Blog



In this scene from "100 Hearts: Betrayal and Forgiveness in the life of Blessed Clelia Merloni," two years before her death in 1928, an ailing Mother Clelia Merloni, right, returns to her congregation, the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Merloni is portrayed by Italian actress Silvia Budri. (Courtesy of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus)



Chris Herlinger

View Author Profile
cherlinger@ncronline.org



Dan Stockman

View Author Profile
dstockman@ncronline.org

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August 19, 2024
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Editor's note: *Global Sisters Report's Monday Starter is a feature from GSR staff writers that rounds up news from or about women religious that you may otherwise have missed.*



A new film to be shown on North American religious television channels and several streaming platforms starting in September highlights the life of Blessed Clelia Merloni, the foundress of the Sisters of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

"100 Hearts: Betrayal and Forgiveness in the Life of Blessed Clelia Merloni" was filmed and produced in Italy by Fogo Multimedia in cooperation with the Apostles congregation.

The feature-length film, in Italian with English subtitles, dramatizes the life of Merloni (1861-1930), who founded the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Viareggio, Italy, in 1894 and was beatified in 2018.

In a statement announcing the film, Mother Miriam Cunha Sobrinha, the congregation's superior general, said: "Mother Clelia speaks to each of us today. The challenges she faced, her faith, her convictions, and the values she lived, particularly forgiveness, can be a keystone for our times as well.

"We hope that telling Mother Clelia's story will help raise awareness of the congregation she founded more than a century ago, and of the good works the

Apostles of the Sacred Heart do to advance her mission of serving others through compassion — whether in education, healthcare or missionary activity."

She added: "We very much wanted this film produced so that the story of this woman who, like Mother Cabrini, was ahead of her time, could be better known." She was referring to Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini (1850-1917), honored as the patron saint of immigrants, the founder of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and subject of a feature film released earlier this year titled "Cabrini."

In an email to GSR, Sr. Colleen Smith, the provincial secretary of the congregation's U.S. provincialate, notes that a major theme of "100 Hearts" is forgiveness, citing the fact that many, including male clergy and those within her own religious family "sought to undermine Clelia's authority in this new community."*

Perhaps most seriously, Smith said, was that a "priest who is entrusted with the money of the Institute — all of Clelia's inheritance — steals the money and flees the country."

"Clelia does not press charges and does not publicly accuse him. Rather, she forgives him, but in doing so, gains the reputation for not being a good administrator."

Smith added that "Mother Clelia has so much to teach us. She shows us that the true path to joy is forgiveness. When we hold on to hurts, though real and valid, we only hurt ourselves and continue the cycle of division and pain. Only by forgiveness and love can wounds heal and relationships be restored."

Smith said the congregation is releasing a 13-minute documentary, "Apostle of Love: The Mother Clelia Story," on Aug. 27 in preparation for the release of "100 Hearts."

The full-length film was written and directed by Paolo Damosso and features an Italian cast. It was filmed in Rome and Alessandria, Italy, and the announcement of the film said it parallels real events in Mother Clelia's life, interwoven with a fictional contemporary story.

"We wanted to tell a story from the past with a direct connection to life today," Damosso said in the announcement. "For this reason, I wrote two intertwining stories, one set at the beginning of the last century and the other in the present time, with the actors playing dual roles. At the center of it all are the human

questions that remain the same throughout the centuries. Mother Clelia Merloni can offer some answers even today."

Click here for information on how to view the film.



Sr. Mary Ann Spangler, who often hosts busy student retreats as part of her young adult ministry, shares a moment with a retreat participant. (Courtesy of the Sisters of the Humility of Mary)

New website helps young adults on their spiritual journeys

Listening to young adults about why they stayed connected to a community of women religious — and how those connections might be strengthened — has resulted in a new form of spiritual accompaniment.

Young Adult Spirit and Life is the result of more than a year of work by Humility of Mary Srs. Mary Ann Spangler and Jeanne Thurin. It is technically just a website, but somehow manages to combine accessibility, answering questions such as "What is a

spiritual director?" and also spiritual depth, with nearly 50 creative ways to pray and how to deal with distractions. It includes ways to connect with 11 spiritual advisers, both sisters and laypeople.

The website launched in July, and it provides a variety of spiritual and educational resources, daily prayers, biographies and contact information for the available spiritual companions/directors, and a calendar of in-person and Zoom events offered by the young adult ministry. The in-person events are in the Cleveland area.

Companioning young adults on their spiritual journeys has been of special concern for the Sisters of the Humility of Mary in recent years, so they held several Zoom sessions in 2021 to engage young adults who had been connected to the community as to why they stayed connected over the years and what the congregation could do to strengthen those connections.



Sr. Mary Ann Spangler (standing) shares a toast to the launch of the Young Adult Spirit and Life website with several of the young adults who collaborated on its

creation. (Courtesy of the Sisters of the Humility of Mary)

"Listening deeply to the voices of young people, the need for companioning, mentoring, sharing values and engaging young adults surfaced as significant needs in our present day," Spangler said. "The crisis of COVID-19 brought to light the feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and lack of security along with the desire for authentic relationships, opportunities for making meaning in their lives, and finding ways to navigate in our world today. These became 'the cries of the poor' we were hearing that needed to be met."

The new website evolved from interest in remaining connected to causes, prayer opportunities and each other that arose from a Young Adult Convocation held at the motherhouse in July 2022. Convocation participants wanted a way to continue the opportunities for prayer and connection they had experienced during the retreat.

"Young adults have very generous hearts, but they often need to be invited — into conversations, into helping and serving, and into sharing about their values and spirituality," Spangler said.

Thurin said the website is designed to be accessible.

"Our hope for the website is that it will be a fast and easy resource for the convocation participants as well as a wider audience of young adults and others who are seeking and searching," Thurin said.

Advertisement

Catholic Climate Covenant announces second round of grant program

Catholic Climate Covenant announced Aug. 12 that it is accepting applicants for a second round of the 2024 Victory Noll Sisters small grants program.

Catholic Climate Covenant is a national U.S. nonprofit founded in 2006 with the support of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that helps guide the U.S. church's response to climate change and integral ecology through faith-driven education, advocacy and resources.

One way it does this is through the Victory Noll Sisters Small Grants Program, funded through the Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters, also known as the Victory Noll Sisters. In their honor and to advance creation care projects throughout the country, the Covenant said it has awarded more than $250,000 in grants in the last three years in the congregation's name.

However, the upcoming application cycle will be different from the first round this year and from previous cycles, Catholic Climate Covenant said.

The group said that through Nov. 4 it will accept applications for one large grant of up to $20,000.

This grant will be awarded to a diocese or Catholic organization to help initiate or be reimbursed for a large-scale net zero emissions/decarbonization project, Catholic Climate Covenant said.

Catholic Climate Covenant intends to announce the recipient of this large grant by Dec. 2.

In a statement, Kayla Jacobs, Catholic Climate Covenant's youth mobilization program manager and Victory Noll Sisters grants program subcommittee member, said the decision to award one large grant was made to support groups needing to make a bold programmatic step.

"I believe so many Catholic organizations would pursue net zero pathways if only they had a boost to get started," Jacobs said. "A grant like this could be the difference between taking this big step or not. I'm excited that we are able to support an organization on this very important journey to live out *Laudato Si'* and Catholic social teaching."

Dan Misleh, the founder and executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant, said that during this upcoming grant application round, the group has "the opportunity to do something unique."

"When it comes to caring for God's creation and making a lasting difference in the fight against climate change, all efforts matter — big and small," he said. "We've awarded many small projects and efforts in the past, but this round, we wanted to help jumpstart a bigger initiative by helping a diocese or Catholic community reduce their carbon emissions on the journey to net zero."

"All projects are important, but we know that there is only so much a community can do with $500 to $1,000," Misleh added. "In the spirit of *Laudato Si*' and recent challenges by Pope Francis to Catholics everywhere — not to mention the call from the scientific community to reduce emissions as quickly as possible — we wanted to go bigger and do more."

The second round of applications is a continuation of Victory Noll Sisters grants allocated earlier in the spring. In that round, 91 recipients were selected for small grants ranging from $500 to $1,000. In all, $85,000 in grants were awarded, the group said.

Land justice group seeking applicants for community programs

Land Justice Futures, founded in 2016 and which grew out of the Nuns & Nones movement, is welcoming applications for its third cohort of its Focus Community Programs.

The program is a community of practice for sister congregations seeking to build land justice into their property plans.

The group said in a recent statement that a new cohort will join 14 communities "already building power, connection, imagination, and practical know-how as they create bold, just, and creative plans for the lands they love."

Among other things, participants receive group reflections and learning opportunities; a personal coach to help communities through a curriculum and assignments; and a two-day land justice workshop for an entire congregation in the program's first year.

Two one-hour information sessions are planned for Sept. 4 and Oct. 9.

**This story has been updated to clarify a plot point in the movie about Blessed Clelia Merloni.*