Arts and Media



Sylvania Franciscan Sr. Jane Mary Sorosiak paints colored glaze onto a ceramic tile. When the painting is complete, the tile will be baked to harden the glaze into a permanent coating. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



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Advent and Christmas can be a commercialized, monthslong celebration of consumerism.

One way sisters help return the holy meanings of the holidays is by creating and selling gifts that, thanks to the internet, can now be purchased from convents across the United States without traveling beyond a computer or mobile device.

The Sylvania Franciscans in a suburb of Toledo, Ohio, put their shop, All Good Things , online in 2017. The shop has expanded to include fair trade items but is dominated by artwork created by the sisters either at the convent or at Lourdes University, which shares the campus.



A handmade, hand-painted ceramic tile of the Madonna and child in the Sylvania Franciscans' gift shop in Sylvania, Ohio. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

Chief among these are Sr. Jane Mary Sorosiak's ceramic tiles. Sorosiak was a Lourdes ceramics professor and now runs what has become a small industry: In addition to the hundreds of hand-painted ceramic tiles the shop sells every year, hundreds more are created and sold as part of an annual fundraiser, and hundreds go into the ceramic-tile mosaics that adorn buildings across the country.

Sorosiak, 92, has the help of two sisters and several volunteers for the process of rolling out 25-pound blocks of clay to the correct thickness, pressing it into molds, baking it in a kiln, then hand-painting each one. Tiles for the mosaics that will be outside in the elements are painted with colored glazes containing glass powder, and a second baking melts the glaze into a colored glass that won't fade from the sun, rain or snow.

"I've been doing exactly the same thing all these years," Sorosiak said. "It just takes a little longer now."

Sr. Sharon Havelak said before the start of the store, many sisters in the congregation were making items and selling them from their offices, and in 2009, those efforts were essentially consolidated into the gift shop.

"We had been talking about doing this for years and years," Havelak said. "We started out with selling cards, soaps and artworks."

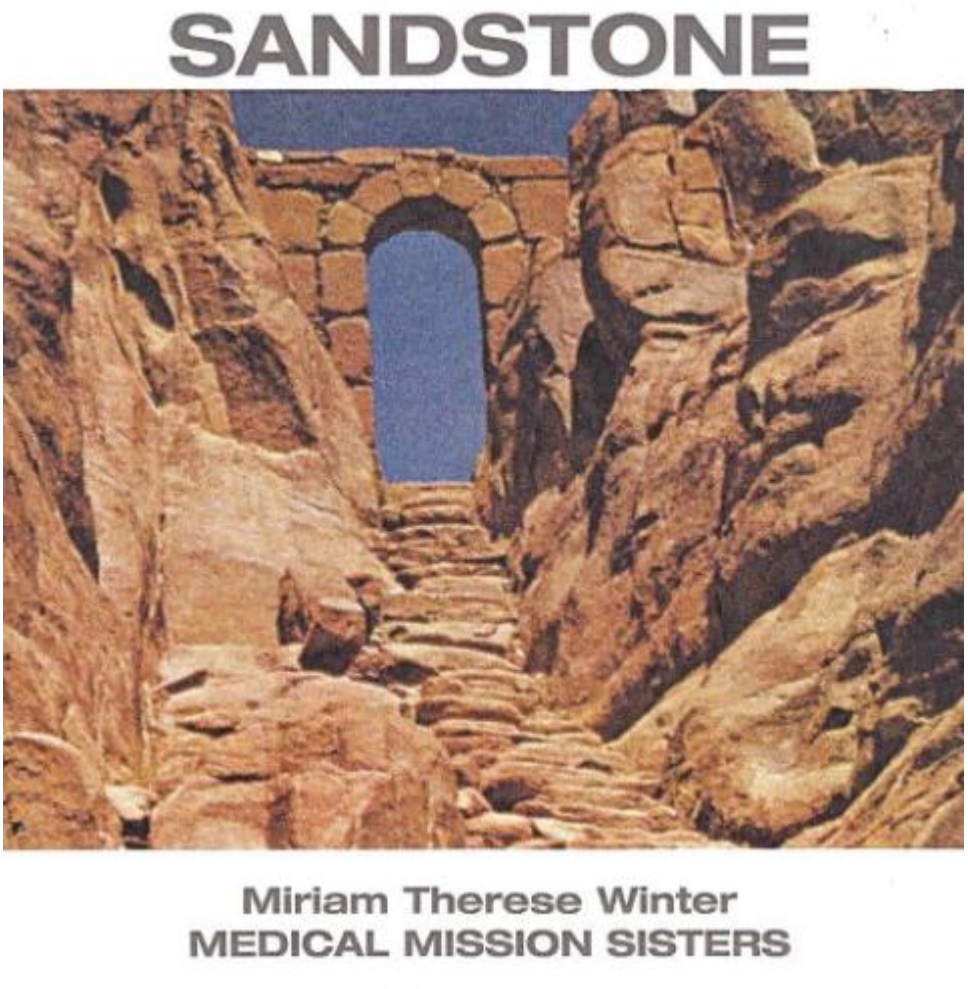


Sylvania Franciscan Sr. Sharon Havelak, one of the sisters who founded the congregation's gift shop in Sylvania, Ohio, stands near hand-painted silk scarves the shop sells. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

The congregation has always had the arts at its core: The order's foundress, Mother M. Adelaide Sandusky, was an accomplished artist and placed art from her trips to Europe around the campus.

"That history of art has been woven through everything," said Sr. Karen Jean Zielinski. "That store and ministry is such an outflow of who we are."

Other popular items in the store are Prayer Pillows, small handmade pillows "stuffed with prayers."



The Medical Mission Sisters' store sells CDs and songbooks of music written by Sr. Miriam Therese Winter. (Courtesy of Medical Mission Sisters)

The sisters say the small amount of money the shop brings in is wonderful, but All Good Things is more about relationships than commerce.

"It really is a hub. It's like a Starbucks without the coffee," Zielinski said.

While the customers usually want to buy something, they're often looking for something else: a friend, a conversation, a prayer, Zielinski said.

"We try to always have a retired sister there. That presence is important in a world of big box stores," she added.



At Linden Leaf Gifts, Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods sell items related to St. Mother Theodore Guerin, who founded the order. (Courtesy of Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods)

Congregations that have online stores tend to specialize in items related to their charism or history. Linden Leaf Gifts, the gift shop of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, specializes in items related to St. Mother Theodore Guerin, who founded the order. The Medical Mission Sisters' store has an extensive inventory of CDs and songbooks of music written by Sr. Miriam Therese Winter. Both the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas, and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, Pennsylvania, sell honey from their own beehives.

What follows is a sampling of online stores where U.S. sisters sell arts and crafts and fair-trade items. Descriptions are from the congregations and have been edited for length and clarity.

Monastery Goods Gift Shop, Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica

"There are hand-embroidered tea towels, home-made jellies and preserves, honey from our beehives, hand-made quilts, crocheted stuffed animals and much more."



The Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden sell Story Bowls created by Sr. Sue Clay at their store, Down to Earth Gifts. The bowls come in several sizes and can be made with custom content. (Courtesy of Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden)

Linden Leaf Gifts, **Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods**

"We sell many sister-made items, including sewn crafts, alpaca felted items and jewelry. Our store also specializes in St. Mother Theodore Guerin items, alpaca items and fair-trade items."

Down to Earth Gifts, **Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden**

"Among our most popular and unique items are apiary products (including a variety of honeys — creamed and flavored) from the bees on the property. Other unique gifts are the Story Bowls created by Sr. Sue Clay."



At Monastery Goods Gift Shop, Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica sell honey from their beehives. (Courtesy of Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica)

Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Augustine Shop, **Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Augustine, Florida**

"We specialize in the Maxims of Perfection Desktop Edition — written by the Jesuit founder of the Sisters of St. Joseph with photos or artwork by sisters and scripture and reflection questions on each Maxim."

Music, Books & Art, **Medical Mission Sisters**

"We have an extensive inventory of CDs and songbooks of music written by Sr. Miriam Therese Winter, the earliest of which is Joy is Like the Rain, produced in the mid 60's. We also have books written by Winter, as well as several other sisters, and an assortment of greeting cards, photo cards, watercolor paintings and Christmas cards."

Advertisement

Monastery Creations, **Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration**

"We offer a variety of handcrafted products such as soaps, lotions and candles (made with prayer and a drop of holy water) and just launched the Heritage Collection, which includes items mostly made by our Sr. Sean Douglas, who uses reclaimed materials found around the monastery including salvaged flooring, glass and tin ceiling tiles, to make wood stars, keepsake boxes, photo frames and more."

This story appears in the **Advent** feature series. View the full series.