



Engaging Aging

Preserving Our Roots by Building for the Future

By Sister Megan Mary Thibodeau, SOLT

“Our goal for building a motherhouse... is about building our future and preserving our roots. We desire to witness to the culture of life, providing a home that will offer a place for our sisters to age with dignity and witness to the world, the Church and their sisters...”

*Sister Megan Thibodeau,
General Sister Servant of
the Sisters of SOLT*

In his message for the first World Day for Grandparents and Elderly in 2021, Pope Francis wrote that Jesus’ words to the Apostles to “Go and make disciples” are also addressed to us and specifically to the elderly today. These words “help us better understand that our [the elderly’s] vocation is to preserve our roots, to pass on the faith to the young, and to care for the little ones. Think about it: what is our vocation today, at our age? To preserve our roots, to pass on the faith to the young and to care for the little ones. Never forget this.” Our community is at a unique point in our history when we need to preserve our roots, to pass on the beauty of our charism to our younger members and those we serve, and to care for our sisters in need.

Foundational Roots

In 1958, Father James Flanagan, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, founded the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity (SOLT) within the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, New Mexico. The greater SOLT family is composed of two societies of apostolic life: the SOLT Sisters and the SOLT



Sister Megan Mary Thibodeau, SOLT, is the General Sister Servant of the Sisters of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity and has been serving in this position since 2013. After graduating with a degree in History and Secondary Education, Sister Megan served as a volunteer teacher at Our Lady of Mount Carmel High School in Belize, Central America for two years. It was during her time as a volunteer that she came to know the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity. Sister professed her first vows on December 8, 2000 and perpetual vows in 2005. During the course of her professed life she has served women in initial formation at the community’s houses in Texas, North Dakota, Italy and New Mexico. She also currently serves as the Assistant Chairperson for the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR).

Preserving Our Roots by Building for the Future, continued

Clerical Society, and the SOLT Lay Association. Our headquarters are in Corpus Christi, Texas, and we have missions throughout North and Central America, Asia and Oceania.

One of the guiding scriptures of Father Jim's life and the community he founded is, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)

From its conception, the emphasis of this small community has been to be disciples of Jesus through Mary; live a Marian-Trinitarian spirituality; and serve on ecclesial family teams with members of the three branches of SOLT priests and brothers, sisters and laity, in areas of deepest apostolic need. From its very beginnings, SOLT was missionary in the "Ad Gentes" sense and has tried to respond to the needs of bishops

(Below) Sister Asuncion, SOLT, visits with a student in Melchor, Guatemala. (All photos are used with permission of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity.)



(Above) Sister Laudem, SOLT, took a group of college aged young adults from across the United States on a mission trip to a SOLT mission in Benque Viejo, Belize.

from around the world. There was always a burning desire to go and make disciples and to serve in whatever capacity was most needed.

Outreach Expands with Confidence in God

Very quickly, the community spread from New Mexico to Kansas City, Belize, Guatemala, then to the Philippines and Thailand. Apostolates range from rural catechesis and evangelization to serving our migrant brothers and sisters; from teaching in Catholic schools to serving in remote and island parishes and running drug rehabilitation centers.

The main thrust of SOLT was to go and serve God's people in the missions with great trust in God's providential care. And God has indeed provided. He has shown over and over again the truth of His promise, "Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and

Preserving Our Roots by Building for the Future, continued

lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come.” (Mark 10: 29-30)

In our short history of just over 60 years, we have received a hundred times more houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands. God has taken care of our needs along the way, so much so that we were able to strive to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” and “not worry about tomorrow; as tomorrow will take care of itself.” (Matthew 6:33-34)

Due to the pressing needs of God’s people in the missions and the relatively young age of our members, a long-range plan for caring for our members as we aged was not a priority in the early years of the community. Tomorrow would happily take care of itself, and it did quite sufficiently for many years. There was never a need or opportunity to develop a motherhouse for the sisters, as our administration and formation houses were small, and we valued that flexibility and simplicity.

Sister Mary Redemption (*center*) celebrates her 60th year of profession with Sister Maria Hostia (*left*) and Sister Mary Immaculate (*right*) at St. Cecilia’s Convent.



As our few older sisters needed more care in their aging, their presence in our local mission or formation houses was a special blessing. Our original Constitutions stated, “the presence of our sick, infirm and aging sisters in our houses are a special blessing and we have a privilege to serve them and love them. This charity should be attended to with the greatest care and solicitude. We share their suffering and hardships with heartfelt compassion. We are grateful to the glory of the Trinity in His goodness and holiness for the reward of their work and suffering.” It truly is a blessing and privilege for us to care for our infirm and elderly sisters as they carry the cross of sickness and suffering.

Aging Brings Call for Long-Range Planning

A year or so into my first term of office, Sister Mary Anne, a member of our General Council, and I attended the National Assembly of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR). During the assembly, we heard a presentation from Sister Janice Bader, CPPS, then executive director of the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO). As Sister Janice was speaking, Sister Mary Anne and I looked at each other and simultaneously knew that we had to develop a relationship with NRRO. It was one of those moments when there was no doubt the Holy Spirit was at work!

As a community we were in a position that we had never been in before. Whereas previously we had one or two elderly sisters, now we had four. In ten years, that number would grow to twelve and we would need to be ready for this new phase of growth and development. The words of Jesus immediately came to mind: “Nobody puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins too. No! New wine, fresh skins!” (Mark 2:22) It was the time to start

Preserving Our Roots by Building for the Future, continued

preparing new wineskins for the new wine. Something exciting was afoot!

Very quickly after that National Assembly we established a relationship with NRRO and began the incredible journey of long-range planning for our future. Being in relationship with NRRO has helped us to begin building an awareness and understanding around our future needs regarding aging and retirement planning. We quickly became aware that we had a lot to learn! Our NRRO consultants shared their expertise and wisdom with us and encouraged us to ask ourselves tough questions and do the hard work of long-range planning.

In the past number of years, we have slowly and steadily formulated a long-range plan to ensure that our sisters will be well cared for in their hour

Gathered on the porch of St. Cecilia Convent, Sisters of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity, (from left) Sister Mary Redemption, Sister Maria Hostia, Sister Margaret Mary, Sister Mary Divine Savior, Sister Teresita.



of need, whenever that hour arrives. We have greatly benefitted from the wide range of services and opportunities offered by NRRO, from direct care grants to planning grants, from elder consultations to buying into Social Security. We were able to designate the convent of St. Cecilia, a small five bedroom house, as our temporary home for our infirm and elderly sisters to address acute needs for care and support at this time while we continue to plan for the future.

Again, in his message for the first World Day for Grandparents and Elderly, Pope Francis spoke of the importance of dreams, memory and prayer and called them the three pillars necessary in order to build the world of tomorrow:

The Lord's closeness will grant to all, even the frailest among us, the strength needed to embark on a new journey along the path of dreams, memory and prayer. The prophet Joel once promised: "Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men will have visions" (3:1). The future of the world depends on this covenant between young and old. Who, if not the young, can take the dreams of the elderly and make them come true? Yet for this to happen, it is necessary that we continue to dream. Our dreams of justice, of peace, of solidarity can make it possible for our young people to have new visions; in this way, together, we can build the future. Dreams are thus intertwined with memory... Keeping memory alive is a true mission for every elderly person: keeping memory alive and sharing it with others... Without memory, however, we will never be able to build; without a foundation, we can never build a house. Never. And the foundation of life is memory. Finally, prayer. As my predecessor, Pope Benedict, himself a saintly elderly person

Preserving Our Roots by Building for the Future, continued

who continues to pray and work for the Church, once said: “the prayer of the elderly can protect the world, helping it perhaps more effectively than the frenetic activity of many others.” He spoke those words in 2012, towards the end of his pontificate. There is something beautiful here. Your prayer is a very precious resource: a deep breath that the Church and the world urgently need (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 262). Especially in these difficult times for our human family, as we continue to sail in the same boat across the stormy sea of the pandemic, your intercession for the world and for the Church has great value: it inspires in everyone the serene trust that we will soon come to shore. (Pope Francis’ Message for first World Day for Grandparents and Elderly, July 25, 2021)

Our sisters living at St. Cecilia’s convent have heroically embraced these pillars. They dream, they remember, and they pray. They continue to dream of new possibilities and new missions. They share with us the rich history of their consecrated lives, the stories from the early days of the community, the inspiring accounts of serving

God’s people in a particular portion of His vineyard. And most of all, they are intrepid prayer warriors who continue to offer their lives in prayer and sacrifice to the Lord. They are truly breathing new life into the Church and helping to hold us steady in these turbulent times. They are inspiring us to build on the foundation they laid, anchored by these sturdy pillars.

Plans Point to First Motherhouse for Sisters

In order to build on this foundation, and with the amazing resources made available to us through NRRO, we have been steadily working to build our future. In 2019, we went through a



(Above, from left) SOLT Sister Gianna Marie and Sister Mary Ignatius make their First Profession in Corpus Christi, Texas.

strategic planning process which helped to clarify the needs and the desires of the community. There was a strong desire among our sisters to remain, as we always have done, in community as we age, even when we may need extra support. This was coupled with a desire that when sisters needed care, it be provided in a hybrid model with sisters helping sisters as well as having outside professionals as needed.

In the course of our planning process, which included a facility assessment, fundraising feasibility study and much prayer, it became clear that we needed a motherhouse to give all of our sisters a home in the heart of our community. This would be a place where our aging sisters could continue to be a vital part of the greater



(Left) Sister Margaret Mary attending a Perpetual Profession ceremony of one of her SOLT sisters in Corpus Christi, Texas.

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Preserving Our Roots by Building for the Future, continued



(Above) The General and American Regional Leadership of the Sisters of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity, (from left) Sister Emmanuel, Sister Mary Paul, Sister Aloysius, Sister Megan, Sister Mary Anne, Sister Miriam, Sister Mary Mediatrix.

SOLT family and the family of faith. Having a motherhouse would enable us to consolidate a number of our smaller convents and bring together sisters in active ministry with those sisters who are entering a different phase of their consecrated life. It would also be a place where younger sisters could interact and benefit from the deep faith, wisdom and experience of those who have been long in the race, “who have competed well, who have kept the faith.” (2 Tim 4:7)

Vita Consecrata beautifully summarizes the role of our elder members:

Caring for the elderly and the sick has an important place in the fraternal life, especially at times like the present, when in

some parts of the world the percentage of elderly consecrated persons is increasing. The care and concern which these persons deserve arises not only from a clear obligation of charity and gratitude but also from an awareness that their witness greatly serves the Church and their own Institutes, and that their mission continues to be worthwhile and meritorious, even when for reasons of age or infirmity they have had to abandon their specific apostolate. The elderly and the sick have a great deal to give in wisdom and experience to the community, if only the community can remain close to them with concern and an ability to listen.

More than in any activity, the apostolate consists in the witness of one's own complete dedication to the Lord's saving will, a dedication nourished by the practice of prayer and of penance. The elderly are called in many ways to live out their vocation: by persevering prayer, by patient acceptance of their condition, and by their readiness to serve as spiritual directors, confessors or mentors in prayer. (#44)

Our goal for building a motherhouse is about more than a building, much more. It is about building our future and preserving our roots. We desire to witness to the culture of life, providing a home that will offer a place for our sisters to age with dignity and witness to the world, the Church and their sisters that aging and suffering are redemptive. The motherhouse will be at the heart of the central headquarters of the community, allowing sisters living there to be more active in the prayer and community life of the greater SOLT family.

Preserving Our Roots by Building for the Future , continued

One of the themes noted about the SOLT Sisters in the feasibility study was the word “family”. Many of those interviewed noted the familial and joyful spirit of the SOLT Sisters. It is a privilege to welcome visitors, offer hospitality and to invite women to come and experience our way of life as they discern the Lord’s call. The new motherhouse would enable us to do this in a much more fitting manner. Currently, we are also finding it challenging to host women for “come and see visits” in Corpus Christi due to lack of space. The motherhouse will offer a place for women discerning their vocations to visit, pray and interact with a larger SOLT Sisters’ community and the greater SOLT family.

New Chapter of Growth

This new chapter of growth in the life of our community is stretching us and challenging us to trust even more deeply in God’s providence, to remember daily that He does provide, and He will provide. We have just launched a fundraising campaign in order to make the dream of a motherhouse a reality. We have designed the house in keeping with our spirit and style,

and while it will be new and bigger than any of our convents, it will be simple and flexible. There will be twenty bedrooms, ten of which will be fully American with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant and the other ten will have the potential to be ADA compliant should the need arise. It will promote independent living while being safe, accessible and dignified. Our hope is that it will be home for many generations now and well into the future.

This is uncharted territory for us. We have never done a campaign but have been greatly encouraged by the support of our families, friends and benefactors. It has been a remarkable journey thus far and we are looking forward to this next stage of our development and growth.

As we continue to be mission-oriented and build our future, we have the unique opportunity to place our elderly and sick members at the heart of our mission and community and, at the same time, be able to respond to our Lord’s call to continue to “go, and make disciples of all nations.”

(Below) SOLT Sisters in the American region gather for the Perpetual Profession of Sister Mary Rachel in Corpus Christi, Texas.



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