Our Lady of the Angels Chapel and Ministry Complex—
Celebrating 65 Years

Our Lady of the Angels Convent is both home and Administrative Center for the United States Province of the Congregation of Franciscan Sisters, Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, whose international headquarters are in Rome, Italy. Yet as our national headquarters are located in Wheaton, Illinois, members of the United States Province are known as Wheaton Franciscans.

Our Lady of the Angels is on a sixty-acre campus. It had been said that “this is the spiritual powerhouse of the Franciscan ministries. Here the prayers and lives of our retired and younger sisters mingle with care and concern for peoples, especially the poor”.

This is also the site of the nationally acclaimed Marianjoy Rehabilitation Center (founded and managed by the Province until 2016 when it was sold to Northwestern Medicine), the Tau Center (a Spirituality Ministry of the Wheaton Franciscans), the Wheaton Franciscan Ministry Fund, and Canticle Place, a 12-unit apartment complex providing affordable housing to persons living with AIDS.

Historical Background

The first United States mission of the Wheaton Franciscans was founded in Missouri in 1872. New members were received at our original motherhouse at the site of the old St. Anthony’s Hospital located in St. Louis. During the 1940s, it was concluded that a hospital in a large city was not a suitable place for the formation of new members. A more rural site was sought. The search ended when the Hurley estate went up for sale. The location of the property in midwestern Illinois, near Wheaton, was deemed an excellent location with its rolling lawns, lush wooded areas, wildlife, flowers, many varieties of birds, a creek and two large orchards. The convent (Province Offices) and novitiate were established in the estate’s two large homes. It was an ideal setting for Franciscan women to develop their personal and spiritual life.
Newspaper article and photos from the *St. Louis Register* announcing the Franciscan Sisters’ new property and move from St. Louis to Wheaton (June 13, 1947).
In 1947, when the motherhouse moved to Wheaton, there was a constant influx of new members. Soon the two residences became too small, and wings were added to both buildings while the plans were made to build a “proper” convent and novitiate. Ralph Ranft, a St. Louis architect, was engaged to design a functional layout for a new building which would be in keeping with canon law, the requirements of religious life and the spirit of Francis of Assisi. The result of this effort is Our Lady of the Angels Convent named after a church dear to St. Francis. Constructed of reinforced concrete throughout; its exterior walls consist of variegated salmon-rust face brick with limestone trim. Above the entrance (#5), the Franciscan Coat of Arms is engraved in stone. The first part of the convent, including the novitiate wing, was built in 1955; another wing was added in 1963. The slope of the land was incorporated in the layout of the structure, resulting in the varied levels of the building’s wings, gardens, and courtyards. In 1955, Our Lady of the Angels Convent and Novitiate was dedicated just as membership for the Franciscan Sisters crested to the all-time high of 496 members. (written by Sr. Jane Madejczyk)
In this photograph and the two that follow, Sisters are shown a model of the Convent complex, circa 1953.
Construction
Completed building, motherhouse—entrance 5
Completed building, motherhouse, chapel—entrance 5
Completed building, motherhouse—courtyard
Completed novitiate
The motherhouse and novitiate were dedicated on August 24, 1955. Some of our Sisters remembered being young novices cleaning the motherhouse and novitiate when they were completed. They remembered this cleaning was particularly difficult because of the fine construction dust that veiled everything.
The refectory
The auditorium/ gym
The boiler room
Main hallway, entrance 5
From Chapel narthex into the Relic Room
The promenade
Main lobby
Main lobby
On August 19, 1955, a week earlier, the chapel was dedicated, and the altars consecrated. The following pictures were taken on the August 24th celebration, the day the motherhouse and novitiate were dedicated.

Photograph of Bishop McNamara and assistants blessing the outside of new motherhouse (August 24, 1955).
Bishop McNamara blessing the chapel and guests in the chapel.
Photograph from the back of the chapel during the Mass of dedication on August 24, 1955.
Photograph from the balcony of the chapel during the Mass of dedication on August 24, 1955.
Back of chapel.
Color photograph of the chapel. Note the elaborate hand-painted ceiling depicting the Life of Christ through symbols with gold leaf.
Front of the chapel. The redish-hued marble at the front of the chapel is Rojo Alicante marble from Spain. Botticino marble and Bianca P marble (both from northern Italy) are used for the altars, the Corpus and the statues of the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph. The Stations of the Cross and most of the other marble in the chapel is Botticino marble. The altars are decorated with Florentine mosaics.
Daprato Ragali Studios executed the chapel design with the marble and statues. Their company was founded in Chicago in 1860 by five Italian craftsmen from the Tuscany region.

The Emil Frei Studios in St. Louis designed and executed the stained-glass windows. The windows in the chapel were designed by Francis Deck and the glass is imported from Munich, Germany. The windows depict the Magnificat through symbols while two front windows honor St. Francis and St. Clare.
Sample of stained-glass window (left) and a sample of the ambiance the windows offer during a Mass celebration (below).
The 65th anniversary of the building of the motherhouse, novitiate, and chapel was marked by a special Mass on August 19, 2020. Fr. Phil Horrigan celebrated the Mass, a priest the Wheaton Franciscans are lucky to have as a celebrant and coordinator of Liturgy along with Melanie Teska. Wheaton Franciscans were asked to share their memories of the chapel in their lives and these were included in the celebration, as well as spontaneous sharing from the small group of Sisters who reside at Our Lady of the Angles Motherhouse. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, outsiders were not allowed inside the motherhouse or chapel, though the service was shared through live streaming.

Homily offered by Fr. Phil at the 65th anniversary celebratory Mass;

“The Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar

The rite for the Dedication of a Church (or Chapel) and an Altar is one of the most moving and significant rituals in the liturgical repertoire of the Church. It marks one of the most important moments in the life of a faith community. It is no wonder that the anniversary of the dedication of a liturgical space is designated a particular solemnity for the community.

Jacob may have been the first to dedicate a sacred place (Gen. 28: 16-19). When he awoke from his dream, having conversed with God during the night, he took the stone he used for his pillow, anointed it with oil and declared, “Truly God is in this place and I never knew it! How awe-inspiring this place is. This is nothing less than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

In the Christian era the historian Eusebius recounts the dedication of the first basilica of Tyre (318 C.E.). He notes that the scriptures were proclaimed, food was shared, the psalms were sung with great joy, and the holy kiss was exchanged among all present. The building, he declared, had “a brilliant beauty and dazzling workmanship.” The Christian community continued to grow in those first few centuries and, with the patronage of the Roman Emperor Constantine, built and dedicated numerous places for worship. Perhaps the people became a little too enamored by their buildings and John Chrysostom (c. 337-407) remarked, “It is not the building that makes the people holy, it is the people who come into it that make the church holy.”
Like all the rites of the Church, the rite of dedication changed many times over the centuries. In its early form the rite took its cue from the rites of initiation: the walls were sprinkled with water as a sign of purification; the altar and the walls were anointed with oil while the assembly renewed their baptismal promises; the altar was vested with a new white cloth; and candles were lighted to symbolize that Christ the Light was ‘in this place.’ In the 8th century relics were inserted in the mensa, the top of the altar since it was no longer possible to build every church over the tombs of the martyrs.

By the 18th century an elaborate ceremony had developed that included an all-night vigil with a deacon sequestered inside the church to fast and pray. In the morning the bishop, after processing around the church 3 times, knocked on the doors. Ashes, salt, and wine were mixed and smeared on the doors in the form of a cross; the walls were anointed and incensed; relics were placed in the top of the altar; incense and was were burned on top of the altar, and prayers of exorcism were chanted. Finally, according to the rubrics, “the bishop celebrates Eucharist if he is not too tired!”

The basic structure of this rite maintained until the middle of the 20th century when Pope John XXIII made several changes that shaped the format for the rite that is used to this day.

From the records:

- Construction of the Motherhouse, Novitiate and Chapel began in March 1953.
- The chapel was dedicated, and the altars consecrated on August 19, 155. The name of the Chapel is Saint Mary of the Angels.
- The titles of the altars: The main altar, Sacred Heart of Jesus; the two side altars, Blessed Mother and St. Joseph.
- The motherhouse and Novitiate building were dedicated on August 24, 1955. A mass of dedication was celebrated in the chapel that same day.
- The chapel was rededicated on March 27, 1991 following an extensive renovation. That new wood altar was consecrated in the same ceremony.”
The following are quotes sisters and others volunteered to share when asked about some of their favorite memories of the chapel;

Sr. Margaret Grempka

“I always love our jubilee celebrations in the chapel. They are such a special time for the community and families of the Jubilarians.

I'm always grateful we still have our chapel. It's so beautiful when the sun streams through our beautiful chapel windows.

My brother was married in the chapel and a number of my nephews were baptized in the chapel. Those were truly special times for me and my family. I've always been grateful these sacraments could be celebrated there.”

Sr. Glenna Czachor

“(too many to choose from...) My most favorite memory of the Chapel is my final vow service. What was most special was having the WF Community and my family all in one place, and the amazing grace and blessing it was to profess my life to God, to have Sr. Margaret receive my vows and give me my profession ring.

My favorite view of the Chapel is from the choir loft, especially on Jubilee day when the chapel is awash with color, and flowers, and crowded with lots of wonderful people…community, family and friends!

A happy memory from my Novitiate was helping Sr. Catherine Clare with her sacristan duties. A special memory was setting up the Deutschland chapel for Holy Thursday and dusting off all the characters for the crèche for Christmas.
The memories for which I have the most gratitude for are the two funeral liturgies for both my parents. This was such a gift to me and my family from the Community. I felt such an outpouring of love and support and could not think of a better place to celebrate lives of my parents as we mourned their passing.

I fondly recall the Interfaith Prayer Service for Peace that I was privileged to organize and host as JPIC coordinator. We invited into our chapel members and heard from the leaders of Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and various Christian Protestant Communities.”

Sr. Shirley Krull

“Tears in my father’s eyes at my investiture into novitiate
Joy when Father David would be a spontaneous celebrant with us.”

Sr. Georgene L. Wilson

“One of many blessed moments that I have experienced in and through the holy space of Our Lady of the Angels Chapel was the day I received the community ring from Sr. Thomas on a Sunday in 1975. As I publicly transferred into the Wheaton Franciscans, she said to me: ‘Wear this ring as a symbol of the circle of all your relationships in your God’. Her blessing healed all my wounds from chastisements by the leadership of my former community leaders for 'getting too close to people' and confirmed me into a Franciscan Way of Life through which to live ‘My God and My All’. This holy space continues to re-member me in communion with all creation via each and all relational rituals and rites of One-ing in Infinity.”

Jeanne Guilfoyle, Covenant Companion
“I remember Sr. Diane taking me for a tour of the chapel. When I walked in, I was overwhelmed by the beauty and the size of it, especially the stained-glass windows. As much as I was overwhelmed by the beauty, I was also grounded firm and secure by feeling of ‘home’. I can only think that the years of worship and prayers were being felt by me in that moment, conveying a place of home.

At Jubilee times, every year, I feel the full impact of the grandeur of the chapel and the celebration. I feel that also at Christmas and Easter vigil Masses. The very space itself vibrates with joy and music!!”

Sr. Marge Zulaski

“I appreciate the beauty of our funeral liturgies and rituals. After the funeral for Sister Virginia Mary Barta, Gabriele and I were walking home to Maura Hall when we noticed birds circling in flight above the chapel. We felt that the birds were attuned to the spirit of our dear Sister Virginia Mary.

I love the stained-glass windows with the theme of the Magnificat.”

Paige Samdal, Covenant Companion

“Evening Prayer when the sunlight casts through the stained-glass windows and covers the floor in bright colors.”

Frank Bucaro, Covenant Companion

“The many times that I played guitar with folk music for Mass in the late sixties when I stayed at the Bridge and became part of the Community.

The memory of bringing my grandchildren to Masses and introducing them to all the Sisters! They still remember fondly that experience.”
Sr. Theresa Langfield

“Magnificent Magnificat and Canticle of the sun windows reflecting inside the chapel. Floods of memories of Gregorian chant, choirs in chapel and in the choir loft and magnificent reception, profession and Jubilee celebrations.”

Sr. Pauline Langfield

“I have loved decades of playing the organ and leading song in our chapel.”

Sr. Diane Przyborowski

“I have appreciated the deep silence and sun streaming through the windows on a late afternoon when the chapel is seemingly empty. What a wonderful invitation to deep contemplation!

We have had so many liturgies when the walls of the chapel seem to breathe out to invite more and more to enter: Christmas, Jubilees, Holy Saturday, special celebrations. The chapel swells with beautiful music and song and the welcoming presence of the Wheaton Franciscan community. Friendships are renewed and the sounds of little children and babies remind us that WE ALL ARE THE CHURCH!

Sr. Jackie Drazen

I miss the art that was on the ceiling before it became a solid color. If I remember right - it was of the Passion. Most of all - I treasure all the personal & community liturgical Eucharists.

Sr. Mary Ellen McAleese
“My first challenge is where to begin or where to focus? The Chapel has been a favorite ‘stomping ground’ or stopping place for over 60 years!!

It has held me in deep silence and also in open bellows of the organ plus other instruments and voices.

In addition to my own reception and times of professing vows & Jubilees, certain members of my family have been married, baptized, and buried within that special place!

Times of celebrating Jubilees with families, friends, associates have truly given all an experience of ‘being Church’ at its very best. At the other spectrum of sound there was always an invitation to be absorbed in the silence. Maybe even knowing the reality of the song ‘I heard you crying the chapel...’.

Before sharing my favorite window, I need to mention the fact that the ceiling of chapel once was a painting of the Root of Jesse ..........all the major events up to the Resurrection (ending above the altar).

My favorite window really selected me rather than I selecting it....it is not so much the pictures (quite abstract) but the verse... FOR HE THAT IS MIGHTY HATH DONE GREAT THINGS FOR ME

I had been sitting in front of it almost every time at Mass but not seeing the words.... ..... ‘done great things for me’...... How true.... how true...countless are things done for us.”

Sr. Lynn Schafer

“Our many Christmas creche processions of Sisters, Associates, and Faith community of families, especially the young children, carry their figures to the creche. So precious a moment to be part of this and see it happen every year.

Our chapel windows have been an inspiration to me in my own artwork. I love to look at the shapes, curves, and colors. The sunlight coming through the windows has been a presence of Mystery among us.”
Sr. Maureen Elfrink

“I was a first-year novice. In June (of 1955), the novices began the cleaning of the new building—beginning in the attic in building A. We pushed the workers ahead of us so we would have the place ready for the new group of Postulants that were to arrive in August. During this time, we also had classes in Gregorian Chant by Professor Burns and our organist, Sr. Humilitas. We were ready. The chapel was beautiful. We loved going there for prayer. It was worth all of the hard work and time it took to be ready for us to continue our novitiate. However, I do not remember anything about a dedication of the new chapel. I do remember that we did very well singing the Gregorian Chant. I do remember practicing the Gregorian Chant at rehearsals so we would be ready to sing the Chant on Sundays and Feast Days. We sounded very good!

The Magnificat is the theme of the Chapel windows. One of the Franciscan Fathers gave us a beautiful description about the meaning of all the symbols in the windows. That made them even more meaningful for me.”

Sr. Fran Glowinski

“Each Christmas Eve, my favorite chapel drama unfolds as young, old and in-betweens bring to the empty crib our Christmas characters.”

Rita Kennedy, associate of Our Lady of the Angles Motherhouse

“On July 22, 2006 I received special permission to have my marriage to Guy Vaccaro celebrated in the lovely OLA Chapel. Guy and I were fortunate to have the Mass concelebrated by Guy's Uncle, a Maryknoll Missionary priest home from Peru, and his close friend, a local Joliet Diocese priest, Reverend William Donnelly. It was a beautiful day enhanced even more by the beauty and simplicity of the Chapel.”

Seth Dibblee, Covenant Companion
“I visited the chapel numerous times as a volunteer organizer for the World AIDS Day services. I especially remember the octagonal font with the ‘waterfall’ and the buzzing ‘halo’ light fixtures, the latter of which were a bit of a vexation. One year my young son came to the evening service and had a moment of inspiration in front of the Sacred Heart statue in the narthex. ‘Dad,’ he said, ‘I saw Jesus and our eyes met. For real!’”

Sr. Alice Reckamp

“For many years I was on mission in Brazil, but I remember being in the novitiate and couldn’t go to my aunt’s (Sister Marcella) profession, but I could go into the chapel at other times, for the Office, and it was really early, I think at 5:30 in the morning. Since I’ve returned from Brazil, I’ve enjoyed my ministry as a sacristan, setting up for mass on weekdays, Sundays and special feast days.”

Sr. Jane Ann Kiefer

“I was received into the community in the novitiate chapel before the big chapel was built; but I was there for final profession and it was brand new at that time, and so beautiful.”

Sr. Yvonne Wiza

“I remember the beautiful decorations by Sister Gerald Hipp who was the first sacristan for the new chapel. Most of the flowers she arranged came from the flower gardens that she tended around the grounds. I remember being here for the blessing of the grounds and the new mother house and the novitiate; I was present for the celebration. I remember when we had pews and the marble altar rail, and the beautiful symbols of the sacraments on the marble panels of the rail. I remember the magnificent painting on the ceiling.”
Sr. Mary Lou Wirtz

“The chapel holds many wonderful memories for me. I was received into the novitiate there, made profession of vows there and participated in my jubilee celebrations there as well. I love the beauty of the chapel, especially the windows and the artwork. And I love the quiet of the chapel and being able to soak up its beauty.”

Sr. Martha Friedman

“I remember being present for the blessing of the chapel. One of the sisters said that she remembers being received in this chapel. I remember being sent from this chapel. I remember there were three Franciscan priests in the sanctuary blessing the three of us sisters who were being sent to start a mission in Brazil. It was a very nice send-off.”

Sr. Mary Beth Glueckstein

“I remember the original set-up of the chapel, with the pews and the original sanctuary area. I also remember the beautiful painting of the ceiling. I remember one of my jubilee celebrations when the Jubilarians processed up the main aisle and stood in the sanctuary for a special blessing.”

Sr. Pat Irr

“I remember being a Jubilarian and the people present were asked to bless us. A friend of mine from Arizona was there and he came forward with tears running down his face and said he had never seen anything so moving as that celebration. I remember the funeral mass for Sister Fran’s mother. I was already planning to move from my community to another one, and when one of the Franciscan sisters came up behind me and placed her hands
on my me and said “we’re very flexible here” (it was about where to sit) but I understood her to mean much more than that and I knew then I was going to join the Wheaton Franciscans. Hospitality was the key.”

Sr. Jane Petzel

“I wasn’t here 65 years ago, but for 20 years I have been in awe of the beauty of the OLA chapel, the art, the architecture and the spectacular stained-glass windows. The experience of this sacred space for worship is always the same, deepening in me, whether in silence or in song, the reality of the Divine Presence. Whether it’s Christmas, Easter, special Franciscan feasts, jubilees, or ordinary time, the ambiance of beauty is always there lifting up my soul. How blessed we are to have Our Lady of the Angels Chapel right here on our holy ground. And, all are welcome!”

Sr. Mariette Kalbac

My first visit to our new Chapel was on August 24, 1955, the day the Chapel was dedicated. My parents, in St. Louis, had been invited to come for the Dedication Ceremony because my Dad had made a donation for the building. (The donation was used to obtain the marble Infant of Prague statue in the Relic Room. My Dad was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia.) I accompanied my parents to Wheaton for the ceremony. I had already applied and been accepted to join our Franciscan Community the next year, 1956, after I graduated from high school. It was a special occasion for me to pray in the new Chapel for the first time. I still pray in this Chapel 64 years later.

A collection of artifacts from the original chapel (usually on display in the Heritage Room) were gathered for a display outside the Sisters’ Dining Room. The artifacts contain the original Mass Card from the Main Altar, the keys which were on the doors of the confessionals, the large wooden blocks that were hung on the back wall of the chapel, a box of gold leaf that was scraped off the original painted ceiling of the chapel, and professional
photographs which were taken when the chapel was completed. There was also a collection of poster boards of photographs made by the archivist over the course of the last several years (including a display for the 60th anniversary of the building). The boards include photographs of the original buildings and the land when the sisters first moved to Wheaton, the new motherhouse during the stages of construction, the inside of the motherhouse after it was completed, and photographs of the dedication ceremony on August 24, 1955. Fr. Phil arranged the collection in a display on tables outside the Sisters’ Dining Room. Photos of the display follow.
Motherhouse and chapel dedication

August 24, 1955

Photograph of Bishop McNamara and assistants blessing the outside of new motherhouse (August 24, 1955).

Another photograph of the dedication Mass taken from the balcony.

Photograph from the back of the chapel to the front during the Mass of dedication on August 24, 1955.

Bishop McNamara blessing the chapel and guests in the chapel.

Front of the chapel. Front marble is Rojo Alicante marble, a red marble for Spain. The statues of the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph are made of Bianca P marble and the rest of the chapel is done in Bamburgo marble, both from Italy.