

# VOICES — OF CHARITY



SISTERS OF CHARITY  
OF LEAVENWORTH

— SPRING 2025 —





SISTERS OF CHARITY  
OF LEAVENWORTH

## CHAPTER 2022 DIRECTIONAL STATEMENT

Now, with God's grace, we are called in these days

"...to give freely of ourselves and our goods for the sake of the Kingdom..." (SCL Constitution, Norm 14)

In the spirit and charism of Vincent, Louise, Xavier, and our founding Sisters, we step into our future with a renewed sense of mission.

Through the lens of integral ecology, we will:

- tend to the care of marginalized people and the fragile earth;
- use spiritual and tangible resources to meet the critical needs of God's people and earth;
- broaden collaboration with local and global groups working to achieve systemic change;
- explore our relationship with sponsored works;
- clarify the structure of our governance model.

As Gospel-centered, ecclesial women rooted in Christ, we are called to love and serve in these times and in these places and to stand and pray with those who suffer, who grieve, who hope.

Now, with God's grace.

### ON THE COVER:

A magnolia on the campus of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth Mother House reminds us of the beauty of God's creation.

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The Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth trace our roots to the spirit, spirituality, and outreach of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac. Founded in Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1858 by Mother Xavier Ross, the SCL Community continues this Vincentian tradition through ministering to and on behalf of the poor and those on the margins of society.

*Voices of Charity* seeks to remain faithful to the charism of St. Vincent, St. Louise, and Mother Xavier. Looking through the lens of Integral Ecology, these articles hope to educate, highlight ministries, and inspire readers to continue the mission of charity.

# From the Community Director

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Sister Eileen Haynes, SCL

*“When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs? He will answer, ‘Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.’” Matthew 25:44-46*

This familiar passage from our friend, St. Matthew, continually calls us to know God in the ‘other.’ As we strive to respond to this invitation, our hearts recognize that this call will demand that we set ourselves aside, often interrupting our daily routine, comfort zone, and perhaps even our political beliefs.

Each article in this edition of *Voices of Charity* speaks to elements of Catholic Social Teaching: respect for life, human dignity, call to preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, and solidarity with our sisters and brothers with whom we share this sacred planet. The stories reflect the manner in which an individual’s struggle for life bonds with one whose intent is to serve. The broad sense of community is strengthened through this interaction. Our relationship with God deepens because we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and we learn to walk with others; that is, we are more able to be open to God’s presence in the hungry, thirsty, naked, ill, or imprisoned person. Perhaps there is also a recognition of our own hunger, thirst, nakedness, illness, and/or self-imprisonment that yearns for healing. We discover that the stranger really is a sister or brother of ours.

How blessed we are to be given this invitation from God!

May our arms of love grow larger that God’s charity and justice unite.

*Sister Eileen Haynes, SCL*

Sister Eileen Haynes, SCL  
SCL Community Director



Jerusalem Farm's retreat house, originally a convent, welcomes high school and college-aged students for a week of service in the Historic Northeast of Kansas City.

# *Sowing Seeds of Service*

## Jerusalem Farm's Impact on Young Adults

Jerusalem Farm is a Catholic intentional community dedicated to transforming lives through service and sustainable living. In the Historic Northeast neighborhoods of Kansas City, Missouri, Jerusalem Farm (J-Farm) welcomes high school and college students for week-long immersion experiences that blend service with Catholic Social Teaching. The community's members lead and assist volunteers in home repair and environmental projects for low-income residents of the Historic Northeast.

"We have our four cornerstones: prayer, community, simplicity, and service," explains Jordan Schiele, who co-founded J-Farm with his wife, Jessie. "We see the volunteer program fulfilling all four of these cornerstones, as well as an opportunity to share Catholic Social Teaching with high school and college students and model service in the community."

The standard volunteer week runs from Sunday evening to Saturday morning. Each day begins with prayer led by J-Farm community members, with volunteers eventually taking on this responsibility as the week progresses. "As Catholics, our understanding of prayer is typically the Mass or the rosary or different memorized prayers," notes Schiele. "But for our periods of gathering for prayer, it could involve conversation, dialogue, art, silence, movement, scripture—whatever medium that will direct people towards God and one another."





Tuesday evenings are a special time at J-Farm with a community meal. Students who are volunteering for the week prepare dinner for not only themselves, but also for long-term residents of J-Farm, neighbors, and friends of the community. This evening, over 50 people were served.

After breakfast, volunteers head to various work sites throughout the day. They return in the afternoon, share dinner, participate in evening prayer, and enjoy some downtime.

An educational component occurs on Mondays when volunteers take a three-hour neighborhood walk focused on Catholic Social Teaching. “We introduce them to the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching [life and human dignity; call to family, community, and participation; rights and responsibilities; preferential option for the poor and vulnerable; the dignity and rights of workers; solidarity; and care for God’s creation],” Schiele explains. “We try to talk about them in concrete ways in which the volunteers will be able to see and experience these concepts through our work during the week, but also through the lens of our neighborhood and urban living.”

While on the neighborhood walks, Schiele helps students analyze urban challenges through this framework: “We might talk about the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable...how we might, as a society, approach this situation differently.”

This critical engagement helps students move beyond surface-level service to an understanding of the systemic issues affecting communities.

## Building Bridges in Divided Times

The impact of these experiences can be long-lasting. “We have an individual named Jack who lives in St. Louis now and works for Catholic Charities,” Schiele shares. “He told me, ‘I came on a retreat seven years ago, and it completely changed my life—my attitude towards service and what I want to do.’” Jack briefly joined the seminary because of his experience at J-Farm before eventually pursuing social work.

J-Farm intentionally brings together diverse groups for each retreat week. “We might have three different schools come, and they’re all going to bring eight to 12 people,” says Schiele. “We’re bringing together people from across the country with different experiences. We sometimes have Cristo Rey schools that come here, and those students are coming from even different backgrounds than the typical, say, wealthier Jesuit school.”



A J-Farm volunteer works on the roof during a home repair project. (Photo J-Farm website)

Schiele sees this diversity as essential in our current cultural climate. “We live in a pretty divided time. I view these retreat opportunities, these immersion trips, as a way for people to encounter one another,” he explains. “These weeks are a great opportunity to build unity and reorient ourselves to one another and each other’s humanity and tie it all together with what it means to be Catholic.”

By serving in Kansas City’s Northeast neighborhoods, which Schiele describes as “some of the most diverse neighborhoods in all of Kansas City,” students engage with people from different economic backgrounds. This challenges the volunteers to move beyond political divisions and view faith in a broader human context.

Like teachers planting seeds, the J-Farm team never knows which experiences will transform a young person’s life. But through their commitment to prayer, community, simplicity, and service, they continue creating opportunities for meaningful encounters that often bear fruit for years to come. 🌱

## Goat Squad

Jerusalem Farm has 11 goats working hard to restore Kessler Park, a 300-acre green space in the Historic Northeast of Kansas City. Their mission? To clear invasive species and restore the park’s natural habitat.

The goats are incredibly efficient, clearing about one acre every two months. A dedicated shepherding team provides them with water, additional food, and supervision. Every two to three weeks, J-Farm organizes volunteers to remove trash, clean the goat trailer, and migrate the fencing to create a new grazing paddock.

The goats are more than just workers—they’re community ambassadors! They’ve been invited to neighborhood events where local residents are thrilled to meet them and create a rural connection within the urban core. Citizens visit the park to watch these “goofy creatures” work, learn about habitat restoration, and enjoy nature in the city.

J-Farm’s goats and volunteers work to counter the spread of invasive species like bush honeysuckle, which can grow 15-20 feet tall and disrupt native ecosystems. By grazing, these goats not only remove invasive plants but also restore nutrients to the soil—proving that sometimes the most effective ecological tools have hooves!

## Ecological Highlights

The J-Farm goats have:

- cleared five+ acres of invasive species
- enabled J-Farm to plant over 200 native trees
- enabled J-Farm to spread over 100 pounds of native seed
- contributed to 2,000+ volunteer hours in Kessler Park



A curious goat from J-Farm



# FROM EMPTY LOTS TO HOMES FILLED WITH HOPE: **The Vincentian Spirit Transforms Leavenworth**

This will be a big year for Depaul USA and Leavenworth Attainable Housing. Vacant lots that once represented neighborhood decline will come alive with new homes and residents. Since their merger in January 2022, this Vincentian collaboration has expanded from managing a handful of properties to overseeing 19 houses—13 owned and six managed. Now, thanks to a grant from the state of Kansas, they will build four new duplexes to join the one they built in 2024.

## **The Strength of Grassroots**

Jennifer Messner of Depaul USA, who helped secure the one-million-dollar grant from the state of Kansas, highlights Leavenworth's grassroots beginnings as the strength of the efforts here. Leavenworth Attainable Housing emerged from the Interfaith Community of Hope, "which serves the Leavenworth community so diligently and passionately with emergency shelter and basic needs," she says. They recognized "an incredible need for more affordable housing and longer-term systemic solutions."

Chuck Levesque, President of Depaul USA, says of this latest project: "We're not changing the entire system of affordable housing in the United States, even in Kansas, but we are giving people a chance to break the bonds of poverty by providing housing. If you have housing, you can work on other things like your health, your education, your employment."

This project will achieve more than just new construction. "We're trying to take vacant lots where no one's invested for years," Levesque explains. "We're trying to fill in these empty lots in northeast Leavenworth. I think it will make a

difference in how the neighborhood looks and provide very nice housing for somebody who's precariously housed or unhoused right now."

## **Local Investment**

Across America, communities face a severe shortage of affordable housing. Rising costs have outpaced wage growth, leaving millions of Americans spending more than 30% of their income on housing or facing homelessness. In smaller communities like Leavenworth, the crisis may be less visible but equally devastating, particularly for low-income residents and families.

The city of Leavenworth has been crucial to the efforts of Depaul USA/Leavenworth Attainable Housing by supporting zoning issues and, in the past, providing \$600,000 in funding for buying and rehabilitating houses.

Collaboration between the local government and Depaul USA/Leavenworth Attainable Housing makes sense, according to Sister Amy Willcott, SCL, director of Leavenworth Attainable Housing. "Helping people find housing affordably," she explains, "contributes to the local economy. People in these houses will contribute to Leavenworth, which helps increase our community connections and the neighborhood connections built in northeast Leavenworth, the most economically depressed part of the city."

The path forward still holds challenges. Before the first shovel breaks ground in June 2025, the team must navigate environmental studies, property purchases, and construction bids. The reimbursable grant requires careful financial management throughout the building process, with completion projected for June 2026.

Depaul USA logo



## **The Vincentian Influence**

This work embodies the Vincentian charism, which combines direct service with efforts to address the root causes of suffering and is guided by several core principles: respecting the inherent dignity of every person, providing both immediate relief and long-term solutions, empowering rather





Chris Leach, housing support specialist, and Sister Amy Willcott, SCL, director of Leavenworth Attainable Housing, at the first duplex dedication in 2024.

than creating dependency, and seeing service as a mutual exchange that transforms both the giver and receiver.

By June 2026, when the final duplex is completed, eight more families or individuals will have found their way home. In a neighborhood where empty lots once symbolized abandonment, new life will emerge—a living example of the Vincentian spirit of compassionate, systemic change. 🌱



Putting the welcome mat out at the 2024 Leavenworth Attainable Housing duplex dedication.

## Small Spaces with Big Impact

Each 450-square-foot duplex unit offers much more than its modest dimensions suggest. These complete homes feature thoughtfully designed elements:

- Open-concept living room and kitchen
- Full bathroom with modern fixtures
- Bedroom with closet space
- Stackable washer/dryer unit
- Energy-efficient appliances and systems

They're designed primarily for single adults or couples—possibly with a small child—for people who might otherwise fall through the cracks of existing housing programs.

"They're small," Sister Amy admits with a smile. "You have to love your roommate very much." But in those small spaces, people will find something immeasurable: dignity, security, and a place to belong.



Screenshot of Sister Therese Bangert, SCL, as she addresses the Kansas House Federal and State Affairs Committee, February 2025.

## Sister Therese Bangert Speaks on Behalf of Immigrants at Kansas Legislature

Sister Therese Bangert, SCL, stood alone before the Kansas House Federal and State Affairs Committee in February 2025, speaking against a resolution urging Governor Laura Kelly to support President Trump's immigration enforcement agenda.

Sister Therese was the only outside speaker at the hearing. Reflecting the SCL Directional Statement, calling for care of the marginalized, she expressed concern that the deportation efforts by the state of Kansas will include immigrants who live peacefully in the state but lack the proper work permits.

"I find the rhetoric troubling when speaking about our sisters and brothers who are immigrants," Sister Therese stated, noting that those targeted by the resolution are Kansans in every way except for possession of U.S. immigration documents.

After being denied the opportunity to speak at the January Senate Committee hearing, Sister Therese persisted and

delivered her testimony to the House Committee in February. By highlighting the real people behind immigration statistics and emphasizing their contributions to Kansas communities, she brought a perspective of compassion and human dignity to a debate otherwise dominated by legal and enforcement concerns.

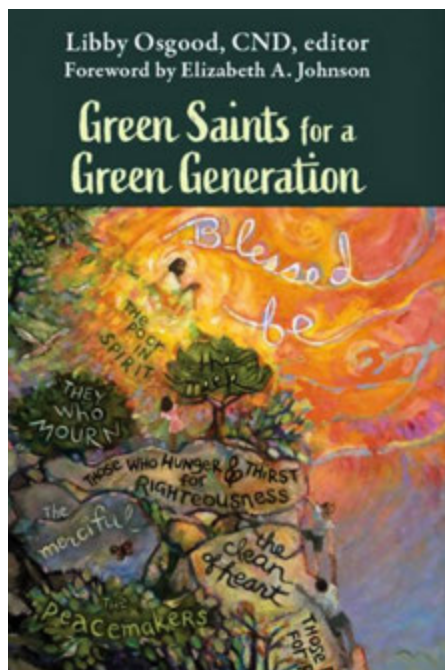
Sister Therese's testimony exemplifies the SCL mission at work. By speaking on behalf of immigrants, she is responding to the cry of the poor. This work connects to a broader understanding of Integral Ecology that recognizes the interdependence of social justice and environmental concerns, as articulated by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*.

While the resolution is expected to pass in the Kansas House, our mission compels us to advocate for immigration policies that preserve family unity, recognize the dignity of labor, and acknowledge the complex realities that drive migration. This commitment remains central to the SCL Vincentian heritage and ongoing work in Kansas and beyond. 🍷



# Green Saints for a Green Generation: Sister Paula Gonzalez, SC

By Sister Réjane Cytacki, SCL



In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis established caring for creation as a cornerstone of Catholic Social Teaching. Yet many Catholics have struggled to embrace this ecological calling. “Green Saints for a Green Generation” addresses this gap through the voices of young Catholic women who illuminate stories

of saints—canonized and not—who integrated faith with concern for our Earth.

When I was approached to write for this book project, I immediately knew Sister Paula Gonzalez would be my subject. A Sister of Charity of Cincinnati who passed away in 2016, Sister Paula was involved in environmental organizations, including Sisters of Earth. I first encountered her story while teaching fifth-grade religion. The textbook mentioned her solar home constructed from a chicken coop. My reaction was, “I must meet this woman!” Years later, that opportunity materialized. Sister Paula would always pause and take time to listen to others. She offered support for my youth gardening initiatives, becoming a source of inspiration.

Sister Paula followed her parents’ footsteps as an educator in New Mexico. Like her namesake St. Paul, she felt called to a mission. In her words: “The 1969 photo of Earth from space changed my life. It grabbed me by the hair of my head, and I became a global citizen on the spot!” That image of our planet—a beautiful yet fragile blue-green sphere suspended in darkness—catalyzed her educational ministry toward Earth stewardship.

Like St. Paul’s journeys, Sister Paula traversed the United States and beyond from the 1980s through the 2000s, advocating a principle: “Live simply so others may simply live.” Many Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth recall her presentation to our Community. With a doctorate in cellular physiology, Sister Paula’s expertise enhanced her faith perspective. She understood the interconnectedness of creation and humanity’s place within—not apart from—the world:

*If you have never planted a vegetable seed, tended the tiny shoot, watered and fertilized the growing plant, and finally picked your first sun-ripened tomato, you have missed a profoundly sacramental experience... Even if you buy a young plant at a garden center you can enjoy being an active part of the incredible miracle of photosynthesis. You can learn to eat mindfully, personally celebrating the wonders of nature. Once you taste a sun-warmed tomato off the vine, or enjoy the real flavor of tender green beans, you will be hooked. Also, you may discover what I have learned through my annual activity: My garden is my spiritual director and my favorite sacred space.*

As a gardener myself, I resonate with her perspective on gardens as sacred spaces.

Sister Paula aspired to foster sustainable living practices, particularly in design. The housing crisis in Cincinnati in the 1980s motivated her to develop housing models utilizing recycled materials. Her vision materialized in her residence, “La Casa del Sol,” and later in a facility called EarthConnection, which incorporates solar and geothermal energy systems.

Rather than identifying as an environmentalist, Sister Paula preferred the term “futurist,” emphasizing imagination and youth empowerment to transform the world. Her legacy endures today, and I encourage visitors to Cincinnati to explore EarthConnection and Casa del Sol. By sharing Sister Paula’s story, I hope the principle to “live simply so others may simply live” inspires readers as it has inspired me. 🌱



# Restoring Connections

## Building Relationships Across Social Divides

Restoring Connections is a Denver organization that creates meaningful relationships between people from different social backgrounds. Founded by Vie Thorgren, the group follows the caring spirit of St. Vincent de Paul through its prison outreach and work with people facing hardship.

### Beginnings

Restoring Connections began in 1995 when St. Thomas Theological Seminary in Denver closed. Thorgren, who taught spiritual development to students there, received an invitation from the Vincentian priests who had moved to a downtown Denver church.

“They invited me to start a center that would help people find their calling and connection to service in their everyday lives,” explains Thorgren.

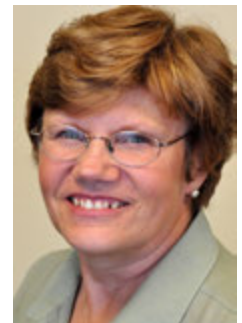
What started as a six-month trial grew into a lasting mission. The organization was first called the “Vincentian Center for Spirituality at Work,” but this name confused people. Many stumbled over “Vincentian” and misunderstood “work” as meaning jobs rather than spiritual purpose.

They eventually changed their everyday name to “Restoring Connections” while keeping their original legal name. This new name better cap-

tured their main goal of bringing people together.

### Everyone Has a Voice

From the start, Restoring Connections has practiced what it preaches in how it’s organized. Unlike traditional charities where well-off people serve clients in need, Restoring Connections includes people from struggling communities in all leadership and decision-making.



Vie Thorgren

“From the beginning, our committees, board, and planning have included people who are often left out—people without homes or who had just returned from prison,” Thorgren notes.

This approach ensures that programs are created *with* those they aim to help, not just for them. It rejects the idea of charity recipients and instead creates a model where everyone gives and receives.

“When we bring together people who have comfortable lives with people who are struggling—everybody’s a client,” Thorgren emphasizes. “That lawyer or business person—we care as much about their spiritual growth as we do the person who may be homeless, in prison, or reentering society.”

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*Restoring Connections has served around  
100 individuals in prison and during reentry per year since 2001.*

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## Sharing Meals and Building Connections

Restoring Connections runs several key programs designed to create life-changing relationships:

### Training and Support for Companioning Others

Spiritual directors and others who are committed to serving marginalized individuals can access a variety of formational programs and participate in trauma-informed peer supervision. These services support a network of providers for individuals most in need.

### Survival Backpack Initiative

The organization provides backpacks with toiletries, food coupons, resources, towels, and other basics for people without homes. This program now includes winter items hand-made by women in prison—an example of connection between different communities.

## Soul Care: A Deeper Prison Ministry

Perhaps Restoring Connections's most unique aspect is its prison ministry, "Soul Care." Trained volunteers meet one-on-one with prison inmates regularly.

"We focus on addressing why they became incarcerated," Thorgren explains. "We work on healing, finding meaning and purpose, dealing with forgiveness, and helping them discover they can choose a future that reflects their values."

Restoring Connections works with prisoners, "helping them discover they still have a life with meaning and purpose and can serve others even where they are."

## Charity and Justice Together

The foundation of Restoring Connections comes directly from St. Vincent de Paul's tradition of bringing together people from opposite ends of society. This approach



Volunteers from the survival backpack initiative pose with filled backpacks.

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*“Nearly 90% of the women who completed Restoring Connections’ programs successfully reentered society, remained crime free, and became contributing citizens.”*

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rejects the idea that poor or incarcerated people are just charity recipients.

“These are our siblings. These are our brothers and sisters. We form relationships and work together for change,” Thorgren emphasizes.

This view reflects St. Vincent’s understanding that real transformation happens through relationships, not programs. As Thorgren puts it: “Each has something to give, and each person has their own needs. We become whole in relationship with others.”

The organization’s inspiration comes from 2 Corinthians 5, which provides the motto: “Impelled by the love of Christ.” This Scripture calls believers to be “ambassadors of reconciliation,” bringing healing to wounded communities.

Thorgren describes this balanced approach: “Charity and justice are both arms of love”—meeting immediate needs while also working for system-wide change.

## Real Stories of Change

The power of Restoring Connections’ approach is clearly shown in the stories of lives touched by their work.

### Tanya’s Story: Taking Action

During one of Thorgren’s regular Soul Care visits, a prisoner (called “Tanya” to protect her privacy) shared that she was deeply troubled by thoughts of people living on the streets.

“Tanya told me, ‘I’m here because I did something wrong and needed to be punished. But the homeless haven’t done anything wrong,’” Thorgren recalls.

When Tanya learned about the backpack program, she realized: “I know how to crochet. I can make hats, mittens, and scarves for the backpacks.”

With insight, Tanya noted the irony of her situation: “I live in a gated community,” she joked about the prison. But then she continued gratefully: “I do have shelter. I have a bed, a blanket, a pillow, and three meals every day.”

Tanya organized other women who could crochet, got permission from prison officials, and started a program to create winter items for the backpacks. When Thorgren shared this story at a church, the response was overwhelming, and women there began donating yarn—creating a connection between communities that would normally never meet.

Prisoners crochet winter accessories like these for the survival backpack initiative program. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)





## The Gardener: Finding Purpose

Another woman serving life without parole found her calling through the Soul Care program. Using her gardening knowledge, she got permission to start a garden that provided the prison with flowers and fresh vegetables they didn't have before.

This project improved the physical space while giving her opportunities to teach younger inmates gardening skills. Through this work, she found purpose: "My life has meaning. It's not wasted," she told Thorgren.

The organization's approach helps prisoners discover they're not inmates or offenders, but free women with something to offer others and the community.

## Finding Spiritual Support

As a Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth Associate (SCLA), Thorgren finds essential spiritual support for her challenging work. This relationship gives her a community where her mission and values are understood.

"I spend most of my time in leadership confronting people who have more punishment-focused views," she explains. These encounters can involve challenging racist or harsh mindsets—difficult and draining work.

"Being an SCL Associate gives me a place where I don't have to explain myself," Thorgren reflects. "It gives me a space where I can be nurtured and just be. I can be fed and restored."

This spiritual grounding provides Thorgren with the strength needed to continue her work in environments where she must counter harsh perspectives and invite people to more compassionate understanding.

## Meeting Today's Challenges: The Power of Stories

In today's divided social and political climate, Thorgren finds hope in stories that bridge divides and inspire action. She notes that stories of transformation—like Tanya's—can balance the negativity that often dominates public discussions.



Another prisoner utilizes her knowledge for creating gardens similar to this one at the prison. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

"Stories are so important—stories about the work God is doing through so many people in quiet ways," she explains. "St. Vincent de Paul taught that the destructive spirit speaks loudly and gets lots of attention. God's spirit is quieter and gentler, but much more effective over time."

## Looking to the Future

Looking ahead, Thorgren hopes that the spirit behind Restoring Connections will spread, even as organizations change over time.

Thorgren recognizes that organizations have life-spans: "Organizations spring up, have a lifespan, and don't last forever. It's not the organization that matters as much as the spirit behind it."

"I hope what lasts and spreads is the spirit behind our work," she reflects. "That deep spirituality that leads us not just to charity, but to a sense of justice."

Her goal is not to build an organization that lasts forever but to nurture relationships that transform individuals and communities by recognizing the dignity and gifts of all people, especially those society often ignores.

Through its programs and spiritual approach, Restoring Connections continues to build bridges, heal wounds, and show the deep humanity of all people—especially those society too often forgets. In doing so, it carries forward St. Vincent de Paul's legacy of charity and justice as expressions of love in action. 🌱



Sister Mary Jo McDonald, SCL (Photo: NBC Montana)

# BUTTE WATCHDOG

## Social and Environmental Justice Commitment

Sister Mary Jo McDonald, SCL, recently moved back to Leavenworth, Kansas, after 42 years of ministry in Butte, Montana. Although over 1200 miles away, she is still working on behalf of the people of Butte.

Sister Mary Jo has been named the board chairperson of the Butte Watchdogs for Social and Environmental Justice. This citizen-based nonprofit demands quality, timely, and science-based solutions for the city's Superfund cleanup.

“Keeping a critical eye out to make sure that Butte gets the best cleanup is something to which I can dedicate myself in retirement,” said Sister Mary Jo.

Butte was named a Superfund site in 1983 due to pollution from years of smelting and strip mining. Sister began working on behalf of the city's residents when she led a class-action lawsuit effort to clean up Silver Bow Creek, which had been named a “metro storm drain,” even though it was a source of drinking water.

As a pastoral minister at St. Ann's Church in Butte, Sister Mary Jo worked with a women's group that prayed and cared for people in need. When talking to the group, she found they were concerned about the city's water quality. Local parents had been told to

include juice and soda in their children's lunch boxes so the children didn't have to drink the polluted water. “We were going to have a whole generation that couldn't drink water,” Sister Mary Jo said.

Butte Watchdogs wants to pressure city officials, who they claim are resistant to clean-up efforts and want to save federal money for future expansion projects. The group is also pushing for a timelier clean-up effort, which they are told could take 25-40 years.

Sister Mary Jo says Butte Watchdogs is not only a civic organization but one driven by faith. “Making sure Butte is a safe environment is a social justice issue,” she said. Caring for the fragile earth is one of the directives of the SCL Chapter 2022 Directional Statement.

Even though she now lives in Leavenworth, Sister Mary Jo hopes to travel to Butte often to continue working on these environmental issues in the city. She hopes that Butte Watchdogs can help facilitate partnerships among British Petroleum, who owns the mines, the city and federal government, engineers, and those who continue to watch and sound the alarm on the state of Butte's environment. 🐾



# Finding Humanity in Migration

By Sister Sheila Karpan, SCL

*“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” -Saint Teresa of Kolkata*

I was born in a small, coal-mining town in Wyoming with a population of less than 10,000 but boasting 57 different immigrant ethnicities. I’ve grown to realize how this diverse milieu influenced my thinking and values in deeply significant ways. As a Sister of Charity of Leavenworth, I have also been formed and live by our mission statement of committing to the ministry of meeting the critical needs of God’s people, especially the marginalized and the disenfranchised.

In Denver, I worked for over 20 years in a community of people who migrated from Mexico, Central America, and Sudan. For the last six years, I have been drawn to continue to work with migrants and refugees as a volunteer at the southern border and, more recently, with new arrivals in Denver.

## Reframing the Conversation

It’s challenging to discuss immigration because it is a complicated, multi-layered issue, and sometimes, we forget that human beings are at the heart of the discussion. I wonder where we would be today if we discussed immigration first and foremost as a humanitarian concern, with compassion and love, rather than a problem, a crisis, or an emergency. This could eliminate the fears that the labels migrants are given are meant to instill. Who dares to cross borders? They are our sisters and brothers.

## Migration as Human Nature

The August 2019 *National Geographic* issue described migration as a world-wide phenomenon: “A World on the Move.” We are a migratory species.

“Hope,” a mural at Casa Refugiadas in El Paso, Texas



Humans have always moved. Who among us is a native of the place we call home? As said in the article, “We Are All Migrants,” by Mohsin Hamid, “We all experience the constant drama of the new and the constant sorrow of the loss of what we’ve left behind. It’s a universal sorrow and one so potent that we seek to deny it, rarely acknowledging it in ourselves, let alone in others. Instead, we are encouraged by society to focus only on the new rather than on the loss that is the other thread uniting and binding our species.”

## Push and Pull Factors

Why do people migrate? It is commonly described by identifying factors that push and pull.

The most common push factors are violence, fear of exploitation and corruption, poverty, and climate change. The most common pull factors are employment, increased wages, education, security, and reuniting with family members who previously migrated.

## Witness at the Border

Within this context, I’d like to focus on some of my recent experiences while in the company of people on the move. About five years ago, a call was made for women religious to volunteer at hospitality houses on the southern border. Over a while, I was able to be at Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas, Catholic Charities shelters in Laredo, Texas, and Tucson, Arizona, and when the border came to Denver.

Pope Francis said, “No one will ever deny that migrants are human beings, but in practice, in the way that we treat them and the decisions we make, we can show we consider them less important, less worthy, less human. For Christians, this way of acting is unacceptable.”



Sister Sheila Karpan, second from left, with other volunteers at the migrant shelter



Mural from Casa Vides in El Paso, Texas

## Welcome and Compassion

In the shelters, I saw the opportunity to serve and witness people being seen and treated with dignity and compassion. Whether they arrived bruised and scarred physically or emotionally from their long, arduous journeys, they were now safe and secure.

Service in the shelters consisted of meeting basic needs, which began when Border Patrol or ICE brought a bus load of people who had been processed and had spent variable amounts of time in detention centers. When I was fortunate to meet the bus, I saw people lined up like schoolchildren, looking exhausted, sometimes apprehensive, or even stoic. I was fortunate to see each individual and greet them, “Bienvenido,” “Bienvenida.”

I imagined that this was likely the first time since they crossed the border into the United States that someone had said, “Welcome.” I also treasured the times when they were seated prior to orientation to bring them a cup of water. Later, at mealtime, I relished being in the serving line, offering the first warm food they likely had since they left home. It was not lost on me that the simplest of gestures, the smallest acts, were most meaningful.

## From Inhumanity to Hope

This contrasts with the treatment many received just after their crossing. We were given accounts of holding cells so cold they were called freezers. It was their experiences in these cells that were most dehumanizing, and men, women, and children alike complained of the cold. A woman said her backpack was taken from her and thrown in the trash.



Shivering, she bolstered her courage and asked the guard if she could have her sweater in the backpack. He allowed it and then threw the bag back in the trash. Both men and women brought from Yuma, Arizona, told of being crowded in holding cells with one toilet standing shoulder to shoulder, unable to move or shift positions. A woman told me they stood this way for four days.

People came to us wearing flip-flops, many with ankle bracelets; if they had shoes, the laces had been removed earlier in the holding cells. Piles of flip-flops were seen outside the showers, indicating that many people had found shoes in their size (or close to it) in the clothing room. Everyone was provided with food, a hot shower, clean clothes, and a place to sleep.



Guests were only at the shelters long enough to contact a family member or friend who would arrange for air or bus tickets to their destination. Over the years, that communication process changed. First, we saw people who had to rely on a shelter phone; now, almost everyone has a mobile phone. Being reunited on the phone with their loved ones is always a time of jubilation.

### The Desperate Journey: Courage Against All Odds

How desperate are people to leave their home country? This question, unfortunately, is often not considered. We know migrants travel thousands of miles by foot, in buses, jumping trains, crossing barren deserts, climbing the border wall, swimming the Rio Grande, guided (and sometimes betrayed or abandoned) by smugglers—risking kidnapping, sexual assault, and death.

How desperate are they? A man escaped his kidnappers, willing to go through the sludge of a latrine, in order to reunite with his wife and infant child. I heard numerous accounts of travelers on buses who were stopped by masked men and women who entered demanding money and pointing guns. One woman told me she clutched a rosary and a small statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Thankfully, the female robber saw these and passed her by.

### Individual Stories of Flight

A woman told me her husband had been murdered as he was going to testify as a witness to a crime. Since she, too, was interrogated, she feared for her life and hurriedly fled with her infant child and teenage daughter. On two separate occasions, the buses they rode through Mexico

were robbed by armed individuals entering and pointing guns in their faces. As I was leaving the shelter at the end of my shift, I said goodbye to her when she told me their tickets had arrived, and they were leaving later that night by bus. I thought often and still do about the complex trauma that people experience not only when they migrate but also by what precipitated their departure. Later that same evening, thinking of this mother, with her children, boarding a bus at night prompted me to go

to the bus station, find them in the crowded waiting area, and stay with them until they boarded. While I cautioned them to be alert to individuals, I felt confident that I could reassure her that armed robbers would not stop the bus en route.

### Toward Understanding and Compassion

Each migrant has a story. I believe sharing these stories will help our citizens think differently about migrants. They are the stories of what losses and risks people embrace as they move toward what they believe is more life, a better life without fear, and one that holds promise for them and their children.

Pope Francis tells us if we don't listen, if we turn our backs, if we believe the scarcity myths, "Those who close borders will become prisoners of the walls they build." 🍷



A pair of tattered shoes that belonged to a migrant

# Lives Touched by San Vicente Pastoral Center



The San Vicente Pastoral Center in Piura, Peru, provides an important support system for community members facing various life challenges. Daily visits help some clients find daily purpose. Others visit the Center to rebuild strength after a medical emergency. Regardless of the reasons for visiting San Vicente Pastoral Center, their narratives demonstrate how the Center creates meaningful relationships while providing practical assistance, embodying a mission recognizing each person's dignity and need for community.

## José Córdova Neyra

At 91, José Córdova Neyra is a beloved regular at the San Vicente Pastoral Center in Piura. Born on November 29, 1933, in Frías, Ayabaca, José spent his childhood in his hometown before migrating to the city of Piura at age 18.

Throughout his working years, José worked for various companies and raised five children, though only two remain alive today. When asked about his grandchildren, he simply smiles and says there are "a lot"—too many to count.

Every morning, José arrives early at the Center with his small notebook to have his blood pressure checked. This daily ritual, which he has maintained for many years, brings structure and meaning to his life. Living just steps from the Center, "Don José," as everyone affectionately calls him, finds friendship and community there. He participates enthusiastically in all Center celebrations and has become a cherished figure among staff and visitors alike.



José Córdova Neyra visits San Vicente Pastoral Center every day for his blood pressure check.



## Manuel Sacramento Ramos Lalupu

Manuel Sacramento Ramos Lalupu worked as a driver to support his family, including his four-month-old baby, while helping with farming during his days off. At 44, Manuel faced one of life's greatest challenges with remarkable courage. It was during one of these agricultural workdays that Manuel experienced a severe headache that progressed to seizures. Medical imaging revealed a blood clot in his brain, requiring two complex surgeries.

Though the operations were successful, Manuel needed extensive physical therapy to regain strength in his extremities. His family, having already sold many possessions to cover the surgical costs, turned to the San Vicente Pastoral Center for help. Recognizing the family's struggle, the Center decided to subsidize Manuel's therapy sessions, providing crucial support during a time when he could not work to support himself and his young family.

Today, Manuel's recovery has progressed remarkably well. He expresses gratitude for the assistance that has helped restore his dignity and hope. For the Center, Manuel's

improving health represents the impact of their mission—helping community members rebuild their lives and return to wholeness.

Though José and Manuel come from different generations and circumstances, their stories intertwine at the San Vicente Pastoral Center, where compassion transcends age and hardship. José, in his twilight years, has found a second family among the staff and visitors who greet him each morning, while Manuel discovers renewed strength and possibility with each therapy session.

The Center embodies St. Vincent de Paul's belief that genuine care extends beyond material support to recognize the inherent dignity in every person. As José continues his faithful morning visits and Manuel progresses in his recovery, they demonstrate an approach that combines practical assistance with personal connection. Their experiences reflect the continued relevance of St. Vincent de Paul's principles in addressing contemporary needs, creating a supportive environment where community members help one another through life's challenges. 🍷



Manuel Sacramento Ramos Lalupu receives care at San Vicente Pastoral Center.

# Prison Ministry in Peru

## A Journey of Faith and Compassion

In the prisons of Ayacucho, Peru, Sister Julia Huiman Ipanaqué has dedicated decades of her life to serving those behind bars, bringing light into places often forgotten by society.

### Called by the Gospel

Sister Julia's journey into prison ministry began nearly three decades ago, rooted in her faith and the biblical call to service.

"I believe what led me to work in prisons is to live the Gospel: 'For I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger, and you welcomed me, I was naked, and you clothed me, I was sick, and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to see me,'" she explains, quoting Matthew 25:35-36.

Her prison ministry work began around 1992 when she was in the early stages of joining the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth. She started by accompanying the Sisters in biblical workshops and in the chocolatadas they took from the parish of St. Rose to the prison in Piura. "Chocolatadas" is a hot chocolate party—a Christmas tradition in Peru. Today, her ministry includes a men's prison in Huamanga and a women's prison in Huanta.



Communion at the men's prison in Huamanga, Peru

### A Ministry of Presence

What does a typical day look like for Sister Julia? Her routine begins early, entering the prison at 9:00 a.m. alongside a priest, Father David, and two pastoral ministers, passing through security checks to reach the chapel by 9:30 or 9:45.

"We begin to clean the chapel and prepare everything for the celebration of Mass while they let the male inmates out of their wards to come to the chapel," she shares. The morning includes reconciliation services led by Father David, the chaplain, while Sister Julia and others prepare for Mass.

The celebration itself is a community affair with an entrance procession and active participation of all, with lectors, choir, and offertory procession. Following Mass, the inmates return to their wards around noon, while the pastoral team remains for lunch and afternoon services with the women, typically concluding their day around 5:00 p.m.

Recent changes have affected their schedule. "At the end of November, the women were moved from Huamanga to the Huanta prison, which is one hour away," Sister Julia notes. "So, we are currently visiting and celebrating Mass with the women on Saturday afternoons in Huanta and with the men on Sunday mornings in Huamanga."

### Challenges and Hopes

When asked about the challenges inmates face, Sister Julia doesn't hesitate to name them: "Corruption, overcrowding, lack of medical care, and necessary medicines." Perhaps most devastating is "the abandonment of some by their closest family members."

To address this challenge, she and her colleagues are working on "the creation of the San Vicente de Paul Shelter, which, thanks to God and the generosity of many people, will soon be operational." This space will provide "workshops with psychological help to strengthen the inmate's relationship with his or her family, legal advice, and pediatric care for children of the inmates, among other services."



## Transformations Behind Bars

The transformations she witnesses are among the most powerful aspects of Sister Julia's ministry. She shares the story of one inmate who had suffered since childhood, who had been through a rehabilitation center and multiple prisons before arriving at Yanamilla-Huamanga.

"When he arrived at the prison, he did not want to know anything about faith experience," she recalls. "Little by little, he began to participate on Sundays and in pastoral activities, and even though he has had many difficulties inside the prison, today he is the coordinator of his ward to encourage others to participate in pastoral activities." Now, he shows "tranquility and hope for his release from prison," and repeatedly affirms, "No way I'll go back to prison."

Another story involves "a foreign inmate" who arrived in early 2022 in a "terrible" emotional state, unable to stop crying. Through personal accompaniment, this woman found peace. "In October 2024, she received the Sacrament of Confirmation and is currently very faithful to the celebration of the Holy Mass and pastoral activities, grateful for our pastoral work."

## Faith as a Foundation

Sister Julia's approach to ministry includes "spiritual formation workshops, adequate preparation for the sacraments, personal spiritual accompaniment—whenever they ask me or the priest—schools of forgiveness and reconciliation, and emotional workshops with professionals in psychology."

She sees her work as fundamentally connected to her religious charism: "Prison ministry is a very Vincentian ministry, going to the poorest and most forgotten by our society and authorities, keeping in mind and recognizing the presence of God in them regardless of the offense committed."

The role of faith in transformation is central to her understanding of the work. "I believe that if they voluntarily participate in our activities and celebrations, it is because they are moved by faith in our Lord Jesus that encourages them to hope for something different and better in their conversion process."

## Personal Growth Through Service

This ministry has also transformed Sister Julia. She has learned "to listen and understand with compassion and empathy, from the heart, to the situation, experience, and history of each and every one without judging, to be able



Women after Confirmation Mass



Baptism in the women's prison

to accompany with a clean look without prejudice, which is what the Lord invites me to do, to recognize Him in each brother and sister."

## Supporting Reintegration

Sister Julia concludes with the importance of prison ministry: "The prison ministry is important and very valuable, not only for the people deprived of their freedom but for all our community, because if we help in this process of change and reinsertion into society, we will have fewer people in the prisons, fewer people generating violence in our streets, and we will help to have more people who contribute to the development of our country."

From her faith perspective, she reminds us that inmates "are our brothers and sisters, with a minor or major fault, but they are still our brothers and sisters created in the image and likeness of God, our Father."

Through her time in this ministry, Sister Julia continues to embody this belief, bringing dignity, hope, and faith to those society too often forgets. 🙏



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