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Behold, we have left all things to follow Thee.

These words were penned by Mary Frances Cunningham, later Mother Demetrias, foundress of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart. They were written on the first page of her journal for the year 1890, the year the Community began.

This year marks the 125th anniversary of that founding. The year-long celebration began with a Mass last October; Bishop Denis J. Madden, D.D., V.G., gave the homily that included a short history of the Mission Helpers. Here is some of what he had to say:

Mary Frances Cunningham, a young woman who was an active member of St. Martin’s Parish in West Baltimore, worked with poor black children and their families, none of whom were welcome in mainstream society or, very sad to say, in the Church.
What the Church would not provide, Mary Frances Cunningham and a few other women, would. After holding a retreat, they decided that God had called them to establish a religious community, but the pastor at St. Martin’s refused to allow Mary Frances to go forward. James Cardinal Gibbons, who was an advocate for vocational training for black people and religious education for their children, showed wisdom and foresight when he spoke those now famous words: “Let her go, something may come of it.”

And so, what began as the work of educating black children soon grew into the founding of an industrial school for black women and a professional laundry to give them work. By 1895, the Mission Helpers’ ministry was extended to all races. In the annals of the Community we read, “United in their love for the poor, early Mission Helpers banded together to incarnate God’s love for all those who are spiritually or temporally in need.”

Within a few years, the Sisters extended their ministry into Southern Maryland and into New Jersey and New York where they established day nurseries for the children of immigrants so that their mothers could find work. And, in 1897, they established the first school for the deaf.

The Mission Helpers were the first United States Sisters to serve in Puerto Rico and they established a mission in Guam in 1905. In 1962, they responded to Pope John XXIII’s call to send Sisters to Venezuela, and today they are still a vital presence in that troubled country.
From the earliest days, the Mission Helpers were known as “new kinds of Sisters.” They were not the traditional school teachers or nurses. Instead, they went out among the people, reached out to those who were the most vulnerable, alienated or neglected by society, and responded to their needs. They gave life and meaning to catechism and gained national recognition with the Adaptive Way method of teaching, which was based on the premise that every child has the capacity and the right to learn about and experience God’s love. When the Catholic bishops began to focus on providing religious education for Catholic children in public schools, they quickly realized that the Mission Helpers were already leaders in the field and turned to them for assistance. The Mission Helpers Catechetical Center published textbooks and manuals in English, Spanish and Braille; they trained teachers of religion in hundreds of dioceses and parishes throughout the country.
The Mission Helpers were among the first Sisters to drive automobiles. The reason? Their habits allowed them to turn their heads. Other Sisters couldn’t do that because their habits were connected to their veils.

With no anxiety but in a spirit of thankfulness for being able to serve the Lord by serving others, the Sisters traveled all over the United States, Central and South America, as well as to 50 military bases in the U.S. and Germany.

They have had ministries in 38 states and 18 countries worldwide.

When the country faced a shortage of priests, the Sisters assumed new roles as parish administrators with responsibility for all aspects of parish life. Mission Helpers were among the first of these pioneering women.

While they are still teachers of religion, their ministries have extended beyond the borders of the classroom to faith formation, spiritual
Mission Helper Productions was created to produce videos, later discs, to reach people through new media.

Mission Helpers have been pioneers in the fields of telecommunications and on-line education. They have served in centers for those with special needs, offered shelter and protection to abused women, and welcomed asylum seekers into their home.

Campus ministry in Ithaca, New York

Parish Administration in North Carolina

Mission Helpers taught religion on a weekly TV show in Pittsburgh (above), and brought technology into the religious education classroom (right).
It is amazing what a congregation of women can do! How sorely the world and the Church still need their presence and their service so filled with love.

The Mission Helpers change people’s lives, they give hope when there is no reason to hope and bring joy when lives are surrounded by darkness. Can anyone thank them enough for this?

They have been doing what they do so well for 125 years now—from the time Mary Frances Cunningham came down those steps of St. Martin’s Parish on Fayette and Fulton Streets and saw those black children in need of knowing God’s love for them and their parents needing to earn a living.

The Mission Helpers have heard the voice of God calling and could not ignore it; they had the courage to risk it all on Christ. They heard the call and they stepped out and said, “I’ll do it, I’ll follow you.”

We offer them our meager thanks while praising God’s Holy name for sending them among us.

— Bishop Denis J. Madden, D.D., V.G.
125th ANNIVERSARY 2015
Mission Helpers in Venezuela

The early Missioners in Venezuela established a training program for catechists in the major cities of Caracas and Barcelona. The success of that mission enabled the Sisters to work with the Archbishop in identifying new ministries in the areas of greatest need in the country.

They agreed that Lara State in the northwestern part of Venezuela would be the focus, especially an isolated area that included the 10 villages surrounding Manzanita, where the poorest of the poor work the land and live in small shacks with dirt floors, no electricity and an unreliable water supply.

The people of these remote villages had no church, seldom saw a priest and had little relationship with their faith.

In 1990 Sister Rosa Sophia Toledo, a native of Venezuela, and Sister Marita Rodriguez Segarra, born in Puerto Rico, began their ministry in this impoverished region. The Sisters first set up a tiny worship space that has since blossomed into Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish. The church serves as a community and outreach center for the villagers and has become the center of social and spiritual life for this region.

The Mission Helpers have established an industrial school, multiple child and elder day care centers, a credit fund and a food distribution center. And, they have taught the local women to run these facilities.

The Mission Helpers conduct liturgies in the absence of a priest and have trained a cadre of Lay Missioners who teach the children and are active participants in the liturgies and festivals of the church. The Sisters provide food, medicine and other resources for all who come to

In 1990, the Sisters went to the underdeveloped villages of Manzanita, and set up a mission, living and working with the poorest of the poor. Today, that tiny mission has become Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish; it is the center of community and religious life.
The Mission Helpers in Venezuela have strong support from both villagers and city people and a team of experienced volunteers who help carry out the ministry.

Sister Rosa, an experienced family counselor with degrees in Psychology and Pastoral Ministry, leads the Mission Helpers’ family counseling program for the people of those troubled urban centers. Both the school system and the Archdiocese call on the Sisters to provide counseling.

In 2010, the Family Counseling Center in Cabudare was established, staffed by the Sisters and a carefully trained and dedicated corps of Lay Missioners.

The Center conducts a wide variety of family workshops as well as individual and group counseling sessions.

The Mission Helpers remain committed to the people of both the cities and the villages—especially during these times of crisis. They bring hope and the promise of God’s love to those in need of spiritual, emotional and material support.

their door. They are the only religious community engaged in missionary work in the region.

In the Cities…

Elsewhere in Lara State, in the cities of Barquisimeto, El Tocuyo and Cabudare, the people are poor, but not impoverished. But there is rampant violence—in the home, in the schools and in the streets. Alcohol and drug abuse abound. Single mothers and abandoned children are commonplace and family life is threatened.

Since early 2014, the situation in Venezuela has worsened dramatically. There are severe shortages of food and other necessities, political upheaval, street gangs, little public security, disruptive demonstrations, and an inflation rate of 62 percent. These conditions intensify the already fragile lives of the people who seek solace from the Sisters.

The Sisters in Venezuela provide formal and informal family counseling in a country of violence and insecurity.
Since our earliest days in Baltimore, the Mission Helpers have been blessed with lay women and men who have walked with us on our journey. The groups have had a variety of names and missions, but their common thread, from the 1930s to the 21st century, has been a desire to share in the joy of the Sisters’ ministry of living the Gospel.

The Mission Guild of the Sacred Heart, which began in the late 1920’s, was the first band of lay supporters in Baltimore. By the 1940’s, our friends and supporters were known as the Ladies Auxiliary.

During the activist years of the 1960s, young women from across the country participated in the Mary Missioners program, working with the Sisters on missions, visiting in homes and hospitals and teaching religion to children.

Wherever the Sisters were on mission, there were usually people who wanted to share in their ministries as volunteers or in some way deepen their relationship. In Baltimore, in the 1980s, the group was called Friends of the Mission Helpers.

Today there are Lay Missioners in Florida, searching for a deeper spirituality and a desire to express this spirituality in service.
to others. And, there are less organized pockets of long-time friends and supporters in San Antonio, Boston and Raleigh.

In Philadelphia, members of the Friendship Club of the St. Charles Borromeo parish make a yearly pilgrimage to Mission Helper Center for Mass, lunch and a flea market.

Another group of close friends and supporters are our Sisters in Spirit—women who were once members of the Mission Helper Community, but who have gone on to other callings. They still care very deeply for us, and we for them. We try to get together at least once a year and call on them to assist us in staging various events.

In the greater Baltimore area there is a dedicated corps of volunteers who are the driving force of our fundraising events. They are the arms and legs of the Sisters in the execution of our annual crab feast—this year is the 34th! They are also the planners and the hands-on managers of our more recent fundraising endeavor—the annual Fruit of D’Vine wine tasting. All of these devoted friends pray with us at the beginning of every gathering, and we thank God for them every day. We are also grateful for the hundreds of people who support us by attending these annual events, as well as our autumn flea market.
I am the daughter of deaf parents, who studied at St. Gabriel School for the Deaf in Santurce, Puerto Rico. This pioneer mission of the Mission Helpers, even now, is bearing fruit and the deaf community of Puerto Rico still expresses with pride their experiences at that school and recognizes the great work that the Sisters carried out in Puerto Rico.

It is important that I do justice to this mission through its historical memory because, in this way, I can express the underlying truth of the fortitude, dedication and efforts of those pioneer Sisters who took the lead in this mission—responding to the call from God and to the invitation of Mother Demetrias, as well as other leaders of the Church and the community.

The Sisters’ lives and mission are models to follow, and I believe that it will serve to evoke in others that there is much more to be done on our island. The impact of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart still remains alive in our times, within the Deaf Community, which had been totally neglected before the arrival of the Sisters…

[Ms. Barbosa is completing her doctoral thesis at the Center of Advanced Studies of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. The work is entitled, “The Contribution of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart to the Deaf Community in Puerto Rico During the Period 1902-1956.” It was translated from the Spanish by Sister Rosa Sofia Toledo, MHSH.]

We lived in Perryville, Maryland, and there were no Catholic schools there in the 1950’s. Our pastor said that he knew of a wonderful group of nuns in Baltimore, the Mission Helpers, who did work like priests and were excellent teachers. So on Saturdays, he drove to Towson and picked them up and brought them up to Perryville to teach religion to the children. That’s how we became associated with them. In the summer they came up and stayed—the pastor owned a cottage adjacent to the church—and held summer school.

My mother, an excellent cook, took dinners to them at the cottage—they loved her crab cakes.
We had a great relationship with them. Later on, my sister and I and a friend began going to Baltimore to take CCD classes at the Motherhouse on Monday nights; Sister Jogues taught.

They were a wonderful group of Sisters. They still are. These days I go to the Villa (Mercy Villa) and play bridge with the Sisters there, so I’ve stayed in touch all these years.

At the reunion of friends of the Sisters, we shared memories of almost 30 years of ministries, which came easily. Our smiles and voices erased the lapsed time since Sister Natalie DeLuca and Sister Teresa Mary Dolan (affectionately known as T.M.) had retired from the area.

We shared memories of church tours for children, First Communion, assemblies, art projects, lessons, and a multitude of children’s faces came quietly in recall. As a Pastoral Sister, Natalie guided home/hospital visitors, directed the bereavement ministry, advocated for marriage annulments, and supported ministry for the poor. A flood of memories.

Sister T.M. was Director of Adult Education, she spear-headed RCIA programs, and introduced Annotation 19, serving as its Spiritual Innovator. Her ministry welcomed many men, women and children to the waters of Baptism. Her time as Spiritual Director to all those believers in God who yearned for a deeper relationship with Christ changed their lives. The joy that her presence at the reunion inspired is hard to describe. This coming together was like a dream.

Before the reunion ended, Sister T.M. posed her standard question: “How was it for you?” “I’m addicted to the Mission Helpers,” was the response from a tall, silver-haired gentleman. There was laughter, but in the shared humor and delight, a discovery was shared: Our stories were all intertwined. We got his meaning. To be addicted to the Mission Helpers means to live the Gospel of justice and truth, in love.
My time as president was one of real transition—a transition necessitated by Vatican II, which asked us to be aware of the signs of the times and to be sensitive to what was happening in the world. And, we were asked to see what our place was in this world.

At the time of the election, the existing administration felt that the older Sisters had the experience to lead the Community in this transition, but the people who voted felt that it should be a new slate. So they elected the five of us; we all had professional jobs in various dioceses throughout the country, but no experience in the administration of the Community. At the outset, we sought the guidance of an experienced theologian who knew religious life to help us develop into a cohesive administrative unit. We worked with him for a week and he pointed out our strengths and our weaknesses and helped us know each other and to really talk with one another.

Getting to Know My Sisters

The transition to a new way of looking at religious life—and at the administration of the Community—was very difficult for the older Sisters and not at all difficult for the younger ones.

So many of the old symbols changed: we stopped calling the major superior of the Community “Mother,” but that didn’t stop the older Sisters from calling me Mother. The younger ones didn’t stop at just using “Sister,” they called us by our first names. I'll never forget the first time a young Sister said, “Hi, Joanne.” I just couldn’t believe it.

Part of our administration was visiting all the Sisters on their missions, and I found this the most impressive thing of my years in office. I got to
really know our Sisters during these visits, and I found that they were wonderful people—well trained, well educated, intelligent people. They were so enjoyable to be with and had such a positive attitude toward life. This was the blessing of my whole eight years in administration—I came to know my Sisters in such a beautiful way.

Another high point was our affiliation with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). I was the chairperson for Region IV and those meetings were great; the women were so very talented and interesting. We were having trouble with Rome—similar to what we are having today. They had trouble with the word “leadership” and could not understand why we wanted to have a leadership conference. But we were adamant about it and we weren’t going to give up the word—it says something!

God is so good to have given me that experience and to be giving me as much time here as he has. I believe he has a purpose for me still being here and I look forward to each day. [Sister Joanne is 96 years old]

What stands out most from my presidency is the opportunity I had to visit all of our Sisters in our local communities in the United States, Puerto Rico and Venezuela. Frequently, I also had the joy of visiting the families of our Sisters; they are truly a part of our Mission Helper family.

**New Ministries**

Pain and letting go is a normal part of life. It was painful in the 1980’s to enter into a facility study, which led to the decision to sell our motherhouse. We would retain five acres to build a new facility in the future. Our Mission Helper Video Productions, under the leadership of Sister Anne Guinan MHSH, and Sister Caritas Kennedy, RSM, were invaluable as we shared the progress of the decision to let go of the property in order to share the Gospel and care for our Sisters. With videos in hand we traveled to area gatherings to critique, clarify and share this information, which was vital to the life and the mission of the Mission Helpers.

Simultaneously, we began a collaboration with seven congregations to discuss the possibility of a joint venture to care for our infirm and elderly Sisters. This resulted in the Mercy/Mission Helper facility in Baltimore County.

During these years, the MHSH ministry of evangelization and catechesis took on the broader scope of social work, spiritual direction and counseling. This called for on-going education and degrees in specialized fields. We also saw the need for more concern and encouragement for holistic health among our membership. As we cared for others, we needed to care for the physical, spiritual and psychological needs in our own lives. In response to this need, Sisters were encouraged to participate in sabbatical, recovery and holistic health programs.

I give special thanks to all the Sisters who shared leadership with me in our ministry of administration. I am grateful and humbled at the presence of the spirit in this time of community service.
Even though I had the experience of being an advisor to the MHSH president for eight years, I really had no idea of what was about to take place. Thank God I was only 42 years old—I would need all the energy I could muster as my time in office unfolded.

No reflection of my years as president would be complete unless I acknowledged the hard work and dedication of the Sisters who served with me as well as all of our Sisters who pitched in with their talents, care and devotion to make this phase of our Mission Helper life so fruitful.

Goodbye to the Motherhouse

It all began on June 8, 1988, when former president Sister Mary Ita Hayes signed the contract to sell our motherhouse and turned to me and said, “Now you carry it out.”

For the next eight years I did shift work: I worked on the move from the motherhouse from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and handled the ongoing Community work from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. The move was emotional for the Sisters, but especially for those Sisters living in the motherhouse at the time, and even more for those living in our infirmary. These Sisters would be moving to the joint retirement convent with the Sisters of Mercy called The Villa. I met with these Sisters every week to help process their feelings—we called them “fireside chats.” These were difficult times for elderly Sisters who thought they would end their lives living in their own Community infirmary.

Next, we had to prepare for the move from the motherhouse to the Mission Helper Center the following year, and we began the “fireside chats” for these Sisters.

Again, the move was an emotional one—this had been our home for nearly 70 years. The process was made more difficult because of the myriad construction problems that we encountered along the way. The Mission Helper Center had six extensions to the contract, meaning that our Sisters were packed and ready to go, but we could not move.

When moving day came, we had a magnificent farewell ceremony and rented a city tour trolley with a loudspeaker and moved from building to building, remembering, praying and saying good-bye. For the last time, we gathered in the motherhouse chapel, which was stripped of pews and completely empty. We sat in a circle on tin folding chairs and sang and prayed and cried.

In the midst of the trauma of the moves, we celebrated our 100-year anniversary in 1990 at a time when we were living like nomads without a home. Yet, we had nearly 1,000 friends join us in the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen and 50 priests celebrated with Cardinal Keeler. It was a grand celebration.

It was a privileged time as president of the magnificent Community of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart, and I thank our Creator God for the gift of memory—and not for the gift of foresight!
One of the things that had a great impact on me was the account of the early history of the Mission Helpers redacted by Sisters Ruth Catherine Trauger, Agnesine Seluzucki and Judith Zeiler, called "The Deep Story."

Our leadership team desired to inspire a fresh vision for the Community by reflecting on our history. Our hope was that delving into “The Deep Story” might re-vitalize our Sisters with a renewed understanding and appreciation of our Mission Helper vocation.

Each of us needs to recognize and celebrate her personal contribution to the Mission Helper legacy. In reflecting upon this history I came to understand with a new perspective that our Community has been in similar situations to what we face today. The only thing that has changed is the time and context.

“The Deep Story” portrayed Sisters who had always been committed in service to the needs of those they were called to serve by demonstrating incredible faith and resiliency in their vocations. It gave me great encouragement for exercising leadership in difficult times. It enabled me to appreciate more deeply the talents and gifts of the Sisters and their profound commitment to the Mission Helper way of life.

The second experience that stands out was the celebration of the Final Vows of Sister Amarilis in our mission in Manzanita, Venezuela. She is the first fruit of the Lay Missioner program in Latin America. I was deeply moved by the participation of so many of the faithful in the preparation of the celebration and to witness her Final Vows. The Archbishop of Barquisimeto presided over the liturgical celebration.

Sister Amarilis’ vocation is a witness to the young people in a rural South American church. She demonstrates the value of ministry and the importance of living and loving within the Community.

During those eight years I was humbled by the many faithful who support us and our mission through their prayers, donations and friendship. I am humbled by their constant faithful commitment to the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart.

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As Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart, we should strive ever more earnestly that the love that brought Jesus to earth be our distinguishing mark, the sign by which all may know that we follow closely in his footsteps.

— Mother Demetrias
MHSH Foundress
Every Mission Helper and every friend of the Mission Helpers knows the words that James Cardinal Gibbons spoke back in 1890: “Let her go. Something may come of it.” Something really has come of it. We’re here—125 years later—and we’re going strong. Cardinal Gibbons knew that Mary Frances Cunningham and her colleagues wanted to help the black people of Baltimore City by teaching their children about the love of God and giving their mothers vocational training so that they could earn a living.

They did the job so well that Cardinal Gibbons asked Mission Helpers to do similar work in rural areas of Southern Maryland. We were later called to Guam, Germany, Puerto Rico and Venezuela.

Over the last 125 years, we have been called to missions in 38 states and 18 countries. We were called to teach religion to children; then, as the number of new post World War II parishes grew, we trained lay people to be successful teachers of religion in parishes throughout the country.

In the later decades of the 20th century, we were called to new fields of service in hospitals, hospices, colleges, centers for people with addictions and other special physical and/or emotional needs. Wherever there was a need for the healing touch of God’s love, we went.

We’re smaller in numbers today, but when the call comes, a Mission Helper will respond, doing the best she can to fill the need.

Other religious communities are also smaller today, so we are working collaboratively in many key areas. The Mission Helpers were one of the founding members of the P. Frances Murphy Initiative for Peace and Justice as well as A.W.E., Asylee Women Enterprise. Both of these ministries make their home at Mission Helper Center, and we have five brave asylees living here.

In looking back over the past few years, I can join with the past presidents who say that visiting our missions and becoming more deeply acquainted with our Sisters has been a highlight of my administration. They are a wonderful group of women, and I am in awe of what they do every day.

I’ve also become more involved with the people and organizations that so generously support us. Among them, the Knights of Malta have been partners in so many of our endeavors. They sponsored Sister Dianne Livingstone’s trip to Lourdes and I had the honor of being her companion. What a fantastic experience!

I am so proud of this Community and all that it has meant to the people of God for 125 years. We are moving forward into an unknown future, but we are moving into that future with the sure and certain hand of God guiding us on our way.

From Sister Loretta Cornell, MHSH President
Pope Francis has declared 2015 to be a year to honor those in consecrated life. Sister Angela Ann Zukowski, MHSH, D.Min., is the Director of the Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation (online learning) at the University of Dayton. Here are some of her reflections on consecrated life, as published by the University.

Consecrated life is a gift from God….I am a member of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart, an apostolic missionary community. Our mission is to be open to the Spirit, discerning the course of our ministry in changing times, ready and willing to adapt and change when called. We collaborate with others in the Church, individually and as a community, as we test our vision, revitalize our ministry and constantly discover new directions as the Spirit calls us.

For Mission Helpers, consecrated life is an invitation from God to dedicate one’s entire being to both a deeper communion with God and embracing an apostolic missionary life in service to proclaiming God’s word and love as revealed in the heart of Christ.

A Daily Invitation to be Challenged

Aware that many in the world hunger for the bread of God’s word as well as their daily bread, as a Mission Helper I strive through my ministry to alleviate these hungers where I am able. By living in solidarity with the poor, by being an advocate for them and others who suffer injustice, by teaching social responsibilities that come with the stewardship of this world’s resources, a consecrated life offers a daily invitation to be challenged anew to live faithfully my initial calling in evolving new contexts and times….

As consecrated women religious, I am convinced that our call is to be messengers of hope and joy in troubling times. By focusing all our spiritual, intellectual, moral and physical energy on establishing a culture of peace and justice, consecrated women and men can be leaven in the communities we are called to serve….

A Mission Helper of the Sacred Heart’s apostolic missionary vocation is to interpret Christ’s message with simplicity of language, so that his word can reach the minds, touch the hearts and renew the lives of all with whom we are called to minister.
Whom shall I send? Whatever path you are on, God is there to guide you.

Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart

Called by God to serve others

If God is calling you to serve, contact us...

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