

Benedictine sisters score needed funds during Super Bowl

PHOENIX - While the NFL and advertisers used Super Bowl XLII as a chance to further their enterprises and increase profits, some Benedictine sisters in Phoenix used the big game as an opportunity to further the work of the Catholic Church in spreading the Gospel.

By turning their Our Lady of Guadalupe Monastery and Retreat Center into an affordable hotel for football fans, the sisters raised much-needed funds for expansion, increased awareness of and promoted religious life, and established vocation and retreat contacts.

“Really, we did it as a fundraiser,” said Sister Linda Campbell, prioress of the monastery.

Sister Linda, a season-ticket holder for the Arizona Cardinals, knew football fans would appreciate the 3.5-mile drive from the Phoenix monastery to the Super Bowl’s playing field at the University of Phoenix Stadium in Glendale.

The sisters opened their 10 retreat rooms - that feature twin beds, a shared bathroom and no TV or phone - to 20 fans, who filled the rooms.

The football fans - who included a blend of New England Patriots and New York Giants fans - got a decent deal on a room and the sisters raised \$10,000. Their income stemmed from lodging fees and raffle tickets for a large, flat-screen TV to be given away Feb. 24.

Guests at the monastery included three fathers and their sons, another father and son who brought two college-age friends, two couples and a Bernardine Franciscan sister and her blood sister.

The sisters treated them to a welcome dinner and a continental breakfast each morning. They also had access to a full kitchen for other meals and snacks, a cozy living room, a large backyard and a small chapel, where at least a handful of the

guests attended Mass before the big game.

During his homily at the Mass, Father David Donnay likened the beatitudes to a pre-game pep talk. He said just like a coach huddles his players Jesus probably gathered his disciples and talked to them about how to spread the Gospel.

“If they can come away with a really positive experience about religious life, I couldn’t ask for anything better,” Sister Linda said about the guests.

They seemed to enjoy themselves, saying the game was secondary to their experience at the monastery.

“It’s a win-win situation for everybody,” Nick Schiarizzi, a Catholic and a Patriots fan from Massachusetts, said of the sisters’ offer for lodging.

The money will help pay what the sisters owe for roughly 2.75 acres of land they purchased near their home. The two sisters and an associate living at the monastery said they have outgrown the current two-acre property.

The new land will ultimately expand the monastery’s services. The Benedictine sisters offer meeting and retreat space, spiritual direction and a weekly Mass.

“One of the things that has become very real to us is the need for spirituality centers,” Sister Linda told The Catholic Sun, newspaper of the Phoenix Diocese.

She added that the retreat program has mushroomed. For the first time this past fall, the monastery began booking retreats one year in advance. The number of weekday retreats is also on the rise.

“I can’t say enough about the retreat center,” said Franciscan Sister Carol Ann Nawaracaj, noting the sisters’ thoughtfulness. “It goes over and beyond a hotel.”

Sister Carol Ann has served as honorary assistant coach for the Giants since 1981 when then-coach Ray Perkins found out that the Giants won all the games she attended. Sister Carol Ann extended prayerful support for the Giants and prayed throughout this year’s Super Bowl game.

Turns out someone might have been listening – the Giants won 17-14 in the last

minute of the game, creating one of the biggest upsets in Super Bowl history.

The sisters' Super Bowl offer also put them in touch with a retreat contact and helped them get 10 national retreat commitments. The monastery offers private, group and directed retreats.

"We've gotten a vocation contact out of it" as well, Sister Linda said.

A California woman had been researching convents. Her parents saw the story about the sisters' Super Bowl lodging on TV and told their daughter about it. Sister Linda said the young woman wants to go through further discernment with the Benedictine sisters' oblate program.