

FOUR CENTURIES OF SISTERHOOD

1650 The Sisters of St. Joseph, who had been working with the poor and downtrodden in Le Puy-en-Velay in southern France for about four years, are formally recognized as a religious congregation by the Catholic Church.

1793 During the French Revolution (1789-1799), religious congregations are oppressed. At least four members of the Sisters of St. Joseph are sent to the guillotine. The congregation disbands in 1793.

1807 Sister Jeanne Fontbonne re-establishes the Sisters of St. Joseph in Lyon, France.



1836 Responding to a request from Bishop Joseph Rosati of St. Louis for religious women to teach, six sisters arrive in St. Louis from France and establish a school in a log cabin. The sisters soon set up convents and schools in other cities.

1856 At the request of Brooklyn Bishop John Loughlin, three sisters who had been living and working in Philadelphia move to Brooklyn and open a school at St. Mary Parish in Williamsburg. That same year, sisters form what would later become the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood.



1860 The Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood open a motherhouse and an academy at the former site of Episcopal St. Thomas Hall in Flushing.

1891 The Diocese of Brooklyn opens St. John's Hospital in Long Island City, and the sisters go to work there.

1896 The sisters purchase 350 acres in Brentwood, where they would later open a motherhouse and a school, St. Charles Hall.

1904 St. Joseph Commercial High School is established by the sisters in Downtown Brooklyn.



1916 The sisters open St. Joseph's College for Women in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn. Its first class has 12 students.

1929-1933 The Brentwood campus expands with the construction of a new convent and chapel.

375 YEARS NUN-STOP

From Le Puy to Brentwood: Sisters of St. Joseph Mark Four Decades of Service



by Paula Katinas, Senior Reporter

BRENTWOOD, N.Y. — From modest origins in a picturesque French town, a movement was born that would span continents and centuries.

In the mid-17th century, six women in Le Puy-en-Velay, a town in southern France, saw how families lived in poverty and decided to devote their lives to assisting them — the humble beginnings of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Today, 14,000 members working in several countries are celebrating the 375th anniversary of their formal recognition by the Catholic Church as a religious congregation in 1650.

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, formed in 1856, 20 years after the congregation arrived in the U.S., are celebrating with a gala dinner, "Ignite the Night," at the Cradle of Aviation Museum in Garden City on Oct. 15.

Because of their close ties to the Diocese of Brooklyn, where they have established schools and hospitals, they will also celebrate by visiting parishes throughout the diocese to talk about their history. And on Oct. 19, the sisters will gather at the Cathedral Basilica of St. James in Downtown Brooklyn for a special Mass at 11:30 a.m., followed by a reception.

Sister Tesa Fitzgerald, CSJ, president of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, said the anniversary is giving her an opportunity to reflect.

"When the 375, this anniversary, arrived at our doorstep, I thought 'Oh, wow!' But it gave me pause to really look back and to get a sense of greatness and the magnitude of the incredible women who went before us," said Sister Tesa, who professed her vows in 1964.

The congregation has weathered many storms over the centuries and has persevered to continue its work of serving God and those in need.

A century after their founding, the French Revolution ushered in a period of danger and uncertainty as anti-religious fervor swept through France. Four of the sisters were dragged off to the guillotine. The surviving sisters

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were forced to disband their congregation in 1793.

However, a determined young nun named Sister Jeanne Fontbonne re-founded the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1807, and the congregation regained its footing. Fontbonne Hall Academy, the girls' middle and high school in Bay Ridge, is named for her.

In 1836, six members of the Sisters of St. Joseph crossed the Atlantic Ocean and arrived in the U.S. to open a school in St. Louis, answering a request for teachers issued by Bishop Joseph Rosati.

Before long, more sisters arrived, and the congregation expanded from Missouri to other states, including New York. A local congregation that would later become the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood was founded.

Over the years, when the local congregation's mission was primarily focused on education and health care, the sisters founded schools and hospitals in the Diocese of Brooklyn.

But starting in 1970, that mission expanded, and the sisters began working in prisons with incarcerated women and opening shelters for domestic violence victims.

Sister Tesa, who was among the sisters helping the incarcerated, said the expansion of mission has been a gift. In 1986, she founded Hour Children, a home for children whose mothers were in prison.

"I was an educator in the field of formal education for nine years, but then the call to prison ministry was there ... and I had no sense where that was coming from within me, but I certainly knew that was a calling I had to pursue," she explained.

In more recent years, the congregation has assisted immigrants with housing and job training, and worked on environmental issues — moves that align with the sisters' history as women who identify a need and take action to address it.

"It was always a community of people who really listened, were attentive to the signs of the time, the needs of the people, and did something, and they did something concrete," Sister Tesa said. "Whatever it was, they really hit the streets running."



1931-1967 The sisters establish several schools during this period, including St. Joseph Juniorate School in 1931, The Mary Louis Academy in 1936, Fontbonne Hall Academy in 1937, Stella Maris High School in 1943, Sacred Heart Academy in 1949, St. Francis de Sales School for the Deaf in 1960, and Academia Maria Reina in 1967.



1965 The Sisters of St. Joseph are among those marching with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama, for civil rights.

2025 The sisters provide housing for refugees from places like Afghanistan and Ukraine, facilitate legal assistance for immigrants, and offer job training for women.

2021 The Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood work with members of the Shinnecock Tribe to have the Hampton Bays portion of their property used as a shellfish hatchery.

2018 The sisters have solar panels installed on the Brentwood campus.

1994 The CSJ Learning Connection opens to educate women who lack high school diplomas or speak English as a second language.

1979 The sisters open Providence House, transitional housing for formerly incarcerated women.

1970 The sisters expand their ministry to include immigration, prison ministry, and social services.

1968 Responding to Vatican II, the Sisters of St. Joseph rework their governing structure and establish a Sisters Forum to invite wider participation in decision-making. Also, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood acquire Bishop Kearney High School from the Diocese of Brooklyn.