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Hallowed ground

Ceremony at St. Scholastica Monastery marks beginning of new era with new building on the way

6

By [Francisca Jones](#)

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PHOTO BY SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE/KAREN SCHWARTZ
Prioress Maria DeAngeli pours soil from the grounds of St. Scholastica's current monastery during a ritual symbolizing the blending of elements from the sisters' past atop their anticipated future. Construction of the sisters' new home will begin in mid-June.



Waving an aspergillum, Bishop Anthony Taylor blesses the grounds of St. Scholastica during the ground-breaking celebration.



St. Scholastica Monastery in Fort Smith houses 37 Benedictine nuns in a structure built to accommodate more than 300. The 92-year-old building, which ...

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After a yearslong effort of planning, fundraising and perseverance, the Benedictine nuns of St. Scholastica Monastery in Fort Smith have broken ground on what will be their new home.

Residents, town officials and employees current and former joined the sisters May 10 for a groundbreaking ceremony at the future site of the monastery, on the same plot of land as the current one.

In her opening address, St. Scholastica's prioress Sister Maria DeAngeli kidded the Most Rev. Anthony Taylor, bishop of the Diocese of Little Rock, about his proximity to Arkansas.

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"Unlike your predecessor ... who crossed the Mississippi to come to be our bishop, you crossed the Arkansas River from Oklahoma," she said.

"I didn't have to cross the Arkansas," Taylor answered during his remarks. "I grew up two miles from it -- I just floated downstream."

On the heels of laughter, Taylor emphasized how pleased he was that the process of bringing the sisters closer to having a new home was "so built on the community," calling the nuns "tenacious



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sisters."

"We're so happy that it's finally happening," DeAngeli said. "We've been on this journey for a couple of years now, and it's finally coming to fruition."

Plans for a new monastery were first announced in the March 2015 edition of *Horizons* newsletter, but DeAngeli said the sisters had been planning it for years.

"We knew that we had to downsize or reconstruct this building, as so many of our sisters have passed ... we need a new building that will give us some new incentive and new life, rather than constantly having to be repairing a building that's outgrown itself."

St. Scholastica, a late Gothic revival-style building that was once home to more than 300 sisters, is now 92 years old and houses 37 sisters. The monastery currently has two juniors -- nuns in training who have taken temporary vows -- but the average age of the sisters is 80. The oldest of the nuns, Sister Rose Ashour, turned 101 in April.

The monastery's all-female high school, St. Scholastica Academy, closed in 1968, and the monastery has leased the building to Trinity Catholic Junior High since 1986. Trinity has planned but not finalized an agreement to buy the building it's using. At one time the monastery also was home to a Montessori school and a school for children with learning disabilities.

DeAngeli credited good groundskeepers and lay help with maintenance of the property but said the list of repairs to the monastery grows longer every day.

FAMILIAR TERRITORY

Leo Anhalt, 77, president and chief executive officer of the Fort Smith-based construction firm SSI Inc., grew up in Shoal Creek (now known as Subiaco), the town where the sisters first lived after their four pioneers arrived in Arkansas from Ferdinand, Ind., in the spring of 1878.

His father worked in the convent during Anhalt's youth. A St. Scholastica student from elementary school until the eighth grade, he still visits his first- and second-grade teachers (his fifth-grade teacher passed away last year), which he said isn't something many people can say at his age. His wife, Barbara, who grew up in Fort Smith, is president of St. Scholastica academy's alumni association and had two aunts who were sisters there.

For Anhalt, it was a no-brainer to help the sisters. Relying on his knowledge of construction -- Anhalt founded SSI Inc. in 1969 -- he began assisting them four years ago in developing a strategy and plans, and will oversee the design and construction of the new monastery. Work is scheduled to begin in mid-June, he said, and is expected to be complete by the end of next year.

Anhalt said the monastery the sisters live in now is "about 10 times larger than they need."

The need for fundraising became apparent, so he and Barbara Anhalt became co-chairmen of the monastery's Forward in Faith campaign, which began in November. The campaign is also co-chaired by Linda and Buddy Spradlin, and Tom and Dorothy Calderera serve as honorary co-chairmen. All have ties to the sisters through their spouses or their educations at St. Scholastica.

Of the \$5 million the project is estimated to cost, \$1,268,014 has been raised so far through donations, pledges, bake sales, purchases made at the monastery's gift shop and other efforts. BancorpSouth has agreed to underwrite the loan until the sisters can repay it.

"It wasn't going to be a big issue because [the sisters] have been part of the community for so long," Leo Anhalt said. "It's hard to turn down the sisters."

The need for a new monastery was made more urgent when lightning struck its sixth-floor tower in May last year, starting a fire that rendered part of its infirmary floor unusable. No one was injured, but the sisters needing medical care and supervision were moved to Chapel Ridge Health and Rehabilitation, located a half-mile from the monastery.

In good weather, the sisters walk to visit their infirm sisters at Chapel Ridge. DeAngeli said the move to the rehabilitation center was difficult for some of the nuns, who didn't want to leave the monastery.

"We had one [sister] that thought she was going to prison," DeAngeli said. "I said, 'It will be if that's what you think, but I assure you it's not a prison.' And now, she's very pleased. She goes to bingo, she goes to activities and meets new people."

The monastery's chaplain takes communion with the sisters at Chapel Ridge twice a week and holds Sunday Mass at the home.



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A BETTER FIT

The new monastery will have everything the sisters need: 24 bedrooms, a kitchen and dining room, offices and rooms for meetings, a chapel and a few rooms for guests.

Hospitality is a cornerstone of Benedictine teachings, but unlike the current monastery the new one will not have a retreat center. The sisters hope to add a small retreat center in the future, but for now the monastery will host its last retreat at the end of the year.

The fate of St. Scholastica's current monastery remains in limbo. Construction on the five-story building was completed in 1924. Wings were added onto the building over the years and the structure was built without insulation. Once air conditioning was added, DeAngeli said, it was a matter of hot brick against cold brick in a building with no plaster.

The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2006 with a provision that allows for renovation -- something the sisters originally sought to do, but quickly realized the building was too big and the renovations too expensive.

With construction looming, the older sisters have mixed feelings. They're excited about the new facility, but sad that trees will have to be removed from the construction site.

"It's sad for everybody, I think, but especially for the older sisters," Sister Delores Vincent said. "It's kind of a grieving process ... but then you turn around and say, 'Look what's going to be there.' Once [the developers] get started it's going to be more exciting every day. We've never given up hope, or we wouldn't have gotten this far if we had."

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

The groundbreaking ceremony was, in Vincent's words, "as perfect a day as it could be."

At the ceremony, DeAngeli led a prayer service and, along with introducing Taylor, welcomed Sister Joella Kidwell, president of the Federation of St. Gertrude, who drew a parallel between the journey of their foremothers from Indiana and the sisters at St. Scholastica.

"Almost 140 years later, we find these women with the help of many people whose lives they have touched continuing the journey," Kidwell said. "Like the sisters themselves, the buildings that served them well in the past are aching, in need of repair and no longer fit for the needs of the present."

Other guests of honor were the Rev. John Antony, pastor of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Fort Smith and Trinity Catholic Junior High's administrator; Sandi Sanders, representing her husband, Fort Smith Mayor Sandy Sanders; Vice Mayor Kevin Settle; Leo and Barbara Anhalt, Buddy and Linda Spradlin and Tom and Dorothy Calderera; Mark Loibner, the building's architect; and Sister Elise Forst, director of the fundraising campaign. Members of the monastery in Subiaco, where the monks initially allowed the sisters from Indiana to stay, were also at the ceremony.

After the ceremony, graduates of St. Scholastica Academy, who call themselves the St. Scho Girls, invited all attending to a reception.

For Vincent and Anhalt, though, the most touching part of the groundbreaking was the mixing of the soil, which was referred to as "the keeper of our stories."

As the crowd of around 125 watched, Kidwell poured soil she had brought from the grounds of their foremothers in Indiana in front of the ground to be broken. Sister Ethel Marie Sonnier added soil from Shoal Creek. From the community cemetery, where the four sisters from Indiana are buried, Sister Regina Schroeder provided a layer of soil, upon which DeAngeli added soil from the grounds of the current monastery and retreat center. Reflections written by Sister Macrina Wiederkehr on the significance of each soil added were read aloud during the layering of the soils.

"I go to a lot of [groundbreakings] in the business, and they're just groundbreakings," Anhalt said. "Here they had the religious aspect and brought God into the service, which I thought was a beautiful part. It was really heartwarming to see, and I think it was the best groundbreaking I've ever seen. So there's just a lot of good and everyone [feels] the same way.

"The sisters, they just have this way. All I did was bring the shovels."

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