



Together in Mission

...to Connect and Inspire

Our Dear Neighbors and Sisters in Romania

—Margaret Nacke, CSJ/Concordia, Kansas, USA

The boundaries of “neighbor” were stretched beyond imagination for two of us Concordia sisters of St. Joseph when we responded to a call by the US bishops to volunteer in Eastern Europe. Communism had recently fallen when in 1992 the bishops made a plea to US religious congregations to help the church in former communist countries. Sister Mary Savoie and I responded to that call

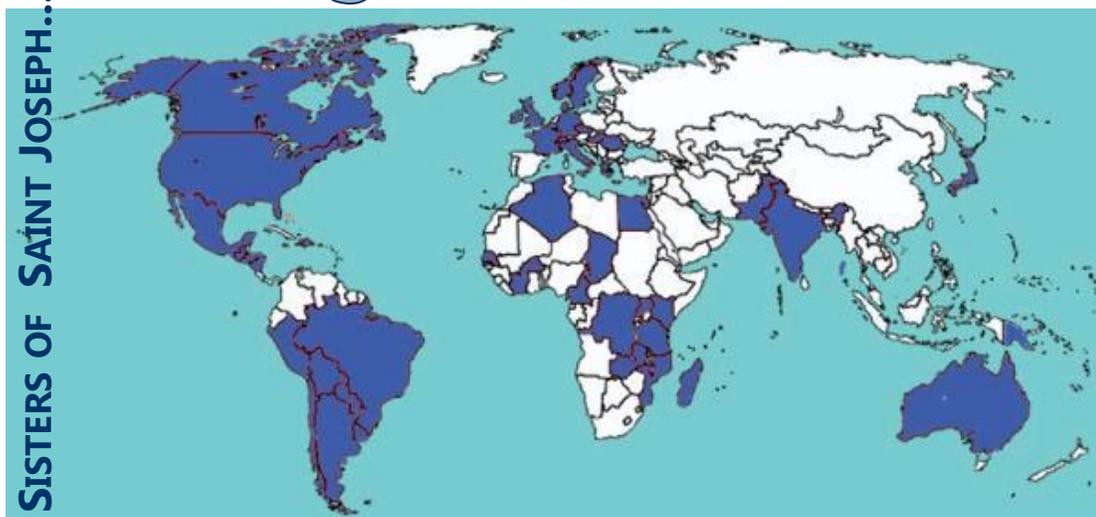
and were assigned to assist with curriculum development in the first Catholic school of nursing, St. Joseph, in Bucharest, Romania. The name gave a providential thrust to our eagerness to help. The experience of a one month first visit convinced us that, although curriculum development in nursing was important, far more was the education of sisters. The over 40 year period of communist domination deprived sisters in working in their schools

...let us connect, dialogue with each other and establish ties

IN THIS ISSUE

SISTERS MARGARET NACKE ,
NORMANDIE GAITLEY AND
MARY MCGLONE
DESCRIBES THEIR EXPERIENCE IN
EASTERN EUROPE AFTER
THE FALL OF COMMUNISM

...throughout the world.



Graphic designed by Baya Claire, csj/Carondelet-St

You are invited to study this image of our world. The countries shaded in blue indicate where our spirit and mission is alive and active through the presence of Sisters of St. Joseph and Associates who live and minister in these countries.



Mary at Victor Barbish Hospital with children with AIDS in Bucharest

and hospitals and took a drastic toll on their lives. The world went on with Vatican II and other radical changes in religious life in the West as sisters lived religious life underground. Through clandestine networks, they became aware of some of these changes but suppression kept them just that – suppressed.

Congregations from Australia, France, Germany, and Italy came to Romania, some to re-establish their congregations and secure new members, others, like us, to assist where needed. The Sisters of St. Joseph from Italy, for example, served in Constanza by the Black Sea. At a first sister-gathering in Bucharest, a great surprise awaited us when four of us learned of our LePuy roots.

During multiple visits to Romania, the bond of “dear neighbor” became stronger as sisters shared more and more information about life under communism. Who knew about their oppression? Did the church have an archive and if so, where was it? The quest for answers led Sister Mary and me to Rome to visit generalates of congregations whose members served in Central and Eastern Europe. We posed our idea of collecting testimonies from sisters to leaderships and their responses: “This needs to be done. We would be grateful if you did it.” So began the development of various projects to tell the story of the oppression of sisters under communism and bring their lives into the public arena.

**Who knew about their oppression?
Did the church have an archive and if so, where was it?**

Catholic Theological Union in Chicago agreed to archive materials. As we broadened our outreach to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, we negotiated with the leadership in each country to collect testimonies and other data from the sisters. These testimonies, and photographs, became the subject for a power point, Witnesses to Faith, that was shown in several motherhouses around the country. Over-and-over again questions: “Where was I? Why did I not know about this?” moved us to create diverse means to educate about the oppression of sisters during the communist era. In 2006, in partnership with the Catholic University of Ukraine, a conference was held in Lviv, Ukraine, Our Common Mission and Commitment – Lessons from Sister Survivors of European Communism. Attendees were leaders who had suffered under communism. Interrupted Lives: Catholic Sisters Under European Communism, an award winning documentary produced in 2008, found its way into many parts of the world evoking examination by sisters and others about their own faith

commitment. A colloquium in Atchison, Kansas, attended by sisters from 13 congregations in the Midwest focused discussion on this documentary.

The book Bearers of Faith – Undaunted Courage of Catholic Sisters under Communism is a recent source for continuing to educate the public. Personal testimonies and photographs reveal years of struggle and oppression. As one sister said: ‘They were difficult times but we cannot delete them from our lives. We emerged from the past as we are today. That was how we spent our youth.’”



Sisters Margaret, Teresa Staab Jesus Milles, Mary in Lviv In the Ukraine

The Deepest and Most Important Form of Hope

— Normandie Gaitley

My journeying to Eastern Europe was in truth following a star. All my life I had prayed "Savior of the world, save Russia" by rote. I had not envisioned going there or contributing any effort to repair the ravages of communism.

At the time that I was invited to join the team, I already had a very full plate. I was finishing my dissertation and teaching a full load at the school where I was hoping to be graduated from in the summer. I felt very committed to these endeavors and did not feel at age 60 that I could put my doctoral studies on hold. I tried to continue these interests and to confine my Eastern European activities to summer vacation time. I was never satisfied with my efforts and consistently felt I received more than I contributed.

Going into Eastern Europe in 1991 gave me a view of countries striving to achieve equilibrium and struggling to engage the world economy after a hiatus of fifty years.

My visits to Romania "Prepped" me to assume a teaching position in Lithuania the following May. This school had a very Christian focus. It was heart rending to see the efforts parents were making at great cost to give their children a view of the West. Traces of the old ways of doing things persisted, and gave one a sense of the beauty and charm of the countries before communism. It was interesting to see how insignificant specific religious traditions were. The focus was Christ and in this focus students found enough commonality to "hang in" together and engage life. As I looked at my beautiful students and considered the tenacity of their parents in holding fast to and in expressing their values despite communist propaganda, the words of Vaclav Havel came to life for me.

"In short I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were from elsewhere. It is also this hope, above all, which is in us and gives us the strength to live and continually to try new thing, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now."



Mary and Kamilia, Salesian Sister
Bratislava– Slovakia

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Mary and Klemens Salacinske,
OSB, Tadea Mlynczak, SSND in
Otwock, Poland



Mary and Sr. Felicia from Romania

“We Need Theology”

— Mary McGlone, CSJ

I had never thought about going to Eastern Europe! But one day, at the celebration of the Salvador Martyrs, Sisters Mary Savioe and Margaret Nacke from Concordia approached me and told me about their beginnings in working with sisters in Romania. I told them that was wonderful, and that I speak Spanish and that Latin America was my scene. Then they explained that very few women religious were aware that the US Bishops had asked religious communities to see what they could do to help communities in the Eastern Block who were emerging from the underground church. They wanted to get a delegation from the Federation to choose Romania.

Then, they found the money to fund the trip in the summer – by then, I thought “Why not?” So, Janet Roesner, then from Medaille, Normandie Gaitley and I traveled in the summer of (I think) 1992.

First we met a doctor who was working in Bucharest with Sfinel Iosef (St. Joseph) Hospital and nursing school. As Doctor Theodora took us around the city we saw both why it was once called the Paris of the East and also how communism had torn down many individual homes to create what would look to us like high rise, low income housing. You also noted that the years under communism had taught people not to look at one another, to be very private, because you never knew who might be a spy.

After some days in Bucharest, we went to Cluj. Now, realize we were dressed in long dark or beige skirts, very modest blouses, etc. But it was hard at first for the sisters to believe we were religious without habits. We met with the Provincial, Maica (Mother) Iona. We told her that our mission was to see in what ways Sisters of St. Joseph might be able to collaborate with them. Janet was the recent secretary general of the LCWR and Normandie had just finished a Ph.D that included information sciences. I felt like I was in on the ride as the token missionary.

The morning after we arrived, we attended our first Byzantine liturgy. As honored guests we were put in the front of the sisters’ side of the chapel, so we had to follow the lead of the lay people to our right to see when we were supposed to stand, sit, kneel, bow, etc. I felt like a Baptist at a high Mass! Because Romanian is a partly Romance language, I could capture a little bit and would whisper to my companions “I think this is the Gospel...I think it is about...I think this is the Our Father, etc. Because it was the feast of St. Isaiah, it was a special liturgy - a little nerve wracking for us who knew not what to do, but with beautiful chant. As the end of the liturgy, the priest came to give us and a few others a very special blessing. He put the chalice on our heads and prayed something. All I could think was “Don’t let anyone of us bump shoulders with another because we would have fallen to the floor in silly, nervous laughter. We made it through!

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“We Need Theology”



Margaret and Mary with
Sisters of St. Basil the Great I
n Lviv, Ukraine

**“They are
cherished friends”**
Mary McGlone

When Maica Ioana asked what I did, I said that I taught theology. She said “That is what we need, theology!” Then she said that I could give the sisters a talk in the afternoon. I asked what she wanted me to talk about and she said “theology.” When I explained that it was a broad topic she simply said “You know better than we do.”

God has been good! I am so glad that I said yes to the 6 weeks before I thought it through and decided that it just wasn’t a good idea.

Well, I had not come exactly prepared for that, but the three of us put our heads together. I said that I had taught Introduction to the New Testament at least 16 times in the past few years and these sisters had been in the underground and wouldn’t be very familiar with new New Testament studies. Together we put together an “adult learning model” process for some input, group work and discussions. When we told her the plan, Maica Iona said, “We can talk to each other all the time, what we need is lecture.”

So, with a translator by my side, I launched into the story of the formation of the Gospels and the different theological points of view represented. After the lecture, Maica Ioana said that I could do a morning and an afternoon talk for the rest of the week while we were there.

I went back around Thanksgiving with Margret and Mary who stayed in Bucharest working with leadership while I was supposed to go to the north to meet sisters who were not convinced that they could come free from the underground. That was fairly unremarkable, but before returning to Bucharest, I stopped in Cluj. At that time the sisters invited me to return in the summer to teach and work with them. I replied that I would, only if I could study the language because I don’t believe in dropping off the moon and expecting people to understand English or get a translator. We agreed.

Then, a week or two before leaving for a six week trip I panicked. How on earth had I agreed to go live in a monastery for 6 weeks where very few sisters had a clue about English and my Romanian was rudimentary at best. Why had I said “Yes?” Well, I went and it was wonderful. Every morning I would go for tutoring in the language and every afternoon we had some sort of activity. In the evenings one of the sisters and I would go for a walk. In one direction we would speak Romanian and she would help me, in the other direction we would speak English and I would help her.

I was invited back, and was able to find donors who would help defray the cost. So, by now, I have been back every year. The current provincial says that I am really Sora Meri, CSJ-OSBM. It has been a great grace in my life to be with these sisters, to watch those who were very young when I was first there grow and become leaders. I have also become friends with the OSBM (Order of St. Basil the Great) fathers and brothers. They too are cherished friends.