Seeds of Hope

INSIDE THIS ISSUE
Tending the Garden: A Spiritual Invitation • Maxim 15 • How Do You Know When You Are Being Nudged by God? • A Life-Changing Experience • Can We Be Anything but Hopeful? • Spring Jubilee Celebration at Saint Joseph Villa • In Memoriam
Save the Date: Swing for the Sisters Golf Tournament—The Grand Finale!
Dear Friends,

What an amazing gift these days are! We see signs of life all around us in the beauty of nature. Once again, we are reminded that what appeared bleak and desolate has been restored to fullness of life. Even more poignant for us as Christians, we continue to celebrate the resurrected life of our Redeemer and Savior. We have again recalled the pain and suffering of that "good" Friday and, with confidence, know that death has been overcome.

Despite the beauty surrounding us, we all carry suffering that is unavoidable. Both our personal suffering as well as the awareness of the pain that so many of our sisters and brothers are experiencing can blind us to the hope and promise of new life that has been given to us. How can we live and witness to that hope?

As I reflect on "seeds of hope," I am reminded of a line from a Mary Oliver poem that says, "all kindness begins with a sown seed." Sowing is a process that, like so much in life, does not bring immediate satisfaction. But the process connects us with all that is around us and calls forth all that is within us, nurturing us even as we do the work of sowing seeds of kindness and compassion. There is no guarantee that we will see the results of our efforts, but God is never focused on results—only on the growth.

There is no person or place that will not benefit from kindness and it is ours to share with everyone, without distinction. Seeds can grow even in the most unexpected places, but they thrive when nurtured. Every interaction—no matter how brief—is an opportunity to nurture hope through acts of kindness and compassion.

How blessed we are to be called to experience and share the hope of Easter every single day!

Gratefully,

Maureen G. Erdlen SSJ
Congregational President
Tending the Garden: A Spiritual Invitation

— Sister Rita Woehlcke SSJ

Everything about Spring speaks of the indomitability of life. In our hemisphere, Earth regales us with myriad flowers that have weathered the tough winter and made the journey from darkness to light. Our spiritual tradition celebrates the triumph of life over death and the sure promise of a God faithful beyond our dreaming.

As many of us prepare our gardens, we select the best seeds and time their planting to maximize the possibility of a nourishing harvest. We weed, fertilize, and water, nurturing and protecting the first fragile shoots. We hope for gentle rains. We are vigilant, watching for intruders and any kind of blight. We make choices and do the work to create the beauty and nourishment we need to help us be deeply human and happy.

This season invites us to take stock of other gardens—our hearts, our communities, our world. The stories of Jesus frequently refer to seeds and growth, to what chokes our spirits or weakens our roots. Even as we Christians profess the mystery of new life out of death, we live in the shadow of endless wars. Our air is fouled with hate speech. We are inundated with divisive messages that our neighbor is our enemy, that those who differ from us in any way need to be destroyed. What can we do to cleanse our spirits to create the world we say we want for our children and grandchildren?
We have choices. What fills the soil of our souls? What fills our air and airwaves? Disparaging rants? Incessant blaming? A vicious partisanship that demonizes the other? What negative tropes have taken root in us and find their way to our lips? What thoughts and feelings are choking the law of Love planted in our hearts? What is stomping down the gifts of the Spirit—wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord? What is spoiling the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control?

The Sisters of Saint Joseph in their foundation and their history are no strangers to ravaged gardens. At their foundation in 17th century France, religious wars among groups both professing love of God and Christ divided their country. That division and its aftermath—poor widows, starving children and hatred, ignited their hearts and their mission: inclusive love that fosters union. In authentic spiritual wisdom, they knew they had to become that love by allowing God’s Spirit to transform their hearts and by making that love visible in deeds. Even as they passionately believed in their Catholic tradition, their love extended to every dear neighbor without distinction from whom they did not separate themselves. They made choices for love rather than hate, solidarity rather than exclusion.

They and those of us who followed them have a practice of reflecting on each day’s experiences. We invite God’s Spirit to reveal where we have responded to grace, where we have been love, received love. We also ask to know and acknowledge where we have been off target, missing the opportunities to be love. We take responsibility for and count on God’s grace and mercy to help us become what God dreams, to help us become good stewards of the garden we all share.

This and every Spring, Earth in its fierce and faithful beauty will invite us to bring alive what is good, true, pure and beautiful. May we tend the seeds of love, and cultivate respect that will renew our families, our communities, our church, our world. Join us in a resounding “YES! Amen.”

And I will always guide you and satisfy you with good things. I will keep you strong and well. You will be like a garden that has plenty of water, like a spring of water that never goes dry.

Isaiah 58:11
Good News Translation
Psalm of Bringing to Birth

— Sister Miriam Therese Winter, MMS
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Leader: What will we bring to birth in the world of the new creation?

All: Wisdom and justice, peace and compassion, concern for all God's little ones, for the homeless and the destitute, the hungry, and all who bear the brunt of indifference and oppression.

Leader: What will we bring to birth on the earth of the new creation?

All: A deep respect for our planet, its windsong and its waters, its topsoil and its forests, and a oneness with the wilderness that is the image of our soul.

Leader: What will we bring to birth in the church of the new creation?

All: A total disdain for power that diminishes or destroys, divestment of wealth and status, sharing of human resources based on mutuality, and the sudden surprise of grace.

Leader: What will we bring to birth in the hearts of the new creation?

All: An unbreakable bond of the Spirit that binds as one all sisters and brothers, transcending class, color, culture, religions, race, and gender, that treats no personal preference, no physical or spiritual difference as aberration or handicap.

Leader: One has been born among us who heralds such liberation. Human liberation, women's liberation, have taken flesh among us and in Spirit dwell with us.

All: Holy the woman who helped this happen. Blessed are we when we give birth to the Word made flesh among us.

The Paradoxical Commandments

by Dr. Kent M. Keith

People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.

The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

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Listen deeply to subtle nudges of the Holy Spirit; then act on them.

Maxim 15
How Do You Know When You Are Being Nudged by God?

— Ernestine Hunter, Partner in Mission

If God is nudging you, it is usually about something you do not want to do. Well, that is the way it seems to me. When God wants us to move in a certain direction, He provides ways to keep that thing before us until we can discern His will.

Many years ago, someone close to me betrayed me, and I was very badly hurt. My pastor at that time would often say, "If you don’t get better, you’ll get bitter." I became more aware of messages concerning forgiveness. I began to hear sermons about forgiveness; read daily devotionals about forgiveness; heard people talking about forgiveness. Truly, forgiving was the very last thing I wanted to do.

However, God kept working on me, kept nudging until I realized that forgiveness was the only way to get spiritually and emotionally better. Today I am so thankful that I responded to God’s nudging all those years ago. Forgiveness changed my perspective, and in subsequent years, I was able to be a blessing to the one who hurt me.

— Pat Blake Flume, SSJ Associate in Mission

The most telling aspect of being nudged by God is that God never gives up. If we say, "No," or if we are undecided, God simply asks in another way or presents us with a situation that makes it almost impossible to say no. The suggestions come in many and varied forms. It could be a phrase that a person says to us, or in a book that we read, or a movie that we see. It’s like God is a mother duck gently, but persistently, pushing us in the direction we need to go.

— Phillip Parrish, SSJ Associate in Mission

There is a hymn titled “Somebody’s Knocking at Your Door.” How do I know it is truly God who is knocking, nudging me to action rather than just my desires? I know it is God when it aligns with our mission as Christians to be loving, kind and unifying. As humans, we are creatures of habit who need to be nudged out of our comfort zones and challenged to the "more." This is why Jesus assured the apostles that he was leaving us an Advocate who would speak to our hearts and nudge us to his will.
Prodding one gently—drawing one’s attention to, a means of encouragement, an invitation or suggestion—these are all definitions of what it means for someone to be nudged by another. God clearly takes any and all of these seriously. God’s never-ending mission of providing us with opportunities to encounter relationships and circumstances from God’s unique perspective necessitates the act of frequent nudging.

As I pondered this question, I reflected on a few more famous nudgings recounted in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Not in a destructive fire does Moses encounter the presence of Yahweh, but rather in the burning bush, which is illuminated but not consumed by the flames. Not in a fierce storm nor raging wind, but in the whisper of a breeze, God’s presence was made manifest to Elijah. Jesus tends to make the invisible visible when he references the lilies of the field, the sparrows and the littlest of children. Such creatures seeming of insignificance provided a segue for some of Jesus’ most profound teachings.

God knows each of us intimately at the deepest of levels. This particularity of relationship creates a custom fit regarding God’s successful nudging strategies! Anyone who knows me is aware of how hyper-focused on details I can be. My ability to laser focus on what seems to be the least significant can be both a blessing and a curse. I notice God’s ability to “interpret all things in the most favorable sense” regarding my attention to detail. God takes advantage of this when it comes to nudging me.

Whether delighting in the countless variety of shells and stones washed up on the sand or the tiny violet stretching toward the sun from a sliver-sized crack in the sidewalk, my attention is immediately drawn to the creator of these spectacular beauties. God’s desire to have me pause and witness the power of such tiny wonders reminds me that both time and encounters are precious.

In community life and ministry, God’s nudges come in the form of an unexpected conversation, a chance to notice a situation I may otherwise have missed or a random encounter with someone who spoke words of challenge or encouragement. I realize that God uses the ordinary and mundane to capture my attention for what God considers most essential.

Throughout my life, I have not experienced earth-shattering signs of God’s communication with me. Rather, I value and hold dear the thinly veiled moments when I sense God’s tangible presence: a ladybug silently strolling on a wooden porch beam at Cape May; a monarch butterfly gliding gracefully among the forsythia bushes at school; a sunbeam dancing on the living room wall; a glistening reflection of the full moon peeking through a windowpane; an unexpected greeting via text from a friend; a timely quote from scripture I just happen to stumble upon when hope or courage are needed most.

While I might not always grasp the full impact of God’s nudges at the time, I typically smile or laugh at the subtle ways in which these encounters occur. Perhaps in the quiet ah-ha moments, God, too, smiles at my recognition of this delicate prodding to notice what everyone else around me seems to simply pass by. It’s in acknowledging one another’s presence when God and I connect so deeply. The Divine is in the delicate details and mundane moments.
Nudges, by their nature, are subtle, understated awarenesses that reach the heart through the senses. Sometimes a nudge is a prayer, a song, a photo, a kitchen aroma, a piece of art, a film, or a poem shared that captures and moves one’s heart or memory.

Nudges are touchstones of the spirit which can either move us or caution us to wait for a better time. Nudges can be seen as a facet of discernment which help one recognize Presence, like Elijah and The Whisper.

Before 1981, all of us awaited the arrival of “The Change List” to see who’d be moving or staying on a mission. That year, I received a call from Sister Liz O’Hara, asking me if I’d consider going to Our Lady of Mercy in Winston Salem, NC. I told Liz I’d like to pray about it and call her back in a few days. I’d just finished my Masters degree in theology and pastoral ministry at LaSalle. Moving to NC meant leaving my beloved Holy Name School and parish ministry, a wonderful community and friends after six years.

The phone call became the nudge. There’s no waiting for a hard copy list of names, missions, and ministries. This nudge required an answer in a whole new form of obedience and missioning. Saying “yes” to this nudge led me to a different style of being Church, living community, and serving in ministry—all in a relatively young diocese where parishioners seemed very intentional about being Church.

At that time there were about 80 sisters who moved from school to parish ministry. This change created a kind of hybrid community life. Adjusting to two different schedules required local communities to adapt to a whole new timetable and creative ways of being together. You can’t have a community meeting after school or in the early evening when one or more of the sisters works till 5:00 PM and has night meetings and groups. This emerging, hybrid-styled community life nudged everyone to be more flexible and understanding, and to be ready to pivot at any given moment. In the last 40 years, we’ve all been nudged in similar ways.

Another significant nudge came into my heart when I felt called to extend an invitation to the St. Stephen (Elkin, NC) parishioners to become SSJ Associates in Mission. Since many travel a distance to come to church on Sunday for Mass, and Faith Formation, it seemed unlikely folks would want to come an additional time during the week for an Associates gathering. I invited Sisters Rita Woehlke and Mary Ann Mulzet to come give a presentation on our SSJ History and the Associates in Mission. Since many travel a distance to come to church on Sunday for Mass, and Faith Formation, it seemed unlikely folks would want to come an additional time during the week for an Associates gathering. I invited Sisters Rita Woehlke and Mary Ann Mulzet to come give a presentation on our SSJ History and the Associates in Mission. To my amazement over 50 attended the initial gathering. This was a wonderful response since St. Stephen is a small mission church of 125 members in rural NC.

Debbie and Phillip Parrish, and Diane and Skip Whitman became the first SSJ Associates in Mission, followed by Kathy Jenkins, Ronnie Krakovsky, and Patty Topper, who were part of the second group that formed two years ago. Both groups now meet together and call themselves a CGC (Christian Growth Community). The nudge I felt six years ago to begin an Associates group here is bearing fruit in Elkin and in Charlotte, NC, as well.

Nudges take on all kinds of disguises. Some shatter our souls like an earthquake, while others are gentle whispers that continue to shape and reshape us in grace.
My husband and I are devout Catholics who enjoy attending Mass and we proudly sent our children to Saint Timothy, Father Judge and Saint Hubert. I believed we were living our faith to the fullest each day and God would be happy with who we were as a family, and then He nudged me to share my time, talent and treasure with my parish community. The nudge was not obvious at first—a simple invitation from my pastor to join the Parish Council. Of course, I said, yes. Who would say no to their pastor? This tiny step was the beginning of an awakening that I never expected.

My first interaction with fellow parishioners in this role provided me with an opportunity to recognize that I have gifts to share with others and God was calling me to contribute in any way possible. It also afforded me the chance to interact with the Sisters of Saint Joseph who have been a wonderful presence in my life and at Saint Timothy. Through many thought provoking-conversations, I began to realize that there was not a rope in front of me pulling me into these situations; rather, there was a set of hands on my shoulders gently encouraging me to believe in myself and share myself with others. God always knows best. That first step defines so much of who I am today. I have been fortunate to serve on many of our parish committees over the years, not only because as my husband says, "you don't know how to say no," but more so because I embrace the gentle nudge to work with others.

There are two defining nudges that God has given me in recent years. One was the courage to go back to school. Initially, the chance to coach in our CYO program was more of a rope pull than a gentle nudge from behind. Even though I had many years of coaching experience at the high school level, I wanted no part of being on the sideline again. I was content to watch my kids play and focus on being a supportive parent, not a coach. Eventually, the athletic director convinced me to change my mind and coach just one team. That first team has evolved into 19 years serving as a coach and athletic director. Why keep doing this, even after my own children graduated? Because this is definitely where God wants me to be. He believes in me and knows that I value the chance to mentor young adults today.

A stronger push from behind was God’s way of encouraging me to overcome a great fear and return to school. His belief that I could handle the challenges of being an adult student aided me in believing that I could succeed. What I did not realize was that this journey would be one of the biggest of my life. Attending Graduate School with a major in Leadership was definitely in God’s plan for me all along. He knew that one simple step at a time would give me the confidence to take the bigger steps when they crossed my path. More importantly, this journey of going back to school enabled me to develop a deeper understanding of the world around me, especially for the students I work with on a daily basis.

How do I know when I am being nudged by God? When I take the time to stop my everyday life and just be in the moment. Sometimes it’s a simple nudge to go out of my way to say hello to someone, or listen when a friend needs to talk. Other times it’s a more prominent nudge that pushes me to broaden my horizons and understand that God’s plan is bigger than myself. The roadblocks we encounter in life are not placed there to stop us; rather, they are more like question marks that God has placed there to ask us, "How do I do this? And why should I do this?" The road ahead may be long, but the hands on my shoulders are gently guiding me to appreciate God’s nudge to live the life that He has planned for me.

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— Trish Decker, Partner in Mission

Throughout my life, I have often questioned God about His intentions and asked, "Why me? Why now? Why are You placing me in this situation and why is this happening at this point in my life?" So many times, my stubbornness caused me to resist these challenges until I understood that God wasn’t challenging me—He was nudging me to embrace the world around me and the journey ahead.

Nudge can be defined in many ways including "prod and push." Personally, I define it as a gentle reminder to embrace the opportunities to live a better life and be aware of others around me. It is not always obvious when God is nudging us; sometimes it could be a moment where we stop and think, "Should I do this?" Other times we might have an awakening to do something bigger than ourselves. No matter how we recognize the presence of God nudging us in life, we can understand and appreciate that He is doing it for our own benefit.

Complacency was a common thread in my life for many years. I was comfortable with my personal and professional life and resistant to any change until I immersed myself in my parish, Saint Timothy.
How am I nudged by God? Simple: God pokes me with a stick! How’s that for a nudge?

When I reflected on the word “nudge” and looked up the definition, I was immediately struck by the word: “gentle” in the description. From my own experience, I have always responded well when it comes to making course corrections in life that involve habits that need to be pitched. Through God’s nudge (whether through my own inspired thought; or someone serving as an “instrument”), I get to learn through my own mistakes and not punish myself for being human. Such an Almighty nudge keeps me humble and reminds me to count those blessings, especially when turning on the evening news and seeing and listening to the horrors of war, the senseless violence in our communities, and the hairline triggers toward hate and anger toward “neighbor.” It is no wonder why a wise sage once pointed out that all the world is “burning.” If I don’t watch it, that burning can ignite the fires of greed, anger and stupidity within my own heart toward my neighbor and the spoiled brat inside of me. This is where God’s nudge for me is a little more than gentle when counting those blessings.

It was pointed out to me once by a wise and respected elder: “Hey, you sleep on a bed better than Napoleon slept! He slept on a horsehair bed, and he was the Emperor of France.” Nudged. I remember my Grandmom told me that growing up, she used an outhouse, had a pump in the backyard to get water, and the entire household gathered around a coal-burning stove for heat, for cooking and for warming water. For my whole lifetime, I simply moved the faucet lever to the left, and within moments not just hot water but almost scalding hot. No pumping is required. Nudged, yet again, to count those blessings.

I take a daily hour-long morning walk throughout my neighborhood. All types of weather: rain, snow, sunny, windy—off I go, thanks to sneakers, hats, gloves and coats that to protect me from the elements during cold temperatures. Indoors, I have a closet full of clothes to wear, a fridge and freezer, and a pantry full of food, all fashioned under-roof to keep out the harsh weather and pests. Yet, I sometimes grumble about not having more—when all my basic necessities are more than met. Goodness, Caesar’s chariot got him all over the Roman Empire and was only pulled by a few horses. The car that pulls me back and forth to the Villa during the workweek has at least 195 horses under the hood. Talk about being nudged by God to count those blessings!

I realize I take for granted these daily miracles and marvels that are readily accessible to me. This gives God a chance to administer another nudge resulting in growth toward wisdom and compassion to be grateful for what I have. I certainly give God plenty of opportunities to use that stick!

Thanks to my teachers and teachings of spiritual traditions throughout the ages, I can reflect and be grateful for all the blessings in my life. God’s nudge manifests similarly as a compassionate and wise teacher who passes along home-grown wisdom: “Michael Joseph, no bellyaching and no poor me, poor me. Be humble and content with what you have. Don’t be a spoiled brat.” Nudged, and thank you.

Being nudged along my path in life by God is a gift. It can be a lifesaver, too. A skillful nudge offers the opportunity to provide solace to another traveler on life’s journey. While going through a period of “growing pains,” a spiritual friend would often suggest a title of a book or pass along an inspiring story from their life history about how they were nudged by God and the positive effect it had. Such sharing and fellowship gave me a much-needed “nudge” toward my maturity.

Recently, a friend lost a loved one. I received the news in the later evening hours and immediately the following Beatitude came to mind: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” I sent a text offering comfort. That nudge adds a spiritual dimension of intuition, inspiration and readiness. To be ready for the call of the quiet voice within (God’s nudge) can be a challenge for me as life’s distractions and temptations do deafen that quiet voice within and I can miss it. I believe the most touching nudges from God bring me back to center—a gentle reminder that I “spaced out” and allows me to come back to the present.

As I reflect on the nudges of God throughout my life, I am blessed. Grateful, I bring that spirit to the Villa. Being among spiritual friends and family—gives me plenty of reason to keep counting those blessings, sparing God from getting carried away with using that stick.
I love this question! It actually brings a smile to my face. No, it actually makes me chuckle. To be honest, I think it makes God chuckle, too, because God and I both know that He never, ever stops nudging me.

God is an artist, a creator. He’s constantly trying to add the finishing touches on His creation—His masterpieces. He gives us the freedom to consent or reject His designs for us. And so, He nudes us in the direction that will lead us to our transformation. But unlike other artists, God has the challenge of trying to create a masterpiece from an organic, free-spirited, living piece of matter who sometimes resists the master’s strokes. But, then again, an artist has his techniques. And one of God’s techniques is the art of persuasion. He is a master at this—a gentle, unobtrusive style of persuasion. When the soul in transformation needs to be intricately chiseled into perfection, the Divine Artist responds to the resistance with this question, "Will you do this for Me?" The Divine Creator asks permission from His creation. He surrenders His right to act upon the soul but rather seeks cooperation, thus gifting the soul with the opportunity to be a co-creator in the masterpiece.

So, how do I know when I am being nudged by God? "I ask Him, "What is it you want me to do? Is this from You or from my own will?" The intimacy experienced between the Artist and His creation, between God and the soul, allows the question to be asked directly. And the answer will be known. The nudging is an invitation inspired by the Artist who is seeking the other’s awareness of His Presence. This delicate relationship between the Artist and the soul is one of love. The response depends upon the depth of love experienced and the soul’s willingness to surrender to the guidance of the Artist. As the intimacy fuses into oneness, the "nudging" lessens as "the creation" eagerly seeks the touch of the Master.

Life is a journey. Our spiritual life is also a journey. We know we are growing in a spiritual life as we increase having an open heart, an open mind and the will for divine inspiration at every level of relationship.

When experiencing a Spiritual Awakening, we are in contact with the Divine. This contact leads us to expand our minds, increasing compassion and widening our range of choices. Through these choices, we move away from compulsion to greater freedom.

**12 Symptoms of A Spiritual Awakening**

1. An increased tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen.
2. Frequent attacks of smiling.
3. Feelings of being connected with others and nature.
4. Frequent overwhelming episodes of appreciation.
5. A tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than from fears based on past experience.
6. An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment.
7. A loss of ability to worry.
8. A loss of interest in conflict.
9. A loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others.
10. A loss of interest in judging others.
11. A loss of interest in judging self.
12. Gaining the ability to love without expecting anything.

These steps are used in the recovery community—a group of people dedicated to spiritual growth.
For SSJ Associate in Mission Diane Maguire, the pandemic was a wonderful time in terms of richness and everything available online. "It was a fabulous family time," she recalls, "and having Zoom calls so often was good for me. At the time, I was doing consulting full time for nonprofits. I had several different kinds of clients: a housing organization, a homeless organization, a children’s organization, and a Science Center, to name a few. I continued to work during the first half of the pandemic. As we moved into the second year, there were few opportunities."

Diane decided to volunteer. She worked with The Ignatian Volunteer Corps and the Sisters of Mercy for a while, but none of it was meaty enough for her. While browsing through Facebook one day, she noticed that a friend of hers was enrolled in an immigration program at Villanova University. Although she had not been particularly attracted to that cause, it caught Diane’s attention. She decided to learn more about the program and enroll—maybe just for a semester.

The program is VIISTA (Villanova Interdisciplinary Immigration Studies Training for Advocates). It is a new, 100% online interdisciplinary educational program that trains students to become immigrant advocates ready to serve migrants and refugees.

Unlike criminal proceedings in which defendants have constitutional rights to representation, in the United States, migrants are not entitled to court-appointed lawyers. Lack of advocacy disrupts families in life-altering ways. Families are separated with each deportation order, employers lose employees, and communities lose valued neighbors and friends. The migrant-serving community knows we need more advocates. VIISTA is the first university-based online certificate program to train immigrant advocates. Having an advocate is even more important than the strength of the underlying legal claim. Migrants with representation are more likely to be released from detention, appear in court, win their removal cases, and seek and obtain relief from deportation.

Diane explains, "At the end of the program, you have a portfolio that will enable you to apply to the Department of Justice to be an accredited representative. Now, you can work under the supervision of a lawyer and actually represent people in immigration court."

Diane volunteered at the National League Service Center in Philadelphia as part of her coursework. One day, she found herself and another volunteer driving a family of five from Philadelphia to Newark, NJ, to an asylum hearing. As they traveled, the father shared some of his family’s story. This family had been evacuated from Afghanistan last year. That trip took them to Germany, Washington, DC, Indiana, and finally, Philadelphia. Listening to their plight of suffering, fear, hunger, and the inhumanity they experienced deeply moved Diane.

The hearing, which was supposed to be for a few hours, lasted almost seven hours. When they came out of the courtroom, tired and hungry, the father shared that they did not have an answer, but were told to wait for a letter, which could take up to 150 days. He was not angry or upset, saying, "They were very thorough."

This experience profoundly affected Diane. "I thought, this is important work I’m doing. To know that there’s a 1.7 million backlog of cases and that only some small percentage of people, who are immigrants, are getting representation. Therefore, they’re not getting asylum because they have no representation. It’s life-changing, totally life-changing, and I knew from that moment that I was in for more than a semester. I was finishing the program. I knew that this was a way I could contribute to humanity for the next stage of my life. This can make a difference in some people’s lives in a fundamental and real way.

I know these stories are heartbreaking. When you hear the suffering that people go through, you realize just how good we have it in this country. I am just so aware now of how blessed I am and how unaware I was of how blessed. Coming face to face and looking into the eyes of someone living with so much pain and fear has changed me. Those personal stories—that’s the thing that can transform you. There are so many people in need and so many opportunities to volunteer. If you can, reach out in some way in your town, city or community. It changed my life."
Can We Be Anything but Hopeful?
— Sister Celeste Mokrzycki SSJ

Landing at Newark airport after two weeks of helping the Ukrainian refugees in Przemyśl, Poland, I was surprised by the blossoming of the cherry blossom trees. It was still winter in Przemyśl, a small town of 65,000, which is most often seen on newscasts about the plight of the Ukrainian refugees. I stayed and served with the Little Servant Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, a traditional Polish congregation garbed in full-length blue habits. The Sisters worried about finding me at the airport in Rzeszów, but I recognized them quite easily. There were many visible differences between us: our dress, language, spirituality, and the way we pray. My “Polish” knees were not up to the task of genuflection, but when it came to the mission of Jesus, our hearts and minds were the same.

Every day, the Sisters and I would wait for the train’s arrival from Ukraine. We would find the most vulnerable refugees, women and children, who had no place for the night. The Sisters, the police and the Caritas volunteers were very concerned about the potential for human trafficking. Hauling mostly plastic bags filled with items grabbed quickly, the Ukrainian refugees arrived on packed trains. Dazed and traumatized by their forced exodus, they were tired, worn and fearful. Volunteers from across the world greeted them with words of welcome and carried their bags and sometimes even exhausted children. For many, this was their first experience of warmth and compassion since escaping the constant barrage of bullets, bombs and piercing sounds of sirens.

Although somewhat familiar to us from the nightly news, the stories we heard and witnessed were horrendous. They tore at our hearts. The young woman talked to her neighbor on her cell and heard that her entire family was killed. With loud wailing, she collapsed, then became comatose and incapable of caring for her infant. Grabbing my arm, the elderly Ukrainian woman was desperate because she had nowhere to go. With tears rolling down their faces, the two elderly women clung to each other for life as they walked into the unknown, leaving the familiar comfort of their small villages. I have never experienced the tragedy of war directly, only what I have witnessed on the news or read in magazines. I never knew my heart could be carved so profoundly to hold the suffering of my dear neighbors.

When we were waiting at the station, we would wonder about where this war would lead and speculate about Putin’s intentions. Would there be a world war? Would Putin attack Poland? What would be left for the Ukrainians as they returned to
their land? Each night just brought more dire news about the war, which seemed to have no end. We could have been overcome with hopelessness, yet we saw and celebrated the glimmers of God lighting the darkness in all of this. Every tragic story shared with each other ended with a message of hope in a God who wept with us, covered us with love and strengthened us for the next day’s journey to the train station. I was reminded of these words from the song “Do Not Fear to Hope” by Rory Cooney:

Hope is for a pilgrim people  
Searching for a promised land.  
Hope is like a rose in winter,  
Or an open hand.  
It celebrates the light of morning  
While working in the dark and cold  
It gathers us together  
To share what we’ve been told.

What were the signs of hope in this devastation? The people of Przemyśl opened their hands and heart, pouring out the love of God in their embrace of the dear neighbors. The Poles in this area had longstanding wounds suffered after the Second World War when each side inflicted death on the other. Now, the Poles opened their arms in forgiveness and compassion because they knew the pain of being forcibly moved out of their land and the loss of their freedom. Only a year ago, Poland’s President Andrej Duda signed a law to build a border wall to keep out his neighbors, Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. He now
Pictured top: Refugees rest at the train station.

Pictured bottom: After hearing the heartbreaking stories from the Ukrainian refugees, Sister Celeste painted this image, "Defend Us in Battle," as a prayer to Saint Michael the Archangel.

Page 16

Pictured top left: Many of the refugees struggled to make a decision about bringing their pets into the safety of Poland. This elderly woman who made the difficult journey with her daughter, clearly shows her affection for her four legged refugee.

Pictured top right: The Little Servant Sisters of the Immaculate Conception prepared a special breakfast to celebrate Saint Joseph’s Day with Sister Celeste.

Pictured bottom left: A little boy, one of many child refugees, guards his family’s belongings as he waits for his mother to return from the ticket counter so they can travel to their next destination.
offered government assistance, free passage and work visas to the Ukrainians. Only God can heal and transform hearts so amazingly.

Our brother and sister refugees were signs of hope as they headed to their temporary Promised Land. Despite their painful journey, they remained a strong and proud people. Their gut-wrenching decisions made without time for discernment didn’t destroy them but strengthened their resolve to rebuild and thrive. Their plight reminded me of the passage from 2 Corinthians 4:9: “We were persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.”

For me, a seed of hope was planted when I drew a child’s portrait. One day at the train station, there were so many volunteers that I tried to see how I could serve. I noticed a young girl drawing a picture as I entered the playroom. I was inspired. I asked one of the Sisters who spoke Ukrainian to ask her if I could draw her portrait and I did. A line soon formed, and children were filled with joy as they ran around showing off their portraits. One mother asked me to sign the portrait so her child could have a happy memory of this time. She knew her daughter would live and thrive!

President Biden’s visit to Poland was a sign of hope for the people, both Poles and Ukrainians. His presence meant everything to them. The refugees knew that America did not forget them. They were not abandoned and alone.

Toward the end of my two weeks, the Sisters asked me to stay an
extra week. They longed for me to see the beauty of their land with the new life that Spring awakens. Although the greening hinted of what was to come, I did not need to see buds or hints of green to see the beauty of Poland. The hope of new life sprung not from buds but from the faith of the people. In Romans 12:12, Paul admonishes the people to be joyful, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer. We will probably never know what happens in the next step of their journeys. I hope that they will find the "Promised Land" that they seek and that they will return to the land they love. I know that God’s heart is with His people and that our prayer will sustain them along the way. We, as faith-filled people, can do nothing else but place our hope in a God who promises resurrection!

About Sister Celeste

Born in Poland, Sister Celeste emigrated to the United States at the age of five to live with her aunt and uncle in Bayonne, NJ. Her early experience of leaving her family at a young age makes her extremely compassionate and understanding of the challenges of being an immigrant in a new land. She first met the Sisters of Saint Joseph while attending Holy Family Academy in Bayonne. In 1979, Sister Celeste graduated from Chestnut Hill College, Philadelphia with an art degree. After working as a graphic artist, she became a Sister of Saint Joseph, much to the surprise of her friends and even some of the sisters. God’s call can be very unexpected!

Her ministries included teaching art and theology at Hallahan High School and Cardinal Dougherty in Philadelphia, and Our Lady of Good Counsel High School in Newark, NJ. She ministered as a pastoral associate in several parishes including Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Oakland, NJ, Saint Thomas the Apostle, Brigantine, NJ, Our Mother of Consolation, Philadelphia, PA and The Parish of Saint Monica, Atlantic City, NJ. She also served as the Vocation Director for the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

During all her ministries, Sister Celeste created artwork that expressed her love of God’s creation. People would ask why she didn’t just paint religious subjects and she would say: "I do. All my landscapes, figures, florals, and scriptural paintings equally reflect the beauty and image of the Creator." Presently, she teaches watercolor painting, drawing and acrylic to senior citizens at the community center in Brigantine, NJ. Working in this mostly part-time position, gives her the opportunity to create her own work, accept commissions and give workshops which integrate spirituality and art. One of these exciting opportunities is to participate in the annual meeting of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in August and to create paintings which reflect the spirit and movement of the gathering.

Pictured left: After a night or two at the convent, smiles returned to the faces of the refugees.

Pictured right: Sister Celeste stands with the Ukrainian family who accepted a sunflower painting from one of her students who wanted the artwork to go to a refugee.
A spirit of joy and thanksgiving filled the Chapel at Saint Joseph Villa on Saturday, April 23, 2022, as 21 Sisters of Saint Joseph celebrated their Jubilee Day by sharing in a Mass concelebrated by Father Angelo Citino, Father Terry Odien and Father Michael Kelly.

Celebrating 80 years: Sisters Helen Gilbert Mann, Virginia Maria Stanton, Catherine Teresa Roche and Conradine Lehmann

Celebrating 75 years: Sisters Margaret Tobin, Anita Louise Bruno, Roberta Rivello and Mary Fineran

Celebrating 70 years: Sisters Alice Marie Badey, Maria Virginia Jenkins, Rita Edward Karnell, Anne Francine Mead, Joan McCann, Alma Bernadette Hurley, Josephine Lucy Donahue, Mary E. Corbett and Barbara T. Kotzman

Celebrating 60 years: Sisters Frances Ann Hall, Mary Denise Clifford, Normandie Gaitley and Joan Alminde

The Jubilarians were greeted in Maguire Lounge by the members of the General Council, who presented them with corsages and joined sisters, staff and friends for Morning Prayer.

In the Chapel, Congregational President, Sister Maureen G. Erdlen SSJ, warmly welcomed all present, recalling with gratitude the lives of the Jubilarians, lived for God in service to the Church.

“Oh, happy day! How fitting it is that we celebrate your fidelity to the call of our God, as we hear...
Alleluia all around us! We rejoice with you in all God has given us, especially through your witness to God’s love for 80, 75, 70 and 60 years as a Sister of Saint Joseph.

We welcome your family and friends, our sisters and Associates, those here in the Chapel with us, and those joining our live streaming. I want you to know that our sisters and Associates who are on pilgrimage to our original foundation in LePuy, France, have joined us in prayer for you and are watching the live stream.

Dear Jubilarians, I ask you to think, for just a moment, of all the lives you have touched as you lived out the mystery of your vocation so faithfully. Just picture thousands of students, parents, young teachers, catechumens, bereaved, the sick and elderly, women in formation, prisoners, and our own sisters, who have been the beneficiaries of your ministries. So many have come to know our loving and gracious God because of you. You have no idea of the impact you have had, but as your family, friends, and sisters, we do. So, we should say Alleluia and thank you!

Our Constitutions read, ‘Each day we make a new beginning in this Little Institute as we move among the people in gentleness, zeal and joy, with our hearts burning within us.’ You, sister Jubilarians, have moved among God’s people for a cumulative total of 544,222 days! Your gentleness, zeal and joy continue to inspire all of us. May your hearts continue to burn within you, today, and every day, as you light up, not just the Villa, but our world! Alleluia!”
Pictured top, from left: Sisters Virginia Maria Stanton and Normandie Gaitley

Pictured middle: Members of the leadership team, from left, Sisters Karen Dietrich, Owen Patricia Bonner, Maureen G. Erdlen and Eileen Marnien, greet Jubilarian Sister Conradine Lehmann.

Pictured bottom, from left: Sisters Barbara Kotzman and Karen Dietrich

Pictured top, from left: Sisters Joan McCann and Teresa Shaw

Pictured middle, from left: Sisters Anne Francine Mead and Maureen G. Erdlen

Pictured bottom, from left: Sisters Margaret Tobin and Owen Patricia Bonner
Pictured top, center from left: Sisters Anita Louise Bruno, Owen Patricia Bonner and guests

Pictured middle: Sister Josephine Lucy Donahue celebrates with her sisters.

Pictured bottom, from left: Sisters Mary Denise Clifford and Teresa Shaw

Pictured top, from left: Sisters Joan McCann and Maureen G. Erdlen

Pictured middle: Sister Alice Marie Badey celebrates with family members.

Pictured bottom, from left: Sister Conradine Lehmann celebrates with family.
Pictured top: Sisters gather for prayer prior to Mass.

Pictured middle: Cantor Sister Michelle Lesher is accompanied by members of the all-sister musical ensemble.

Pictured bottom: Sisters, families and friends gather to celebrate our Jubilarians in the Saint Joseph Villa Chapel.

Pictured top, from left: Sisters Joyce Ballerino, Karen Dietrich, Owen Patricia Bonner, Maureen G. Erdlen and Teresa Shaw greet Jubilarian Sister Helen Gilbert Mann.

Pictured bottom, from front to back: Jubilarains Sisters Anne Francine Mead, Alma Bernadette Hurley, Virginia Maria Stanton, Mary E. Corbett, Conradine Lehmann and Mary Fineran
"I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have called you and you are mine."

We remember with love each of these women, our sisters and friends, who died recently. We celebrate their lives and the example they offered to the Sisters of Saint Joseph, their families, their friends, the Church and the world. These women embraced the call to "Let your life be a continuous act of love." (Maxims of the Little Institute)

They lived lives of faithfulness and commitment while they were with us, and we depend upon them now to continue to pray on our behalf. May they rest in the arms of the loving God they so faithfully served!

Sister Maria Virginia Jenkins
May 1, 2022
Save the Date!

Swing for the Sisters
14th Annual Golf Tournament
The Grand Finale!

Flatbush Golf Course • Littlestown, PA
This will be our final tournament.

Do you know someone who would like to receive One With?
Send the name and mailing address to us at the address above, or email cpollock@ssjphila.org or phone 215.248.7269