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BY MARTANNE MEYERKIECKS
FORT SMITH CORRESPONDENT



KAREN SCHWARTZ

Leo Anhalt (left), president of SSI Inc., general contractor for the new monastery; Bishop Anthony B. Taylor; Father John Antony, administrator of Trinity Junior High School; and Sister Elise Forst, OSB, monastery development director, applaud prioress Sister Maria De Angeli's opening words at the groundbreaking for St. Scholastica's new monastery in Fort Smith May 10.

FORT SMITH — The Benedictine sisters of St. Scholastica Monastery, surrounded by friends, alumnae, oblates and members of the community, broke ground on a smaller monastery May 10.

Before lifting their shovels, the sisters added soil from the sacred places in their history to the construction site. Sister Joella Kidwell, OSB, president of the Federation of St. Gertrude, brought soil from their motherhouse in Ferdinand, Ind., from which four young sisters had journeyed to Arkansas in 1878. Sister Ethel Marie Sonnier, OSB, a longtime member of Hesychia House of Prayer in Shoal Creek, added soil from the site of the sisters' original convent, built in 1879. Sister Regina Schroeder, OSB, added soil from the community cemetery. Finally, prioress Sister Maria DeAngeli added soil from the monastery entrance, Trinity Junior High School, located in the former St. Scholastica Academy, and the retreat center, where guests, friends, family, students and employees were welcomed as Christ each day.

Bishop Anthony B. Taylor, who blessed the grounds, reminded the attendees that the monastery is merely "the envelope that the community gathers in" and what happens within the community is most important. He praised the sisters for coming to a consensus on where God was leading them.

Sister Joella drew on the sisters' nearly 140-year history in Arkansas and the many changes in the Church and the world since the community's founding.

"Like the sisters themselves, the buildings that served them well in the past are aging, needing repair and no longer fitting the needs of the present time," she said.

On behalf of the Federation of St. Gertrude, comprised of 15 communities in the U.S. and Canada, Sister Joella thanked the people with whom the sisters worked and served for their encouragement.

The new, 30,000-square-foot monastery is being built in the southwestern quadrant of the current monastery site. It will contain a chapel, dining room, kitchen, offices, meeting rooms, bedrooms for the sisters and rooms for overnight guests.

The sisters are raising money for the new monastery through a \$5 million capital campaign taking the theme "Forward in Faith." In its 138-year history, the order has adapted to many changes, always trying to discern God's call. The 93-year-old, six-story monastery once housed a boarding school for girls while being "home" to the numerous sisters who came back from teaching elementary school in Arkansas, Missouri and Texas each summer, but what worked so well in the past has now become an obstacle to their mission.

In addition to high operational expenses, upkeep and energy costs, the monastery's multi-level design has created difficulties, especially for the oldest sisters. The small fire caused by a lightning strike to the sixth floor last May underscored the need for a single-story building, as infirm sisters waited on the third floor deck on a cold, rainy night, preparing for a possible evacuation. Fire Marshall Ronnie Rogers, division chief of fire prevention and investigation, stressed the

need for the sisters to move forward quickly. "It's time for these sisters to have a new building that they can get out of safely," he said.

A more affordable and manageable monastery, which is expected to be completed in late 2018, will allow the sisters to use their resources to continue their lives of prayer and ministry in Fort Smith.

"We will add this groundbreaking day to our book of memories," Sister Maria said. "We followed in the footsteps of our fore mothers as we moved forward in faith to build a new monastery that will fit our needs today, blessed and honored with the presence of family, friends, and neighbors. It has been a long journey with many ups and downs, but being women of faith, we always look for a silver lining."



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