Columns
Religious Life



Guests at the Springfield Sisters' Armchair Tour, held during National Vocation Awareness Week on Nov. 7, 2024, enjoyed pie and listened to stories. The event, hosted by the Ursuline Sisters of the Roman Union, the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis, and the Dominican Sisters of Springfield, Illinois, highlighted the vibrant future of Catholic sisters, built on warm connections, their witness and their response to the Gospel. (Courtesy of Beth Murphy)



by Beth Murphy

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We gathered. We told stories. We ate pie.

These simple actions were the heart of the Springfield Sisters' Armchair Tour, a unique collaborative event during National Vocation Awareness Week, hosted by the Ursuline Sisters of the Roman Union, the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis, and the Dominican Sisters of Springfield, Illinois. In the midst of the evening, three powerful lessons emerged:

- People are hungry for connection — and pie!
- We stand on the shoulders of women who continue to uphold and inspire us.
- Consecrated women will continue to love, challenge and shape the church's future.

As communications and vocations staff from these congregations met virtually to plan the event, none of us could have anticipated the profound experience that unfolded on Nov. 7, 2024. What began as a storytelling evening turned into a powerful reminder of our shared mission and the vibrant future of religious life.

From the start, we knew that we wanted to share stories of how our congregations arrived in Springfield, remind our guests about the impact of our presence in the city, and speak to them honestly and with hope about the future of religious life.

Despite all our planning, including producing three introductory videos available here, the secret to this inspirational evening was our guests. Their enthusiastic participation, laughter, and joy reminded us that our vocation is — as we say in our congregational tagline — "For the life of the world." As consecrated religious women, our vocation is one among many in the church, all of which are needed to fulfill God's mission that is a leaven for good in a world that often seems to be spinning out of control.

That night, we welcomed more than 160 people from all walks of life, including friends, associates, former students, colleagues, civil servants, retirees and young people. Among them was a 17-year-old who feels drawn to religious life, who begged her mom to drive her in from the exurbs so she could be with us.

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The evening was both hopeful and inspiring, confirming my belief that Catholic sisters have a vibrant future, built on the warmth of our connections with people, the witness of our lives, and our prophetic response to the call of the Gospel.

Our emcee, Sara Wojcicki Jimenez — a local civic leader, former elected official, and a graduate of a school staffed by my sisters — was the perfect host. Her connections to Catholic sisters run deep: She attended Ursuline Academy and later worked in communications for the Hospital Sisters Health System. She is a testament to the often-unrecognized impact of Catholic sisters.

Sara helped set the context for the arrival of Catholic sisters in Springfield. The Ursulines were the first to arrive in 1857, around the time a circuit-riding lawyer named Abraham Lincoln was about to catapult to national fame. The Ursuline's mission was to open a girls' school under the motto *Serviam*, expand the global vision of their foundress, and make a difference in the Prairie State's capital.

Stretching beyond your comfort zone

"*Serviam* means 'I will serve'" Ursuline Sr. Rita Ann Bregenhorn reminded the crowd. "Living out *Serviam* gives one a sense of belonging to something larger than oneself and the opportunity to reach beyond what you might be comfortable with."

"I bleed *Serviam*," Marianne Stremsterfer said. "I was born into an Ursuline family. My mom, my grandma, my aunt, my sister, my cousins and my children were all alumni of Ursuline Academy. I graduated from St. Al's (staffed by Ursulines), Ursuline Academy, and then Springfield College in Illinois," the two-year college under Ursuline sponsorship. Marianne's husband, too, was a Springfield College in Illinois graduate, and gave decades of his life teaching at an Ursuline-run elementary school in Springfield.

'That Was Jesus'

Sr. Jomary Trstensky, the last of the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis to serve as CEO of their health system, elicited laughter when she said of her sisters who arrived in Springfield in 1875, "They began a whole era of organization — not reorganization.

There were many unmet needs. Our sisters could have come into Springfield and started anything and it would have been an improvement."

Brian Blasco, the Franciscan Sisters' communication director and archivist, shared how the sisters helped him to answer the question, "Why are you on this planet at this very time and place, living out your vocation?"

"It's been a powerful journey for me." He told the story of Franciscan Sr. Patricia Ann Mulkey, who, after sharing a meal at a Chicago restaurant, gave her leftovers to a man shivering on the sidewalk. She then persuaded Brian to do the same. As they walked away, Sister Patricia asked him if he knew who that man was.

"Sister, I'm not from Chicago, I have no idea," he said.

"That was Jesus," she told him. And the lesson stuck with him.



Sr. Anjali Koodamarambil, a member of the Indian Province of the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis, is welcomed by Dominican Sr. Celestine Rondelli. (Courtesy of Beth Murphy)

Educating leaders

"We Springfield Dominicans were latecomers to Springfield," Sara noted, "relocating to the city from Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1893, 20 years after our founding."

Dominican Sr. Kathleen Anne Tait, longtime educator and advancement director, noted that, in the past, sisters were the labor force of the church. "We educated leaders. We provided an education that included the morals that came from the Gospel, an understanding of Christian community, and working toward the common good."

Today, sisters respond to some of the same challenges, but differently. "We are no longer the labor force that we were before. Our impact now is more about influence and transformation," Sister Kathleen said.

Being fewer in number has meant that religious women now fulfill our prophetic role by standing at the margins of church and society, beckoning both forward through collaborative efforts that can have a bigger impact than anything we could do alone. Sister Kathleen noted how our congregational efforts have had a tremendous impact in the city, influencing institutions like a medical school, the school district and government offices through our antiracism partners.

Among those profoundly influenced by the sisters was Vicki Schmidt, a Dominican associate. She called the sisters "a significant force for healing in our community."

Pie and P.I.E.

The evening concluded with guests enjoying pie, much of it baked by Dominican vocation director Sr. Denise Glazik, who invited attendees to "P.I.E." — using an acronym to ask them to "pray for, invite and encourage" vocations to consecrated religious life.

When we ushered the last guest out of the house, there was still cleanup to do, so a group of us pitched in as we usually do, making short work of corralling the dirty plates and cups into the wash.

What lingered in the house, I noticed, as I walked back in the next morning, was the energy of the night before still reverberating in the hallways. It was the kind of energy that could reverberate into the universe for a long time to come, giving

shape to the mission God has for us, in ways still unknown, but welcome just the same.