

# Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur mark 175 years in US

**By Mary K. Tilghman**

*Special to the Review*

Gratitude pervades the ministry of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, who often repeat a favorite phrase of their foundress, St. Julie Billiart: "How good is the good God!"

Celebrating their 175th year in America, the sisters still share that gratitude, their commitment to education and service in various ways, from Trinity School in Ellicott City to the Notre Dame Mission Volunteers and elsewhere.

Sister Gwynette Proctor directs the archdiocesan Office of Black Catholic Ministries. Sister Joan Kelly is pastoral associate of St. Ursula in Parkville, across the street from the parish school where she was principal 28 years.

"Julie was somebody who said, 'Teach them what they need for life,' " Sister Joan said, of the order's foundress.

While those needs have changed since the congregation's founding in France in the early 1800s, those words are as pertinent as ever at Trinity School, said Sister Catherine Phelps, principal.

"We help the children recognize the goodness of God that is in them and share it with others," she said, a process that includes long-standing service projects. "Frequently, students see things that need to be addressed and suggest projects themselves."

"Education helps people realize their God-given potential," said Sister Katherine "Sissy" Corr, executive director of the nationwide Notre Dame Mission Volunteers - Americorps. "For us there is nothing more exciting than learning."

NDMVA volunteers teach in schools and community centers, in GED programs and Head Start.

"They have such energy, such good creativity. We help them channel it," Sister Sissy said. "This helps us maintain our work with the poor and grow our work with the poor."

When Sister Sissy began heading the young program, she found support from Archbishop William Borders of Baltimore, the Americorps program and sisters around the country. Since 1994, 4,000 volunteers have served 700,000 in 30 states.

"This is Julie's confidence, Julie's confidence in the good God," she said.

Sister Sissy said she heard St. Julie Billiart's call "to grow your heart as wide as the world. And that really has happened. My heart has grown as big as the world."

The sisters will mark the 175th anniversary with a noon Mass, program and reception at St. Ursula Oct. 10. The parish will also honor the 170 SNDs who taught at the school at a 75th anniversary Mass Sept. 19 at 5 p.m. Wilmington Bishop Francis Malooly, a St. Ursula alum, will be the celebrant. Afterward, a statue of St. Julie will be dedicated.

The first sisters came to the United States from Namur, Belgium, in 1840, settling in Cincinnati.

In 1873, they established Notre Dame Academy in Washington, D.C., then part of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, and in 1934, opened the motherhouse in Ellicott City.

The foundress was a pioneer in the education of girls, said Sister Eileen Sweeney, a long-time teacher who lives at Villa Julie in Stevenson.

"Educate the mothers," she said. "They influence the world."

They opened Trinity Preparatory School, a girls' high school, in 1934; Trinity School in 1941, and Maryvale Preparatory School in Lutherville in 1945. Heeding their foundress's call to educate the poor, the SNDs helped found Sisters Academy of Baltimore, a middle school for girls in need, which they continue to sponsor.

Just as St. Julie and her co-foundress, noblewoman Françoise Blin de Bourdon, ignored class boundaries as they worked together, Sister Gwynette witnessed a similar spirit of cooperation in her work at Our Daily Bread and the Christopher Place Employment Academy, and now as she advocates for the archdiocese's 17 African-American parishes.

"Good people are looking for ways to help, to give back to the community," she said. "I feel I'm being true to her (St. Julie's) charism, to see people as sacred and how to help them."

Sister Barbara Ann "Bobby" English has stepped down from her longtime role leading the Julie Community Center - a southeast Baltimore center devoted to the needs of low-income and vulnerable citizens - but believes the congregation is working to continue St. Julie's charism.

As Sister Bobby, now a member of the Tri-Province Executive Council, put it, "It will go forward because God is good."

Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Baltimore:

**Sister Elaine Bain**

Director and Clinical Counselor, Suburban Pastoral Counseling Center, Catonsville

**Sister Marlene Biasiello**

Chaplain, Stella Maris Nursing Home, Towson

**Sister Katherine "Sissy" Corr**

Executive Director, Notre Dame Mission Volunteers Baltimore

**Sister Mary Donohue**

Chaplain, Symphony Manor Nursing home, Instructor in Pastoral Training at Greater

Baltimore Medical Center

**Sister Vivien Echekwubelu**

Critical Care Nurse, St. Agnes Hospital, Baltimore

**Sister Barbara Ann “Bobby” English**

Member, Tri-Province Executive Council

**Sister Suzanne Hall**

Member, Tri-Province Executive Council

**Sister Edith Ann Kane**

Coordinator of Special Projects, SNDdeN Development Office

**Sister Joan Kelly**

Pastoral Associate, St. Ursula’s Parish, Parkville

**Sister Shawn Maguire**

Board of Trustees, Maryvale Preparatory School, Lutherville

**Sister Catherine Phelps**

President, Trinity School, Ellicott City

**Sister Gwynette Proctor**

Director, Archdiocesan Office of Black Catholic Ministries, Baltimore

**Sister Collette Quinn**

Pastoral Moderator, Villa Julie

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