

Sister Charla Commins, CSJ, presented the following reflections on June 30, 2013, during the Liturgy, commemorating the 50th Anniversary of St. Joseph's Provincial House.



We are gathered here today to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the dedication of the Sisters of St. Joseph's Provincial House. Each of us is here because of some unique bond we have with this place and this religious community. Some of us moved here from the Seminary in Troy; some came from the interim postulate and novitiate in Albany, affectionately known as "741." Some of us entered here; some have ministered here throughout the years while others of us have retired from active ministry here, and here in this house, our home, our ill and infirm Sisters are cared for with compassion. Additionally, scores of our late colleagues, families and friends were intricately involved with the planning, execution and building of the Provincial House, and as such, will always be part of our history as are those many lay people who are integral to the operation of the House today.

In 1956, Mother Helen Patricia Delaney was advised to begin to plan for a move from the Seminary in Troy, our province headquarters since 1908. The community's needs for growing, and because of the proximity to RPI, there was little room to expand. That was the beginning of the sisters' departure from years of familiarity, of history, of community culture, to journey uncharted paths into the unknown. Like Zephaniah of the first reading, the CSJ Community was entering a significant period of transition. "Do not fear, O Zion, let not your hand grow weak; the Lord the Lord your God is in your midst. He will renew you with his love." Be assured the many hands of the Sisters did not grow weak. It was, indeed, a cross-over moment in the life of the community. The inspired wisdom and foresight of the leadership of that time moved us to sacrifice our certainties, to put down what seemed so right for so long to risk and imagine something else, somewhere else, could be right, too. Mother Helen Patricia, Mother Athanasia and so many like Zephaniah became catalysts for sweeping change that came with the move and with the dramatic effects of the Second Vatican Council on religious communities and the Church throughout the world.

The Provincial House took three years to build. Permission was sought and granted from Rome to borrow the necessary funds, as a 20-year loan not a mortgage from the State Bank of Albany. Additionally, the Diocese of Syracuse agreed to assess parishes where our sisters ministered to help defray the costs and to assure that this magnificent chapel could be built. The Fathers and Friends Organization held annual sales and bazaars from 1962 to 1968 to help repay our outstanding loans. The 20-year loan was repaid in five years.

Behind the scenes, the sisters were busy, engaging in their own creative financing. The original plans called for 369 bedrooms, 150 for postulants and novices. A "Green-Stamp" drive was organized to purchase all the lamps in the sleeping areas. Pepsi caps were collected in schools and parishes and redeemed to buy the library furnishings. A group of talented sister seamstresses made all of the drapes used throughout the building, using one mile of material. We postulants, I remember well, were the lucky ironers in preparation for hanging. At the time of its installation, the mosaic was the largest in the United States when it was completed. Mother Athanasia thought the face of Christ was too mournful. When requested, the artist changed many pieces of the mosaic to render the more joyful expression we see today. There are so many more anecdotes recorded by our beloved Sister Margaret Patricia Hogan to preserve the history of the early days

The Provincial House is not a shrine, a monastery, an institution. Religious life in this congregation was built on the unshakable faith of our founders and their descendants in the generations that followed. The

building is more than simply a structure of walls and roof. Fill it with Sisters, with community, with the dear neighbor, then as St. Paul writes in Ephesians, "We are fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God with Jesus Christ himself is the cornerstone." It is a place where an affective relationship with Christ and the people of God is nurtured, fostered and sustained. It is for many the place that grounds our lives, the place where many cherished moments of human experience unfold. Here we celebrate, and we mourn; we come together as we do today to cherish the past and to explore the future, where we continue to be "built together into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit." It is the place, post-Vatican II, where we were challenged to wrestle with our faith, to appropriate it in an adult fashion at community gatherings, retreats and in contemplative prayer.

But what of the present? The years have seen many changes in religious life and in this house. What has not changed is the call of the Sisters of St. Joseph to bring God's unifying love to the world in a spirit of hospitality and reconciliation. Our early ministries of education and health care have expanded to serve the dear neighbor as spiritual directors, social workers, parish ministers, parish-life directors, campus ministers, agency administrators and a myriad of other ways of serving as we discern God's voice in community and in our Church.

Today's Gospel reminds us that we "are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden." The Provincial House of 50 years ago gave light to the neighborhood then and continues to this day. It houses, in addition to the administrative offices of the community, the Carondelet Music Center, Bright Horizons, an adult daycare center, the Carondelet Hospitality Center, a meeting place for so many organizations and a venue for theological updating and renewal. Deacons and healthcare professionals, diocesan groups and many nonprofit organizations come often to share the peaceful, sacred space the House affords. The lamp of the charism of the Sisters of St. Joseph has not been put under a bushel basket but continues to shine from generation to generation.

There are some wonderful pictures of those early days of building displayed throughout the house today. One picture, in particular, is of 20 or 30 sisters swathed in the black-and-white of the traditional habit, walking up the hill to join the bishops and other notables for the groundbreaking. The image might speak to many of us of meek, retiring, prayerful women, all of which was true. However, Mother Athanasia and her team were women of action and perseverance who dealt astutely with accountants, lawyers, architects, contractors, etc. Those characteristics live on today. We have only to look across the road to see the fruition of the past decade of dreaming, planning, risk taking, resulting in the building of Shaker Pointe at Carondelet, responding once again to the needs of the neighborhood, as well as the future of this CSJ Community.

Today we stand proud. We celebrate the legacy of Matthew's mandate to shine our light before all, so that they may see goodness in our acts and give praise to our heavenly Father. We are grateful for the many women on whose shoulders we stand, whose witness to Gospel living through the years inspired us then as it does now. We also give thanks for all of you who have been companions on the journey. We live in difficult times, times of upheaval, of uncertainty, of complex moral and social questions. Together we need to keep searching for ways to live lives of faith and to share that faith and its meanings creatively with one another. Together, all of us yearn for what is life-giving, what fills our hearts with the love of Christ and one another.

We are once again at a crossover moment in the life of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, a time of futuring, of redesign, a time of "making something new." What that will unfold to be is still mystery. To quote William Shakespeare's **Macbeth**, "If in looking into the seeds of time, you can tell which grains will grow and which will not, then speak." The journey continues.