



FRANCISCAN Prints



Sisters of St. Francis of the Immaculate Conception • *"A Caring, Praying Presence"* • West Peoria, Illinois

Immaculate Conception Convent: 309-674-6168

AUGUST 2026

Celebrating 135 Years of Service

On February 2, 2026 we, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Immaculate Conception, celebrated our 135 anniversary of founding. In this newsletter, we are sharing the history of our founding and the early days.

The Sisters of St. Francis of the Immaculate Conception were founded by Mother Mary Pacifica Forrestal (Margaret Forrestal) in the United States. She began her religious life in a German congregation, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Family in Dubuque, Iowa, but sensed God was leading her to found a branch of English-speaking Franciscans. As a result, she withdrew from the Dubuque community when her temporary vows expired. Margaret then obtained permission from the Archbishop of Missouri to teach as a Secular Third Order Franciscan in Palmyra, Missouri. With a staff of lay teachers, Margaret taught there for two years.

While conducting a retreat in Peoria, Illinois, Rev. Rufinus Moehle, OFM, met Archbishop John Lancaster Spalding and learned of his need to staff the diocesan orphanage in Metamora, Illinois. Father Moehle offered Margaret Forrestal's small group for this ministry and, on November 15, 1890, Margaret arrived at the founding site of her community. On February 2, 1891, the original members professed vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and Margaret became Mother Mary Pacifica.



*Mother Pacifica Forrestal
Foundress*

News of the young community spread, and eager applicants began to arrive. In 1902, Mother Pacifica and Sister Mary Joseph Butler set out for Ireland to recruit members and visit relatives. The journey bore fruit when ten Irish colleens immigrated to Peoria to enter the novitiate. From 1902 to 1930, approximately seventy women from Ireland joined American aspirants to become Sisters of St. Francis of the Immaculate Conception.

On December 14, 1912, the sisters' motherhouse was constructed on Heading Avenue in West Peoria. Less than two years later, St. Mary's Orphanage in Metamora moved into a brand-new building called Guardian

Angel Home located on the same road as the motherhouse. Since both were on Heading Avenue, the sisters were often known as the "Heading Avenue Franciscans."

Scarcely had their ministry at the orphanage begun when Mother Mary Pacifica was asked to serve the elderly. In 1892, St. Joseph's Home of Peoria opened on Peoria's Southside to serve the poor elderly. By the 1950's, the Home was rapidly deteriorating, and with the generous support of the people of the Peoria diocese, a new building was erected, also on Heading Avenue, and dedicated in 1958. Although the Home closed in 2005, the congregation's dedication to the elderly continued through a new ministry, St. Joseph's HomeCare. The sisters provided in-home care and assisted seniors with everything except medical care, which enabled them to remain at home longer and live independently.



*Sister M. Jude with children in
Guardian Angel Orphanage*



Early Community

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A CARING, PRAYING PRESENCE



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Celebrating 135 Years of Service (Continued from page 1)

Having heard of Mother Pacifica's work in Peoria, Bishop James Ryan of Alton, Illinois, asked her to establish a similar home in the Diocese of Alton, which was later renamed the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois in 1923. A generous bequest given to establish a home for Springfield's elders helped Mother Pacifica purchase the Wabash Railroad Hospital for the new home. On October 6, 1903, Saint Joseph's Home for the Aged formally opened "for the sheltering and comfort of aged people." To accommodate their growing mission, the sisters acquired the Workman Place adjacent to Wabash Hospital, joining the two buildings with a bridge. When that too became inadequate, the sisters used the collection from a capital campaign to purchase "Walnut Grove," a forty-three-acre farm on which to erect a new building. On September 12, 1926, the new Saint Joseph's Home for the Aged formally opened and accepted its first residents.



*Blessing of the Stations of the Cross at
St. Joseph's Home of Springfield*

As early as 1915, Mother Pacifica accepted a request from Rev. J.J. Burke, pastor of St. Mark's in Peoria, to staff a safe home for women who were employed, seeking employment, or temporarily disabled by sickness or injury. Although the facility's official title was St. Mark's Home for Working Girls, Father Burke preferred to use the name St. Mark's Hall because he felt the word "home" suggested an institution. For forty-five years, the sisters provided the women of St. Mark's Hall with room, board, and security.

Education has always been one of the congregation's highest priorities. The first elementary school to be staffed by the sisters was St. Mary's, Metamora, in 1894. In 1900, the sisters were invited to teach religion prior to the start of regular classes in the rural public school in Lourdes, and later, at St. Mary's Metamora. As the congregation grew,



Community around 1920

the sisters were requested to open new parochial schools. The community's superiors sought to provide enough personnel to meet the educational needs of parishes; over time, the sisters taught in a total of thirty-one schools.



Sister Mary Peter with her students

In 1936, the motherhouse became the home of a preparatory high school for girls interested in becoming sisters, and in 1962, a teacher-training junior college was added for the novices, both programs being fully accredited. Also at the motherhouse, a pre-school opened for children three to six years of age. The sisters also served students with other educational needs, including summer remedial reading programs and two special education classes for students with special needs at Bishop Dunne School.

For the sisters, the mandate "go and teach" always reached beyond the local Catholic school. From the beginning, the sisters taught religion, usually between Masses



Aspirant high schoolers

A CARING, PRAYING PRESENCE



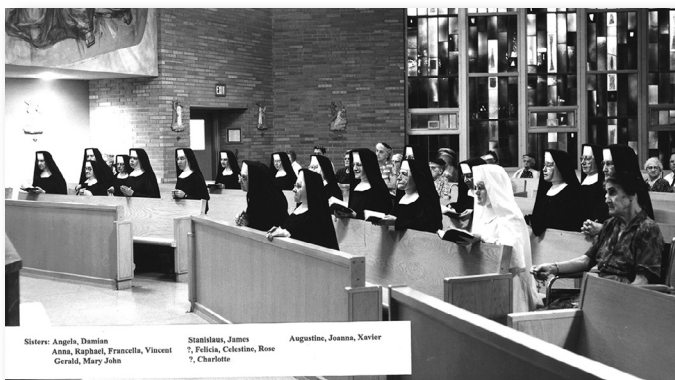
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Celebrating 135 Years of Service

or on Saturdays, to Catholic children who attended public schools. During the summer months, they held all day catechetical sessions for one or two weeks that were often the only exposure many children had to sisters.

In the fall of 1938, the pastor of the church in Aledo, Illinois, was concerned about the religious instruction of children in the large rural area. He obtained the sisters' services for a very novel and creative venture, which came to be called the Peoria-Aledo Plan. Described as a worksheet correspondence course, the project was designed for those who did not attend Catholic schools and was based on the Confraternity edition of the Catholic Messenger series published weekly by the George A. Pflaum Company. The worksheets were assembled



Sisters: Angela, Damien
Anna, Raphael, Francella, Vincent
Gerald, Mary John

Stanislav, James
F. Felicia, Celestine, Rose
F. Charlotte

Augustine, Joanne, Xavier

Sisters in Chapel at St. Joseph's Home on Heading Avenue

the Holy Spirit, the sisters have served God's people in a variety of other ministries through the years, such as prayer ministry; adult literacy; diaconate formation; hospital chaplaincy; hospital Eucharistic ministry; school counseling; social work; internal ministry; child care; administration; marriage tribunal; massage therapy; ministry to the poor and needy; nursing; parish



Sr. Mary Jo Pro-Life ministry

ministry; pro-life ministry; retreats and spiritual direction; tutoring; development; Lakota Native American ministry; archives; Newman Centers; St. Vincent de Paul ministry; Teens Encounter Christ (TEC); Cursillo; and others.

The mission of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Immaculate Conception is "to make

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"Loving and Provident God, I most trustfully commit into your hands my entire self and my total, unknown future."

(A line from the sisters' vow formula that they pray together twice a day.)



Sister Mary Joanna working on the Peoria-Aledo Plan

in the summer by dedicated members of the Aledo area and mailed out before the school year began. Students were then required to read the publication, answer the worksheet questions about the material, and bring the worksheets to the next religion class for correction and discussion. At its height, the Peoria-Aledo Plan reached 85,000 subscribers all over the nation and even in some foreign countries.



Sister Mary Louise in Pastoral Care



Sister Mary Elaine with pre-kindergarten students

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Sisters of St. Francis
of the Immaculate Conception

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*Sister Rose Madonna ministering
to the elderly*



Sister Diane Marie & Sister Betty Jean directing a retreat

God's compassionate presence known to whomever we're with and wherever we are." It echoes the words of Mother Mary Pacifica in her 1916 Easter letter to the sisters: "We will keep on loving God, trying to increase this love from day to day, seeing God in our neighbor. Let us endeavor to make this spirit of charity the distinctive mark of our community."

The congregation's 1991 centennial motto could be used today: "Remember, Celebrate, Believe." Remember the past with joy and gratitude; celebrate the present and God's grace in each moment; and believe God's fidelity will sustain the Sisters of St. Francis of the Immaculate Conception in the future as history has shown.



Community today - 135 years later