

Benedictine, Mercy sisters dedicate decades to children

written by Malea Hargett |



Five Benedictine and Mercy sisters celebrated major milestones in their religious life this year.

50 years



Sister Deborah Troillett, RSM

Sister Deborah Troillett, RSM, a native of Little Rock, graduated from Our Lady of the Holy Souls School and Mount St. Mary Academy. She entered the Sisters of Mercy in 1974 and received her bachelor's degree in theology and English from St. Louis University and her master's degree in Catholic school administration from the University of Dayton. Most recently, she served as executive director of the Arkansas House of Prayer. From 2011 to 2017, Sister Deborah served as an institute councilor for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas — North, South and Central America. Most of her ministry life has been dedicated to Mercy secondary education, serving 22 years at Mount St. Mary Academy as a teacher, principal and president and nine years at Mount St. Mary High School in Oklahoma City. Currently, she serves on the boards of the Family Development Center at Catherine's House in Little Rock and the Cooper-Anthony Mercy Child Advocacy Center in Hot Springs.

60 years



Sister Helen Herbstritt, OSB

Sister Helen Herbstritt, OSB, was born in St. Marys, Pa., the youngest of 10 children. She was inspired by the Benedictine sisters who taught her.

At the age of 18, she entered St Joseph's Monastery in 1962. She professed first vows in 1964 and solemn vows in 1969. Sister Helen earned her bachelor's degree in education from Villa Maria College in Erie, Pa., and a master's degree in education from the University of Dayton in Ohio. A talented musician, she also earned a master's degree in music from St. Joseph College in Rensselaer, Ind.

Sister Helen taught elementary school and religious education for 17 years. She formally transferred to Holy Angel Convent in Jonesboro in 2018. She supports the community with the liturgy and provides organ music.



Sister Madeline Bariola, OSB

Sister Madeline Bariola, OSB, was born in Lake Village to Julius and Catherine Bariola, descendants of the original Italian immigrants. In 1950, at 14 years old, she made the trip to Fort Smith, home of St. Scholastica Monastery. On June 24, 1957, she made her perpetual vows. She is remembered by many as Sister Philip — the name given to her when she became a novice, although she is now known as Sister Madeline. The mission work that stole her heart was at St. Joseph’s Orphanage in North Little Rock, where she worked for 28 years. These days, Sister Madeline keeps busy making cookies, sweet breads and her famous fig preserves. When the weather is nice, she loves to care for plants and flowers, blackberries and fig trees on the grounds of St. Scholastica. She believes the beauty of the monastery grounds is a ministry to both the sisters and their guests.

“My vocation has been a journey filled with hard work and one touched by many lives,” she said.



Sister Rosalie Ruesewald, OSB

Sister Rosalie Ruesewald, OSB, had considered religious life in high school, but she did not pursue her vocation until her junior year of college. Sister Rosalie entered the convent in August 1951 and was given the name Sister Mary Luke when she became a novice on June 24, 1952. She made her final profession in 1957. Sister Mary Luke began her mission work as a teacher in Charleston and at St. Boniface in Fort Smith. After graduating from Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kan., she taught at St. Scholastica Academy for about 10 years. After Vatican II, St. Mary Luke returned to her baptismal name. In 1968, after the closure of the academy, Sister Rosalie taught at Alamo Catholic High in Amarillo, Texas, and then worked in campus ministry in Canyon, Texas. Later, she was also the vocation director and director of oblates. Sister Rosalie has served most recently as the monastery's Social Awareness Committee director, and she was involved in the origins of the monastery's Girls' Education Matters scholarship program for impoverished girls in Guatemala.

75 years



Sister Mary John Seyler, OSB

Sister Mary John Seyler, OSB, was raised in Muenster, Texas, and taught by sisters from Holy Angels Convent in Jonesboro. She entered religious life in 1947 and made her first profession in 1949, followed by her perpetual profession in 1953. After completing her initial formation, she began a 40-year ministry in Catholic education. Sister Mary John taught at Blessed Sacrament School in Jonesboro, Our Lady of the Holy Souls in Little Rock and St. Maria Goretti School in Lake Arthur, La. She also was a teacher and principal at Sacred Heart School in Muenster and St. Paul School in Pocahontas. Sister Mary John also taught religious education at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Erath, La. In 1981, she was elected prioress and served two terms. She then returned to teach at Sacred Heart School in Muenster for nine years before returning to the motherhouse to serve as the formation director. She then began a new ministry in the Pastoral Care Department at St. Bernards Medical Center, where she served as director until 2017. For the past 22 years, she has been the director of oblates.

Support religious men and women

The annual Retirement Fund for Religious collection will be taken up in parishes throughout the Diocese of Little Rock Nov. 30-Dec. 1.

In 2023, parishioners contributed \$207,284.36 to the collection, overseen by the National Religious Retirement Office. From this collection, Subiaco Abbey and the Carmelite Monastery in Little Rock received \$92,894.84 in financial support from the Retirement Fund for Religious.

Escalating health care costs and a lack of traditional retirement plans have created financial challenges for many religious communities. The Retirement Fund for Religious addresses this need, supporting more than 20,000 religious over the age of 70. In 2023, the average annual cost for their care was roughly \$59,700 a person. With skilled nursing care, the average cost was \$90,700.