

Those Who **Serve: Sister Zita Telkamp, CDP** 'Missionary' celebrates 70 years of religious life

Sister: 'Here I sit with people from 14 or 15 countries'

By ROSE YBARRA
The Valley Catholic

SAN BENITO — “Each morning before I begin my day, I spend a few moments reflecting on the symbol that is uniquely ours as Sisters of Divine Providence,” said Sister Zita Telkamp, who wears a silver necklace bearing this emblem as a sign of commitment to her religious community’s charisms.

“The design represents the earth enclosed in an open trefoil, which is a symbol for the Triune God we call Providence,” the Sister of Divine Providence website explains. “God’s Providence is made visible through acts of justice and compassion and through an inclusive, hospitable presence.”

“Every morning when I put my necklace on, I think of that. This symbol reminds me that God is inviting me — today and every day — to make Providence visible to the world, especially the small world of ‘La Posada,’” said Sister Telkamp, who has served as program director of La Posada Providencia, a shelter for indigent immigrants, asylees and asylum seekers in San Benito, since 2008.

She has kept this promise to God every single day since she was 15 years old. Sister Telkamp, who turns 85 on March 23, was recognized for 70 years of religious life during the Mass for Consecrated Life Feb. 10 at the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan del Valle-National Shrine, where Bishop Daniel E. Flores presented her and the other jubilarians with a crucifix.

She will also be honored for her 70th Jubilee in August at a celebration in Pittsburgh, where her community is headquartered.

Sister Telkamp said she was first called to religious life as a sixth-grader in her hometown of



Julie Hernández, Mobile Journalist/
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Sister Zita Telkamp of the Sisters of Divine Providence, program director for La Posada Providencia in San Benito, was recognized by Bishop Daniel E. Flores for 70 years of religious life at the annual Mass for World Day for Consecrated Life Feb. 10 at the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan del Valle-National Shrine.

Brussels, Ill. Her teacher was a missionary who had spent many years teaching “up in the mountains” in Puerto Rico and she often shared anecdotes with her students about the experience.

“I thought to myself, ‘Oh, wouldn’t that be great?’” Sister Telkamp recalled. “I remember going home and telling my mother, ‘I want to be a sister just like my teacher because I get to tell kids about God every day.’”

The third of five children — “I was the meat between the bread,” Sister Telkamp said with a laugh — she said her parents fostered her vocation to religious life.

“We were a religious family,” she said. “Everybody ate dinner together; we prayed our night prayer together. My father always prayed for vocations so I thought, ‘Well, maybe that means me.’”

“Also, I was born on Good Friday and I was baptized on Easter Sunday and I think God has been calling me since.”

She entered the community of the Sisters of Divine Providence as a sophomore in high school, on Aug. 21, 1949.

She said she has no regrets making a lifelong commitment at such a young age.

“I’m grateful I grew up in a very Catholic family,” Sister Telkamp said. “My faith was nurtured and I was mature enough

to make that decision,” Sister Telkamp said. “My brother also joined the military at a young age with our parents’ blessing. I appreciate my parents for allowing us follow our calling and our passion.”

The stories from her sixth-grade teacher and the moving articles about U.S. missionaries serving overseas she read about in *Maryknoll* magazine inspired her to join the Sisters of Divine Providence, but several decades passed before Sister Telkamp began serving as a “missionary.”

Adaptable and always happy “to meet the needs of the time,” she served as a teacher and principal for about 50 years before

accepting her post at La Posada Providencia.

“I wanted to be a missionary as a girl, but now, at the end of my life, here I sit with people from 14 or 15 countries,” said Sister Telkamp, who has never actually served overseas — but she ministers to migrants from many different countries at La Posada Providencia. Since the shelter opened in 1989, it has served more than 10,000 from more than 86 countries.

“We give a rebirth to people who come here, a rebirth of hope, of ‘you can make it,’ ‘you can do it,’” she said. “The greatest thing is their faith, their trust in God, seeing them read their Bibles, hear-

ing them sing “Alabaré” every morning.”

The night before her interview with *The Valley Catholic*, Sister Telkamp was at the emergency room into the early morning hours with a client and her four-week-old baby, who was having trouble breathing. She woke up a few hours later, at 4 a.m., to drive another client to the airport.

It is all in a day’s work for Sister Telkamp, who lives on the property with the clients and ministers to them around the clock.

In August, the Sisters of Divine Providence will present the Ketteler Award for Social Justice to Sister Telkamp, Sister Margaret Mertens of the Sisters of the Divine Providence and Sister Thérèse Cunningham of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate, who serve together at La Posada Providencia. Sister Carolyn (now Hilary) Hooks, who began the ministry, will also be recognized.

In 1998, the Sisters of Divine Providence instituted the Ketteler Award to honor individuals who demonstrate a strong commitment to social justice. The award, named for Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, Bishop of Mainz, Germany, and co-founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of Divine Providence, is presented annually.

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