. Dorothy’s legacy will touch hearts tomorrow?
Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

SNDdeN Mission

Sisters of Notre Dame, women with hearts as wide as the world, make known God’s goodness and love, with and among people living in poverty, through a Gospel way of life, community and prayer.

Continuing a strong educational tradition, we take our stand with people living in poverty, especially women and children, in the most abandoned places.

Each of us commits her one and only life to work with others to create justice and peace for all.

The expression of St. Julie Billiart, “How good is the good God!” showed her special gift of unique trust in God. Today Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur on five continents make known God’s goodness.

Africa
Democratic Republic of Congo
Congo Brazzaville

Asia
Japan

Europe
Belgium
France
Italy
United Kingdom

Latin America
Brazil
Peru

North America
United States
(21 states and the District of Columbia)

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- Share in our hope
- Rejoice in God’s goodness

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