

# Precious Blood sisters celebrate 175th anniversary

## Religious order paved way for Catholic education in Arizona

By Ambria Hammel  
The Catholic Sun

Two sisters opened the doors of a storage closet in 1917 to teach five boys and 10 girls.

That became the first St. Mary's High School, a school with a long and rich history and an account that would not be complete without the story of the Sisters of the Precious Blood. For it was the sisters who opened the state's first Catholic high school and remained there for decades, taught at the elementary level and helped the poor struggling to live in the desert.

"The Sisters of the Precious Blood were the true desert light-houses leading to safety and salvation," Franciscan Father Howard Hall said during a March 21 Mass

### Sisters of the Precious Blood

For information about the sisters and the jubilee year:

[www.preciousbloodsistersdayton.org](http://www.preciousbloodsistersdayton.org)

in honor of the order's 175th jubilee.

The Mass was held at St. Mary's Basilica where the first sisters settled when they came to the Southwest in 1903. Fr. Hall worked with the sisters as pastor in the 1950s.

Dozens of former students and others who worked with the sisters attended the Mass and reception to recall the service some 300 sisters dedicated to the Southwest.

"It's just untold the influence of



Ambria Hammel/CATHOLIC SUN

**Sisters of the Precious Blood pray for the souls of 16 sisters March 22 at St. Francis Cemetery. The prayer service was part of the order's anniversary.**

the Precious Blood Sisters in this area," said Sr. Eleanor McNally, a St. Mary's alumna and former St. Mary's teacher. Sr. Eleanor chronicled the sisters' work in Arizona in one of the order's history books.

Franciscan Father Alonso de Blas, parochial vicar of the basilica and former student of the Precious Blood Sisters, knows the women

were so influential that he helped put Sr. Anna Rita DeLand, a long-time principal, in the St. Mary's hall of fame a few years ago. She remains the only sister inducted.

### Educating the masses

Education remained the order's early focus. The sisters also taught at St. Mary's High

School; St. Mark, Sacred Heart, St. Gregory, St. Thomas the Apostle and Immaculate Heart of Mary schools, Gerard and Bourgade Catholic high schools, Queen of Peace in Mesa, Our Lady of Guadalupe in Guadalupe and St. Mary in Kingman.

The sisters' ministry quickly expanded to include religious education on weekends in Native American and Hispanic missions. The women helped open and staff more than 30 parishes in the Southwest.

Always willing to serve, the sisters did not lead a life of solitude. Children nationwide who needed a dry climate for medical reasons or were otherwise in need of shelter lived in the convent with the women.

Phil Genovese, now a St. Thomas the Apostle parishioner, lived with the sisters for two years beginning in 1939. He still talks about the table manners the religious women taught him.

Genovese said his six years at St. Mary's Elementary School and two in the convent were among his most memorable. He recalls visiting the girls' side on occasion to play on their fire escape slide.

"The nuns didn't care if you went up there and slid down," Genovese said.

While the sisters' students have grown — the nuns last served the diocese at St. Mary's Basilica in 1997 — their memory is not forgotten.

"It still has that sprit of children out there," said Sr. Nancy Wolf, the last Sister of the Precious Blood to serve the school.

She described the life-like sculpture outside the Diocesan Pastoral Center in which several children hold hands and form a near circle in the grass. Sr. Nancy said children visiting the area today continue to play with the "children" of long ago.

### Works of mercy

The Sisters of the Precious Blood also spent their days in Arizona tending to the poor, sick, homeless and orphaned. Sr. Luca Junk served such people through her position at Catholic Charities Community Services.

"They really had an eye for people who needed help," Fr. de Blas said. Fr. de Blas grew up across the street from the sisters, learned from them in school and took music lessons at their convent.

He knows the sisters did a lot for the students, but that they were just as interested in the plight of the poor. Fr. Hall recapped those efforts during his homily.

"Mama Luca, or 'God's Lady of Phoenix,' became the advocate and answer for many recent immigrants and marginalized in South Phoenix who needed food, shelter, the English language or transportation," Fr. Hall said. \*

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