

Our Impressions and Learnings from the CSSJ Federation Event July 2022

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We started our trip on the day before the conference started, in order to see a little of St. Louis and to get settled. Several of the Sisters from Rochester did the same, so it became like a school trip or summer camp! Although we did socialize with the Rochester Sisters and students, including dinner at a local barbeque joint and at the gala dinner, we also met other attendees at our conference tables, breakfasts, the nightly socials, and the historical tour.

The conference hotel was right next to the Gateway Arch. As a National Park, the grounds were beautiful and it was a pleasant place to walk around when we had free time, despite the temperature near 100 degrees. We even saw fireflies there in the evening. The Arch is right on the Mississippi, and the first SSJ Sisters from France landed in New Orleans and sailed up the Mississippi to St. Louis. Culture and cuisine also came up the river from New Orleans, and we ate cajun food for dinner at the Broadway Oyster Bar.

The excursion to Cahokia and the Carondelet Motherhouse opened our eyes to the hard lives of the early settlers and the Sisters. We realized that building a small wooden log church in the late 18th century in a frontier location in the central US must have required at least as much personal effort, if not more, than building a cathedral in Europe. Very enlightening!

We were equally impressed by the Sisters who today live in the Carondelet Motherhouse: not only did they kindly invite us to lunch, but they had prepared a tour of the Motherhouse, which ended up being a colorful journey into the history not just of the Motherhouse, but also of the St. Louis region. As a German by birth, Hendrik was touched to learn that, next to the French enclave, many German and Irish immigrants settled in this area. St. Louis is a true multi-cultural environment, and the Sisters have been helping all who are in need of help ever since they arrived!

Then there was, of course, the main event: the conference. To be honest, we did not know what to expect. This much we can say now: as seasoned engineers who have attended many corporate conferences and sales meetings, we can assure you that the pace and the tight schedule of the Federation Event is easily on par with the corporate events we attended over the years!

Nonetheless, there also were quiet moments to pray, reflect and talk with the other attendees.

The speakers were an eclectic mix of people with different backgrounds and stories to tell. However, they all had in common some experience in transforming communities (the main theme of the conference was “Radically Transforming Community”). We learned so much from these speakers on concepts such as the meaning and importance of radical transformation, Black Lives Matter, abolition feminism, and bail reform.

However, the conference was more than lectures: music, State of the Heart, prayer and blessings were big parts of the Event. At the beginning of the conference, we were invited to take part in the opening ritual, carrying candles to the stage. And at the end of the conference, the Archbishop of St. Louis said Mass for us. We also attended a lunchtime meeting with other Associates, and there were so many that we did not get to meet everyone.

This was, in fact, the first Federation Event that Associates were able to attend as Federation members. As Associates, we always felt included. Our name tags did not indicate our roles or the city we were from, and this was a talking point when meeting new people. Both of us enjoyed the round-table discussions at our assigned tables, which were made up of a mix of people, none of whom were from our city: a micro-cosmos of strangers who got to know one another a little in the midst of a large conference with hundreds of attendees. Even married couples, like us, were assigned to different tables from each other.

One of the high points of the Event was at the end of the gala banquet, when the hotel staff was invited in for a blessing. Sr. Lynn Levo taught us the greeting, Sawabona, which means “I see you” in her Friday night keynote. Sawabona was embodied by this blessing. The staff reluctantly started to come in the back door of the banquet room and all us attendees spontaneously stood up and started cheering and clapping and waving our napkins around for them, and then we sang a blessing. The looks on their faces went from cautious to incredulous to grateful. It was such a moving display for all.

Several future actions have sprung to mind as a result of the Event:

- There are weeping mulberry trees in the courtyard garden at the Carondelet Motherhouse. These have historical significance because the Motherhouse in Lyon, France had them to feed the silkworms of which thread was spun to make lace. Plans are underway to place a weeping mulberry in our Motherhouse courtyard.
- We have been exploring the idea of further involvement and learning from our Alabama mission in light of Black Lives Matter, as we are proud that the Rochester congregation has this mission and was instrumental in the origins of the civil rights movement.
- By way of this summary we are hoping to encourage other Associates to get involved at the Federation level. There are plans for further Federation-level Associate virtual meetings underway and even talk about Associates possibly visiting Le Puy, France one day.