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Ministry



The garden area in front of Villa St. Joseph in Orange, California, is seen at the senior housing complex's grand opening on June 3, 2025. The building had been the motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange/Sandy Huffaker)



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The Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange were in a position familiar to many congregations of women religious in the United States: a motherhouse that was too big and the number of sisters living in it was too small.

Built in 1959 to house about 60 sisters, by 2013 only about 25 sisters called it home. The rest were living where they ministered or next door to the motherhouse in the order's retirement facility, Regina Residence in Orange, California.

The leadership team in place at the time hired a consultant to review their campus of 11 buildings to see what was actually needed and what might find a better use. In 2015, they invited nonprofits, charities and agencies the sisters knew or had worked with to a meeting where they laid out what the sisters no longer needed and could be used by others.

"It was a big assembly, maybe 100 folks," said Sr. Mary Bernadette McNulty. "We explained what we have and what is available to hopefully extend our mission in Orange County, particularly to the poor and vulnerable. One that stepped up was Mercy Housing, who said, 'We would love to put senior housing in your beautiful motherhouse.' "



Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange pose for a group portrait in front of the order's motherhouse in Orange, California, in 1975. The motherhouse was built in 1959 to house about 60 sisters; in June 2025, the newly renovated building opened as Villa St. Joseph, a senior housing complex run by Mercy Housing. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange)

Although the process took 10 years to navigate, in June officials finally cut the ribbon on Villa St. Joseph, which uses about two-thirds of the 80,000-square-foot motherhouse and is home to 50 apartments for seniors, including 18 specifically for seniors who had been homeless before moving in.

The fact the sisters had a building and the area had a need was more than just providential: The Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange were one of the original sponsors of Mercy Housing, and McNulty had been a Mercy Housing board member. The need for senior housing in the area was already great and is expected to grow dramatically.

Though the decision was emotional for the sisters at the beginning, now the project is seen as another extension of their ministry. McNulty is just glad it's complete.

"I gave 10 years of my life to this," she told Global Sisters Report. "Now I can hang up my spurs."

Converting convents to senior housing of one form or another is not new for congregations in the United States, but it is a trend that's growing as sisters reckon with capital assets they no longer need.



Officials cut the ribbon on Villa St. Joseph in Orange, California, on June 3, 2025, completing a project to convert the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange motherhouse into senior housing. Second from left in the front row is Sr. Mary Bernadette McNulty (in the blue jacket), who shepherded the project. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange/Sandy Huffaker)

The Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan, in 2023 sold their motherhouse to St. Therese, which operates senior living facilities in its home state of Minnesota, as well as Ohio and now Michigan.

The congregation leases back the office space it needs in the former motherhouse, but the rest is independent living apartments, assisted living, rehab units, skilled nursing, and memory care. About 101 Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters live in the

various levels of care at St. Therese, and the rest is open to laypeople.

"Part of the arrangement is that sisters would have the first priority of care," said Sr. Maxine Kollasch, the congregation's president. "But it's a very big change emotionally, and also a very big change in physical systems, and it's a big cultural change."

Kollasch said they thought that once the sale and renovations were complete, the work would be done.

"That's really the starting point. Working out all the details of a big operation like this one is a day-to-day effort," she said. "They're new to this [relationship], too, and they're in a building that was not constructed to be a senior care facility. It's beautiful and functional, but not originally built for that."

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Part of the difficulty in these decisions, sisters in several congregations said, is not just the emotions that come with letting go of buildings — it's what that letting go represents. Admitting you no longer need a motherhouse is admitting that completion — even if it is still decades away — is now on the horizon.

But Kollasch said it's not the buildings, or even the congregation that matters, it is the mission.

"We profoundly believe our mission has a future. It may not be what we envisioned, but we have a God of surprises," she said. "We go to that place where God is calling us forward. … That's part of what discipleship is about, being ready for God to surprise you and taking it to heart."

The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas are also part of the trend, several times over. Their sale of their convent in Farmington Hills, Michigan, began with an estate sale in 2021 that was perhaps unlike any other: 60 years of accumulated furniture, food service equipment, pianos, power tools and even an aviary — an inventory estimated at more than 100,000 items.

"We're letting go — this is how we live our vow of poverty," Sr. Mary Ellen Howard, chair of the community's Campus Advisory Committee, said at the time. "In this kind of process, you learn what's important, and it's not things. The things can go. In fact,

please take them."



Officials tour the renovations taking place in May 2023 to convert the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange motherhouse in Orange, California, into senior housing. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange)

Today, the campus is home to Rose Senior Living, who bought the property and operate a new senior living complex, and the old convent is ready for demolition. Sisters were the first residents when they moved into the new center earlier this year; the facility offers independent living, assisted living and memory care.

Shannon McCowan, director of real estate and facilities for the Sisters of Mercy, said the large congregation has a variety of setups for its former convents and new senior living, from retirement centers owned and operated by the Mercies, to some where they are owned and operated or operated by third-party administrators.

The campus is also home to Mercy High School, and the wetlands on the grounds, protected by a conservation easement, were given to the school and not part of the sale.

In Watchung, New Jersey, the facility is leased to a third-party administrator and home to both sisters and laypeople, while discussions are taking place for the Sisters of Mercy convent in Burlingame, California, to be similar to Farmington Hills, where a third party would purchase the retirement facility, renovate the space and add senior housing on adjacent land.

"There are a whole bunch of settings we continue to use and occupy, where we have our own sisters there and sometimes sisters from another order," McCowan said. "We make sure we're doing things today for the health care needs of the sisters tomorrow."



Officials tour the renovations taking place in May 2023 to convert the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange motherhouse in Orange, California, into senior housing. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange)

McCowan said it is different working with sisters, but amazing to be part of.

"We facilitate the wishes of the community. The discernment process can be long, but it is comprehensive," she said. "It's a very interesting process to watch, and it's humbling to be part of something that has such historical relevancy. They really are worried about sisters 50 years from now."

The Felician Sisters, meanwhile, are just beginning the process of converting part of their convent in Livonia, Michigan, into affordable senior housing.

Chet Jackson, vice president for real estate ministry development at Felician Services, a separately incorporated ministry that runs the sisters' many sponsored ministries, said the plan calls for about 68 units of senior housing, using about 80,000 square-feet of the 180,000 square-foot convent building.

But it's not just a renovation project, Jackson said — it's also a preservation project, as the 89-year-old building is historic and the conversion cannot change the character of the building.

The sisters of course want to preserve the beautiful aspects of the building, he said, but it was not designed for separate apartments with private kitchens and bathrooms.

The fact that the building is built to withstand nearly anything makes projects like wiring and plumbing an even bigger challenge, as walls cannot be easily moved or opened up to install new utilities. Even things like heat are a challenge, Jackson said: The building has a huge, central heating system, but private apartments will need to be able to set their own temperature.

"This is a challenge. It does add cost to the redevelopment effort," Jackson said. "How do we preserve the historical integrity as well as the structural integrity?"

Fortunately, the lead developer is MHT Housing, which has a long relationship with the Archdiocese of Detroit and an expertise in historic preservation. And the need for senior housing in the area is so great that 30 of the 68 units have already been rented.

Kollasch said change is never easy, but the resilience to navigate change can be a witness to the community.

"One of the things we work on a lot is building up that resilience for change. Religious life has done that for centuries," she said. "It's a form of ministry — how do you show resilience in a world that so badly needs it?"