

notre dame's Return of the Dominican Sisters

BY PAMELA BOAZ

Four sisters from the Congregation of St. Cecilia in Nashville have recently become part of the spiritual and academic life at Notre Dame High School as the school has welcomed the Dominican Sisters. A homecoming of sorts, Sisters Mary Evelyn Potts, Thomas More Stepnowski, Peter Verona Bodoh, and Anna Wray have joined the staff at Notre Dame, and their story is rich with history and a legacy of excellence in education.

A Rich History

The St. Cecilia Congregation in Nashville, from which the sisters at Notre Dame come, was founded in 1860. The community began with four sisters of the Dominican Order who were invited to Nashville to establish an academy for girls that would emphasize art and music. They chose St. Cecilia as their patroness, a woman who embodied the quality of praise, and the school became St. Cecilia Academy. Imitating the life of St. Dominic, the sisters of the Dominican Order continued to spread the gospel to the world through teaching, and their efforts eventually led them to Chattanooga.

In 1876, Reverend Patrick Ryan, then pastor of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Chattanooga, wanted to open a school. He made his special request to the St. Cecilia congregation in Nashville, and his prayers were answered. The four Dominican sisters responded, resulting in what our community now knows as Notre Dame High School.

Beginning with founding Principal Mother Angela, Dominicans served as principals of Notre Dame High School

through 1954, when Sister Jane Francis ended her term. The sisters continued assignments as faculty members until 1973, when they returned to Nashville. Their departure resulted from fewer women joining the order while, at the same time, school officials increasingly had requests for Dominican sisters as teachers in other places.

Today, a recent growth in the number of sisters has allowed more of those requests to be fulfilled. As the 2010-2011

school term began at Notre Dame, the four Dominican sisters marked a special homecoming in the 150-year anniversary of the Congregation of St. Cecilia in Nashville.

Now one of 12 Catholic high schools in Tennessee and among the 7,094 in the nation, Notre Dame is the oldest non-public school in the city and boasts an impressive academic reputation. In 2010, the school was named to the national Honor Roll as one of the top 50 Catholic high schools in the country – an acknowl-

edgement of its high academic standards, Catholic identity and preparation of students to actively engage the world.

Welcoming the Sisters, Again

"There has been a joy in returning on both sides," says Sister Mary Evelyn Potts, a 1959 graduate of Notre Dame High School and one of the returning sisters who now calls Notre Dame home. The joy refers to the way the Dominican sisters have been received at Notre Dame High School and to their own response in serving once again at the school their order helped to found. "Part of the family has come back," she says.

Having completed their first semester after being absent for 37 years, the sisters are quick to point out the positive response to their return.

Sister Anna Wray, the youngest of the returning sisters, says, "The openness of the students to receive us has been a joy. They are not used to us being here, but they are open to asking questions and to accepting us." She also acknowledges the warmth of the adults in the school community.

In early October, the sisters moved into the newly refurbished convent adjacent to the Notre Dame campus, a place they clearly appreciate. There is a "freshness to the idea of sisters in the school," adds Sister Mary Evelyn.

Unique Passions, Unique Sisters

Sister Thomas More is at the beginning of her doctoral studies in catechetics at the Maryvale Catechetical Institute in Birmingham, England. The focus of this work is on the formation of the imagination, researching philosophies of the 1940s and 50s, which examined concerns and dangers in how imagination forms. Her work is conducted electronically, except in the summer when she will travel to England.



(l to r) Sisters Anna Wray, Peter Verona Bodoh, Thomas More Stepnowski and Mary Evelyn Potts



Sister Anna Wray and student Mary Kate Howard

Having made her profession of vows in 2004, Sister Anna taught for three years at Knoxville Catholic High School. In addition, she was assigned to Sydney, Australia, from 2007–2008 where she helped prepare for the 2008 World Youth Day. Sister Anna describes herself as having a “heart for the high school age.” She says, “It’s about loving them where they are.” She points to helping students make connections as a focus in the classroom. “In teaching church history, students can see the themes of the church in Italy in the 900s connecting to issues today,” she explains.

“Wonderful!” beams Sister Mary Evelyn, when asked how it feels to come home to Notre Dame. She is passionate about the need for Catholic schools. “The schools are needed more today than ever because of the secularization of the world,” she says. “Christ runs through everything. Students see the Author of Truth through all the liberal arts.” Although Sister Mary Evelyn has taught, most of her years in education have been in administration, which is also her assignment at Notre Dame. “I dearly love what I’m doing. Catholic schools,” she explains, “are home for anyone who wants to be God centered.”

Passion is also evident as Sister Peter Verona Bodoh talks about teaching math.

“I am from a math family, and I love breaking down a student’s barrier that says ‘I can’t.’ I love to see the breakthrough when they understand.” Her classes also include a daily story of a saint, a practice that has been positively accepted by parents. “I loved the stories of the saints when I was a student,” she says. “I am really passionate about God and math. I love them [the students], but that’s God’s love.”

Teaching for Life

For the sisters, providing a Catholic education means that regardless of the discipline being taught, the content is rooted in truth, beauty and goodness that point to God. Sister Thomas More Stepnowski explains, “We look for the elegance and beauty and truth that holds the discipline together.”

Sister Thomas More adds, “It is exciting to see students make connections between disciplines and to themselves. Through pieces of literature like John Donne’s “Meditation 17,” students grow in their understanding, not just in academics, but in life.”

The challenges faced by the Sisters are much the same as for any high school teacher, but of course, some are different. “We have to deal with stereotypes of us, while showing students what an authentic religious life is,” says Sister Thomas More. “The greatest thing we have to give,” adds Sister Anna, “is not just information and what we say; it is to witness to the fact that God is real.”

Sister Mary Evelyn shares, “It is often emphasized that prayer for our students is key and important. We are instruments where the Lord is using us. He is the primary mover. We are not just teaching for today, but for life forever. Prayer is at the heart of everything.”

As the Dominican Sisters settle into life at Notre Dame High School, their presence will no doubt be continually welcomed as they contribute to the rich history of faith and higher education that are hallmarks of Notre Dame. Their unique passions and gifts will certainly reach countless people as their students touch the lives of others. **CS**



(l to r) Elizabeth Cao, Dylan Zoll, Sister Peter Verona, Sister Anna Wray and Michelle Spangler