

How to celebrate a 200th birthday

Mary Ann McGivern | May. 3, 2012 NCR Today

I'm still glowing with delight from the four-day experience at our Loretto Motherhouse last week. April 25 was the 200th anniversary of our first sisters entering/forming the community. One of the benefits of a blog is that length doesn't matter -- usually I write brief entries, but I figure if you should turn 200, you will want to know how to do it.

On Sunday, we honored our benefactors and dedicated and opened our new Heritage Center, a magnificent display of archival material in the old Loretto Junior College auditorium where as novices we square-danced, had choir practice and celebrated Christmas with a huge tree and presents from home set out on chairs in a huge circle.

As we processed from the chapel to the Heritage Center, a cheerful, singing conglomerate of wheelchairs, bright colors and cameras, I remembered the annual Sacred Heart procession in the heat of July, novice white capes and veils glistening in the sun, residents from the towns of Loretto and Lebanon standing on the sides to watch. "That was then; this is now," I whispered.

Two of my brothers who died of AIDS are buried in the cemetery. My parents gave their bodies to science, but in 1984, nobody but Loretto would take my brothers' bodies. Last week, many community members visited them and others' family members buried in our AIDS garden. "Now," the changes from "then," had begun in the special chapters of 1964 and 1967, and we Loretto members thrived.

On the birthday itself, our president, Cathy Mueller, said, "In our history, we have faced many challenges with parish priests, bishops and cardinals, and even the government. Fr. (Charles) Nerinckx was perceptive in his farewell letter when he said that the sake of peace, which was already somewhat interrupted in his relationship with the hierarchy, in his opinion that peace would always be tottering with the clergy and the Little Society of the Friends of Mary. Today is no different than 200 or 100 years ago. Our relationship with the hierarchy can be tottering, and we will continue to go forward faithful to our mission and charism."

At those words, we applauded. The applause grew. It continued. Then some members stood. Then we all stood. We kept clapping and tears came to our eyes. It was at least a three-minute interruption of Cathy's reflection, a heartfelt recognition that we are faithful to our mission and our charism.

Later, Cathy read a letter of congratulations from the Prefect of the Congregation of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life.

The salutation, "Dear Sisters and Co-Members," sent us into gales of delighted laughter at the prefect's recognition of who we are. He gave "heartfelt thanks and congratulations to all the members of your community" and said, "Sharing of your charism and mission with non-vowed members, acknowledging and celebrating the different ways of belonging to the Loretto community, will aid you in creatively continuing your evangelizing mission."

After we had done the work of renewal Pope Paul VI had called for, when we sent our rule to Rome for approval, we omitted mention of co-members because we had been told they did not belong in our canonical document. But the prefect himself was recognizing us for who we are. Oh, happy day.

During the two days previous, Monday and Tuesday, we had launched not one but four books. *A Century of Change* is the big book, long, indexed, with 20 authors. Monday night, we gathered in the chapel, and chapter authors spoke briefly about what we had learned from the writing about the nature of our community and the future that lies before us.

Sr. Mary Ken Lewis distributed the Loretto prayer book in the Thomas Merton library, no ceremony, just checking off the list of those who had requested it and promising all those who thought they had signed up that books for them would be available for the cost of postage.

Rosemary Chinnici put her book, *The Stitched Hearts of Jesus and Mary*, on two radiators outside the second dining room, free for the taking. She spoke about the book early Tuesday afternoon, describing some of the small details she uncovered about the spirituality of the early sisters.

And the jubilee class of 2012 launched *Voices from the Silence*, intelligent reflections, photos and splendid artwork about their formation and its impact on their later lives at a second reception on Tuesday for the Heritage Center. This time, there was a bar hosted by Maker's Mark.

The sign at the edge of the town of Loretto reads: "Welcome to Loretto, the home of the Sisters of Loretto and Maker's Mark distillery." It was fun. And the Jubilee book links "then" and "now" by giving a mature meaning to all those old novitiate stories.

Beginning Monday, we had a series of four Calls to Jubilee. We gathered outside and wrote the names of our founders, teachers, visionaries and beloved companions on ribbons to be present with us, waving in the wind.

We had a writers' workshop in a hope that proved futile, that it would generate more stories about our lives for the newly refurbished archives. We had tours of the farm on hay wagons, marking especially the 15,000 newly planted trees.

At Communion, on the jubilee day itself, we sang the litany of the saints, naming deceased sisters and co-members.

We ate well. We talked with one another. Two of the committees I serve on had brief meetings. Others also got some work done. We slept in dormitories, shared hotel rooms and stayed with sisters at other local motherhouses. Marion County, Ky., was settled by Catholics from Maryland and is to this day a Catholic center.

The Motherhouse staff worked their hearts out for us. The culmination of their work and an especial expression of our delight was the group photo. Everyone in the infirmary joined us on a hill in front of the Novitiate Building, and staff stood worriedly watching their charges at the foot of the hill while the photographer arranged us and gave us tips on being photogenic. Afterward, I stayed with two sisters in motorized wheelchairs as they followed a path around a small pond and then up the steep incline of the main road back to the infirmary. Sr. Mary Joyce started up the hill and put her wheelchair in full throttle, shouting, "Whoopee!"

It was a great way to celebrate 200 years.

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