



FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:  
Phyllis Brill, Director of Communications  
410-377-7774 Ext. 1164  
[pbrill@amssnd.org](mailto:pbrill@amssnd.org)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
Dec. 8, 2011

## **Villa Notre Dame celebrates 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its dedication**

The School Sisters of Notre Dame celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dedication of Villa Notre Dame on Thursday, Dec. 8, coinciding with the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The pentagon-shaped structure in Wilton, Conn., that was the motherhouse of the former Northeastern (Wilton) Province is today home to 75 sisters in the Atlantic-Midwest Province.

A day of festivities on Thursday began with Mass in the VND chapel, during which Sister Kay O'Connell, province historian, gave the homily. Ernest Esposito, former Vicar for Religious and Clergy of the Diocese of Bridgeport, concelebrated with the Rev. Tom Elliott, VND chaplain.

After the liturgy, sisters and guests processed -- singing "Gloria in Excelsis Deo" and led by a trumpet call -- to the five wings of the building to bless and rededicate it to the SSND mission of being educators who are "intentional unifiers." Staff of various departments were also blessed and thanked.

In the afternoon, Sister Justine Nutz donned the habit of the SSNDs of 1961 to portray Mother Mary Paschal, the first provincial leader of the Northeastern Province, in a presentation in Paschal Hall. There was also a visual review of the half-century history of the convent. Later at a festive supper, some sisters shared their memories of the early days of the motherhouse. Among those present for the day's events was Sister Providencia Rodrigues, 86, one of the pioneers of the province, who came in from Puerto Rico for the celebration.

Villa Notre Dame was constructed in 1961 on Belden Hill Road in Wilton to be the motherhouse of the Northeastern Province, which had been established in 1957, an offshoot of the Eastern Province that was based in Baltimore. As the Motherhouse, the

new building in Wilton became home to 42 novices, 39 postulants and 21 professed sisters. College classes were also held at the large facility.

Wilton's chapel was designed by architect and Wilton resident R.H. Mutrux. Its cross was fashioned from two wooden beams from a 200-year-old barn in Wilton. The stained-glass windows, which line both sides of the chapel, were the work of Lithuanian immigrant V.K. Jonynas.

In 1973, Lourdes Health Care Center was added to the structure as a separate wing to serve as a nursing facility for ailing sisters.

In December 2005, when the Wilton Province joined with provinces in Baltimore and Chicago to become the Atlantic-Midwest Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the motherhouse was officially renamed Villa Notre Dame. Today, VND continues to serve as a residence for active and retired sisters and is the largest gathering place for members of the Atlantic-Midwest Province, which includes more than 540 sisters.

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