Columns
Religious Life



Mother Caroline's grave in the cemetery of Notre Dame of Elm Grove in Elm Grove, Wisconsin. Author Jane Marie Bradish visited the grave during an open house as the sisters prepare to vacate the space. (Jane Marie Bradish)



by Jane Marie Bradish

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I entered the School Sisters of St. Francis shortly after the seven provinces in the United States merged to become one. In a sense it was the beginning of coming full circle. We had been one province at our foundation and then broke into several provinces as the sisters spread throughout the world, and local leadership made the most sense. Shifting demographics and modern technology now negate the need for as many separate groups, freeing up both personnel and resources for mission.

Since I entered, we have been merging, transferring, closing and selling institutions. I can be sentimental, sometimes more than I like to admit, and while I mourned each transition, I also looked for the blessings. Some long-cherished ministries have grown and thrived "without" us. Some of our former buildings have new life and new ministries for new groups (the former aspirancy building, for example, became a Jesuit-sponsored middle school). I really try to see the changes as a birthing process instead of a dying process.

So imagine my surprise when I felt the need to participate in the farewell gathering for a province house of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (note the name similarity, more on that later). A sunny Sunday afternoon found me taking the short drive to Elm Grove, Wisconsin, to attend the open house for the village as the sisters prepare to vacate the space and move into a new intergenerational construction on the campus of their sponsored university.

As it has for so many of us, the old building has outlived its usefulness. It's big — giant really — with lots of stairs and twists and turns in narrow hallways. Remodeling would be out of the question, both practically and financially. And there simply isn't a need for a space that big anymore. Our foundational property was the same: it was deconstructed and recycled and the property sold. Similar plans are in the works for Elm Grove.



The grape arbor at Notre Dame of Elm Grove in Elm Grove, Wisconsin (Jane Marie Bradish)

The School Sisters of Notre Dame who know me and saw me at the open house thanked me for coming to support this transition. I readily admitted I was there for them as well as for "us." You see, early in our School Sister of St. Francis history, we were taken in by Mother Caroline, the Notre Dame foundress for the United States. There are stories and legends about her taking us in and repeatedly sending us out via horse and buggy as we looked to find somewhere to put down our roots. She

even "gave us" postulants as our community started. Legend has it our way of saying thanks was to take the School Sister part of their name and incorporate it into ours.

I have no idea how much of those early stories are true and — if true — how much they may have been embellished. Early community history is often pieced together based on correspondence and usually concerned immediate needs instead of historical details. In the early days, both of our congregations were large and somewhat in competition with each other; that affects the recall of history, too.

I wandered around the part of the building known as the "castle" very quietly and reflectively. For me it wasn't about sightseeing, it was about acknowledging and honoring the long history of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Elm Grove. I thought of the hundreds and hundreds of women who lived and worked there. The many, unknown to me, who have been touched by the presence and ministry of the School Sisters of Notre Dame over lifetimes.

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I walked through the grape arbor and to the cemetery. I stopped at the grave of Mother Caroline. I talked to her, thanking her for giving us our start. That's all I know about her, and it is enough. I found the grave of Mary Luke, whom I only knew in retirement; she died in early 2021 just months shy of her 98th birthday. When my dad died, we discovered her grandparents are buried in dad's hometown cemetery. It's very possible we are related, albeit very distantly. I thanked Mary Luke too. She would send me articles she determined I needed to read and I reciprocated by sending her Peeps, her favorite sugary marshmallow treat. We knew very little about each other, but somehow we connected and remain so.

From my perspective the world is more divided now than it has been in some time. Politics: Democrat vs. Republican. Religion: conservative vs liberal. COVID-19: vaccinated vs against the coronavirus vaccine. The list could go on. It's easy to get trapped in that. I'm making a conscious effort to look for connection and unity instead of division. The School Sisters of Notre Dame and School Sisters of St. Francis may have been rivals once upon a time, but neither community started that way and we aren't that way now. As a matter of fact, the two communities jointly

built a memory care facility where the two groups live together as one. The most touching piece of that reality for me is that they celebrate feast days for both groups.

I consider it a great honor to have shared in their celebration of "next steps" as they step away from Elm Grove. My question for all of us is something along the lines of, "*Who gave you your start?*" Personally, professionally, congregationally, whatever. And maybe more importantly, "*How do you thank or honor them?*" And finally, "*Who will you help start?*"

Mother Caroline and School Sisters of Notre Dame worldwide, thank you. I can only hope to follow your example.

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