

San Diego nun celebrates 60 years of helping others



By Blanca Gonzalez | 8:23 p.m. Nov. 13, 2010



October 31, 2010 San Diego, Calif., U.S.A. Sister Katie Lett of the Blessed Sacrament Church, center, gives communion every Sunday to neighbor Joe Olkowski, left. At right is Sister Eleanor McNally.

SAN DIEGO — Sister Katie Lett laughs easily and often.

Her blue eyes sparkle and her conversations are sprinkled with “honeys” as in, “Oh, honey, I’m going to jail on Wednesday” or “honey, I don’t know how I ever got through the novitiate.”

After 60 years as a Catholic nun, she has seen many changes in the world but her faith, joy and determination to help others has been constant.

Although she’s officially retired, she still serves as a volunteer chaplain at the San Diego Central Jail and helps with a transitional housing program for abused women and their children. She also devotes much time and energy to Kairos, a support group for women who have been incarcerated or who have loved ones in jail.

Sister Katie, 78, has spent more than half her years as a nun in San Diego County, beginning with her arrival at San Luis Rey Academy in Oceanside in 1969. She later worked in parishes in Chula Vista, Pacific Beach and Blessed Sacrament in the College Area, where she now lives with fellow nun, Sister Eleanor McNally.

The Ohio native was 18 when she entered the Dayton-based Sisters of the Precious Blood, a religious order founded in Switzerland in 1834 by Maria Anna Brunner, a widow and mother of six.

Sister Katie, one of three children raised by a single mother, was very social in high school. “I dated a lot. I was class president for two years. I went to parties and dances,” she said.

She still loves to dance. She helps out at the Blessed Sacrament’s annual Mardi Gras fundraiser every year and usually gets the widows and older ladies up and moving to the Cajun band. “I can get anyone dancing,” Sister Katie said proudly.

She had a steady boyfriend in 1950 before she made her commitment to God. “You really feel the call,” Sister Katie said. “I kept feeling a call to help the poor.” Any qualms she had about becoming a nun were quashed when she took her religious vows. “I received a peace in my heart when the priest put the ring on my finger.”

She met some family resistance from her aunts who thought she should have gotten a job after high school to help her mother instead of choosing a religious life, but Sister Katie said her mother always supported her decision. She acknowledged that her mother had a hard life. “My dad was an alcoholic. My mom told him he had to leave because she wouldn’t support his drinking,” Sister Katie said. “She never complained, she raised three kids on her own, taking in washing and ironing and cleaning houses. We were so poor, but we never felt it. We had love.”

One of Sister Katie’s treasured photos shows her at 19 in her nun’s habit next to her mother. Sister Katie’s long, dark robe and wimple headpiece and veil are of another era, as were some of the traditions that have changed over the years.

For the past several decades, Sister Katie and others like her have

worn secular clothing, usually modest blouses or sweaters with slacks or skirts and sensible shoes. The focus of the nuns’ ministry has also changed. Instead of just teaching in parochial schools, the sisters now participate in various areas of the community including outreach to the poor, homeless and AIDS victims.

She holds a bachelor’s in education and administration and a master’s in psychology from the University of Notre Dame. She has done pastoral counseling and worked with youth and married couples, and she did a stint as director of Recovery Programs for San Diego Catholic Charities. She is Eucharistic minister for the homebound and hospitalized and regularly gives Holy Communion to an elderly neighbor.

Sister Katie said her life has been blessed, but sometimes she looks back at the early years and wonders how she did it. “Honey, I’ll tell you, our training was worse than boot camp,” she said laughing. “There was all that silence. I knew that nuns prayed but ... there was a lot of praying.”

She recalled entering the convent the Sunday before Labor Day in 1950. “There were tennis courts next to us and we had a picnic and played tennis (on the holiday) and I thought, ‘This isn’t going to be too bad,’ ... I loved sports,” she said.

She soon had to adjust to hours of silence and contemplative prayer. “We had to get up at 4:30 in the morning and I wasn’t too much into prayer (at that age) but I had such a desire to help people,” she said.

Stephanie Scott, a leader in Kairos, said Sister Katie has been a big supporter of the group. “She has been a blessing to me and to our ministry,” Scott said. “She’s so vibrant, so bubbly and so full of joy. ... She’s awesome to give back so much of her time,” Scott said. “Whatever needs to be done, she does with such a positive, upbeat attitude. She just brightens your day.”

When Sister Katie officially retired from parish ministry in 2005, a friend gave her an embroidered pillow with the words “Retired ... now I can rest in peace.” But Sister Katie rarely sits still, unless she’s praying. “Nuns never really retire,” she said. “There’s so much to do.”



Top, after Sister Katie Lett gives Holy Communion to neighbor Joe Olkowski late last month, he plays the piano for her. Second, Sister Katie Lett holds an icon from Germany that hangs in her home. Third, Sister Katie Lett, left, of the Blessed Sacrament Church, walks with her housemate and friend, Sister Eleanor McNally. On Sundays, they go across the street to give communion to their neighbor Joe Olkowski. Fourth, Sister Katie Lett holds a photo of herself from 1962. Photos by Peggy Peattie/San Diego Union-Tribune/ZUMA Press; Copyright San Diego Union-Tribune Publishing Co.