

FRIENDS OF THE SISTERS - Bloemfontein

In 2015 – the year the Pope declared as being dedicated to Consecrated Life – a group of 10 women in Bloemfontein were inspired to celebrate and commemorate Religious Life in a very special way.

They had either been taught by Religious women or recognised and appreciated the role that Religious Sisters have played in the Church and in the world. They themselves are teachers, nurses and professionals in various spheres of life. They are wives and mothers and they gathered together and called themselves 'The Friends of the Sisters'. They recognised that priests are cared for by the Bishop in each Diocese but that women Religious are on their own and must find ways to support themselves.

Towards the end of 2015 they organised a gathering, inviting all the Religious of the Archdiocese of Bloemfontein. These would come from about 7 or 8 Congregations and number anywhere between 50 and 60. The day began with celebration of the Eucharist and then each Congregation was invited to share something about themselves and their charism. Only Srs Anna-Lucia and Bernadette could be present and so Sr Anna-Lucia spoke about Dominican life. Sr Bernadette was asked to give a motivational input aimed at affirming and encouraging the Sisters to celebrate their call and use the gifts and talents which they have without comparison. Lunch was prepared for all and there was a gifting of so much by way of groceries and toiletries to each community.

This event was not just a once-off – it has become an annual event in Bloemfontein and some of the 'Friends of the Sisters' even travelling from Johannesburg, Welkom, and Kroonstad to be part of this event. There were no Dominicans present last year because it conflicted with a gathering of our own in Johannesburg.

This year, 2017, was unique and the following is an account of the day which was planned and organised in a wonderful way.

Saturday 25 November began with a Mass of Thanksgiving and wonderful singing which was led by the choir of the Franciscan Sisters of Siessen. We were then invited to a nearby school hall where everything was beautifully decorated in pink and white. The detail was touching – Christmas cards made by children, a printed programme for the day, flowers, a bottle of water with the 'Friends the Sisters' logo on it, wine and juice on all tables. There were two DJs to provide music and a sound system.

Children and grandchildren of these women performed a few items of song and dance, other friends and helpers were called upon to render an item – a chef sang with a beautiful baritone voice sang 'Nearer my God to Thee', an old school friend of one of the women did a 'comedy slot'.

This year they had invited a guest speaker from Johannesburg – Dr Nonthando Hadebe to give an input. She is a Doctor of Theology and spoke beautifully on CALL – the call to religious life – the call of every Christian. She spoke about 'call' being 'for others' and the call to Christian living which we all share and how this unites us as 'Gospel people'.

In the afternoon, after a delicious lunch, those who have been professed 40 years and more were presented with a small gift – a hand-held fan. Great for these hot days when the air is very still!!

Our own Sr Eva-Maria was asked to speak about 'Self-care'. Many of them knew how sick she was last year when she contracted TB and were so happy to have her back healthy. She spoke simply and well about listening to one's body, about taking rest, taking a holiday, taking quiet time etc.

We were then all invited to allow ourselves to be ‘pampered’ and given a manicure and a small gift of ‘nail care’ products and accessories. There were about 12 young women recruited to cut, file, buff, oil and cream our nails – something most of us have never experienced before!!

The stage of the hall was groaning under the weight of gifts which were later distributed to every community present. The generosity was overwhelming. Our own small community of 4 came home with:

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| 5 Kg Mielie Meal | 10 Kg Rice | 12 bars Sunlight soap |
| 5 Kg Flour | 5 Kg frozen chicken pieces | Sta Soft |
| 8 Kg sugar | 12 Litres long-life milk | Soap Powder |

An abundance of toiletry items including toothpaste, deodorant, cream and sanitary pads.

Throughout the day these ‘Friends of the Sisters’ were expressing their gratitude and appreciation for the Sisters and telling us that they are here for us and we can call on them at any time for anything! They were also trying to ‘showcase’ Religious life for the young women they had invited as they pray for vocations to Religious Life.

The thought to detail was astounding and the organisation and cost of the day tremendous – and they did it all with dedication and joy.

Subsequent to this gathering one of the woman has been in touch with us in our community and wants to bring the other women here next year for a visit. Pru has offered to give these women a retreat and we said that between us we have a wealth of experience to share with them for their own ongoing encouragement and spiritual growth.



A group photo after the Mass, at the start of the day.



Decoration of the tables in keeping with the Parish Name of ‘St Rose’



The Welcome by some of the Friends



Grandchildren of the Friends entertained by singing and dancing.



Every House Community received their own gift of provisions



The OVER 40 YEARS PROFESSED receiving a special gift.



Dr Nontando Hadebe, received a small gift as a token of gratitude for her presence and her talk.



Even bottles of water showed their appreciation of the Sisters



Plenty of Cake for all.



Sr Eva-Maria, our representative, giving a THANK YOU for gifts received



The Nail Bar, was a totally unexpected surprise



Sr Bernadette giving a vote of thanks on behalf of all the Sisters present



The decoration of the Hall and tables left nothing wanting



The abundance of gifts shared with each community