



The Service of Rev. Sisters at Knanaya Catholic Parishes in the USA Visitation and St. Joseph Congregations

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Abstract

The Congregation of Sisters of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (SVM) and St. Joseph's Congregation (SJC) are two Eparchial Congregations in the Archeparchy of Kottayam, Kerala, India. The American mission of the sisters started in Los Angeles, California in 2000 with four members in hospital ministry. This paper describes the service of Rev. Sisters at Knanaya Catholic parishes in the USA, illustrating their impact in the community, discussing the challenges they face, and the possibility of vocation promotion among the children in the United States.

Historical Background of the Visitation Congregation in India

The Servant of God, Mar Mathew Makil, with the approval of then Bishop Most Rev. Dr. Charles Lavinge, founded the Sisters of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (SVM) on 24th June 1892, on the feast day of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Kaipuzha, Kottayam. This was before the establishment of the Kottayam Vicariate. The intention of establishing the Congregation was providing an opportunity to the women of the Knanaya Community for religious life and making possible the holistic development of women at large (Makil, M. 1904). Two widows, Eleeswa Kunnacheril (Sr. Eleeswa) and Mariam Mazhuvancheril (Sr. Margaret) were the pioneers of this congregation. Four girls joined as aspirants on the day of the foundation itself.

Being a great devotee of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Mar Mathew Makil wished very much that the congregation that he would found accept the spirit of the Sacred Heart as its charism. He named the congregation Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary because he knew that the Order of Visitation of Holy Mary in France in which St. Margaret Mary was a member dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The visitation of Mother Mary to Elizabeth was an inspiration for Mar Makil. (Lk. 1: 39-56). The Servant of God Mar Mathew Makil took initiative to start this congregation realizing the role of women in the family's formation and in the society's upliftment and the church.

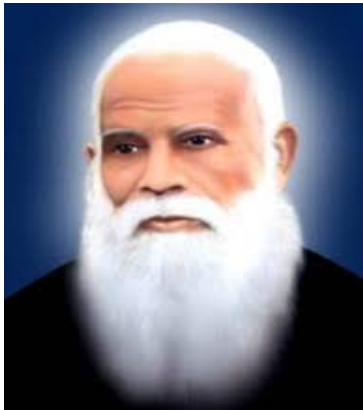


Servant of God Mar Mathew Makil (1851-1914)

Historical Background of the St. Joseph's Congregation

The Servant of God, Rev. Fr. Thomas Poothathil (Thommiachan) founded St. Joseph congregation on July 3, 1928, in Kaipuzha, in the Archdiocese of Kottayam, with the approval of then Bishop Mar Alexander Choolapparambil. He was inspired by the word of God, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Mt. 25:40). Fr. Thomas Poothathil, in his great desire to give shelter to the physically disabled women, raised funds through local collection and support from abroad. He purchased a plot of land by the side of St. George Forane Church, Kaipuzha, and started the St. Thomas Asylum. Bishop Mar Alexander Choolapparambil blessed it on May 3, 1925.

With the opening of St. Thomas Asylum, Fr. Poothathil felt the need for a few committed women to take care of the disabled. In view of that, he asked permission to start a religious congregation for women in the name of St. Joseph. The first five members were: Sr. Josephina Poothathil of Neendoor, Sr. Thomasia Kollalappara of Koodalloor, Sr. Ignatia Elanjimattathil of Edamattom, Sr. Kochuthresia Paravarakath of Thidanad, and Sr. Magdalena Kollamparampil of Aruvithura. They received their religious formation under the direction of the founder himself, with the help of Sr. Catherine and Sr. Johanna of the Visitation Congregation.



Servant of God Fr. Thomas Poothathil

The SVM Charism and Motto

The charism of SVM is to follow Jesus, gentle and humble (Mt. 11:29) as the Blessed Virgin of Visitation, and to attain the Christian perfection through religious life. The motto of this congregation is Live + Jesus. 'I live no longer but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2:20) is at the core of this dictum. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is the source and perfection of SVM charism, and the Blessed Virgin Mary is the perfect model and first patron. St. Francis de Sales, St. Jain de Chantal, and St. Margaret Mary are the heavenly patrons of the Congregation.

The SVM Apostolate

The SVM spirituality is based on the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist and in the devotion to Mary, the Blessed Virgin of Visitation. The founder himself took an unflinching interest in preparing a constitution based on the rich Visitation heritage of a gospel-centered life, a spirit of humility towards God, and of great gentleness and sweetness with the neighbor. It is to be realized through an ascetic pattern of hidden interior mortification.

The specific apostolate of SVM is to lead the people of God, especially the womenfolk, to the salvific love of Jesus. This congregation has been actively involved in various apostolates since its establishment, giving emphasis to Catholic formation and women's empowerment. Being very confident about the role of education in the comprehensive growth of a person, the founder father at the very beginning itself started a school. Presently, the sisters provide value-based education from Pre-K to professional colleges without discrimination of caste, creed, or religion.

Realizing the needs of the people, the congregation provides services in dispensaries and hospitals in India and abroad. The Visitation sisters also serve in government medical colleges and District Hospital Kottayam. The sisters also undertake home missions, Christeen programs, counseling centers, rehabilitation centers for the mentally challenged, hostels, technical schools, tailoring centers, parish apostolate, and various women empowerment programs.

The SJC Charism and Motto

The special charism bequeathed by the founder of St. Joseph's Congregation and lived by the first members may be expressed as the yoga of Divine Glory and the 'dasyam' of God's Mercy. The members were trained to live their lives in a continual praise of God's glory, transmitting his merciful love to others, especially the poor, abandoned and marginalized. The spirit of the Congregation is succinctly expressed in its motto, Love and Serve.

The SJC Apostolate

At present, the Congregation has over 60 houses and 384 members. They serve mostly the Archdiocese of Kottayam, the Dioceses of Rajkot, Ujjain and cities like Delhi, and Bangalore. The SJC sisters offer their services also to different centers abroad, such as Deggendorf, Munich (Germany), Rome, Torino (Italy), Tenero (Switzerland), and Houston (USA). Mar Jacob Angadiath, the Bishop of St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago invited the SJC sisters to provide administrative support to the staff and record keeping in St. Mary's Syro Malabar Knanaya Catholic Forane Church of Houston, at 6400 West Fuqua Dr., Missouri City, 77489 TX. The Congregation is engaged chiefly in the following apostolic services: care of the physically and mentally disabled, Old Age Homes, centers for the terminally ill, Care and Support for HIV/AIDS Patients, Hospitals, Schools, Hostels, Parish Ministry, Centers of Social development of the poor, and women.

The foundation and growth of SVM Congregation in the USA

American Mission of SVM sisters was started at Los Angeles, California in 2000 with four members in the hospital ministry. St. Joseph Sisters of Corondalate (CSJ) in Los Angeles (LA), wanted sisters from India to work in their Daniel Freeman memorial Hospital (DFMH), Inglewood, LA, California. They expressed their desire to Rev. Fr. Abraham Mutholath, who was working as chaplain at their hospital. He discussed this matter with Sr. Innocent, who was the Superior General of the Visitation Congregation, Kottayam, India at that time. During her visit to the USA in 1999, Sr. Innocent visited Daniel Freeman Memorial Hospital and held a discussion on this with St. Joseph's sisters of Corondalate.

The Knanaya Catholic Community of LA welcomed the Visitation Sisters to come to serve the community. Sr. Innocent reported the matter to Archbishop Mar Kuriakose Kunnachery who was the head of the Archdiocese of Kottayam that time. He gave the permission and encouraged to proceed on this matter. Fr. Mutholathu took up responsibility to do the documentation and paperwork. The U.S. Visas were obtained for Sr. Mable, Sr. Meera, Sr. Anugraha and Sr. Sereena. Sister Mable was appointed as the superior of the community.

With the blessings of the new Superior General Sr. Bibiana and other sisters of the congregation, the four sisters started their historic journey to Los Angeles, along with Fr. Abraham Mutholath. They arrived in LA on July 22, 2000. The families of Fr. Mutholathu, Johny Muttathil and other Knanaya faithful received them at the airport. All gathered at the residence of Johny Muttathil. After dinner, by 8.30 PM the sisters went to Our Lady of Grace Convent, Inglewood, LA, where they were warmly and heartily welcomed by Sr. Regina Clare, who was the superior of the convent and president of the hospital. The entire community of sisters in the convent joined the reception of the Visitation Sisters.



Our Lady of Grace Convent, Inglewood, Los Angeles, CA

After the initial formalities, the Visitation sisters started their service in the hospital, staying with the Corondalate sisters in Our Lady of Grace Convent. Sr. Regina Clare and other sisters of the convent extended them all help they needed. Visitation sisters, used to extend possible help in the activities of the convent.



Daniel Freeman Memorial Hospital, Inglewood, Los Angeles, CA

The sisters also involved in the activities of the Knanaya Catholic Mission of LA. Because of the financial crisis, the hospital and the convent of the sister of Corondalate had to be closed in 2007. Hence, the four Visitation sisters moved to a rental house on December 20, 2007. By God's providence, all four sisters got employment in St. Francis Medical Center, managed by Sisters of Daughters of Charity on January 7, 2008. The Visitation sisters are working there now.

Growth of the Visitation Congregation in the USA

In 2009 the Visitation Congregation bought a new house at Downey, in LA, California. On March 5, 2009, Rev. Fr. Mulavanal blessed the convent, and the sisters lived there. The official blessing of the convent was done on July 31, 2010, in which Bishop Jacob Angadiath was the main celebrant. Archbishop Mathew Moolakattu and Bishop Joseph Pandarasseril were concelebrants. Fr. Thomas Mulavanal, Fr. Abraham Mutholathu, Fr. Simon Edathiparambil, Fr. Stany Edathiparambil, Fr. Ossey Kalathil OCD, and Fr. Ambrose OCD joined the ceremony along with over hundred members of the LA community. The parish community of St. Pius X Knanaya Catholic Parish and Corondalate Sisters of St. Joseph (CSJ) continue extending all necessary help in the Convent's growth.



Visitation Convent, Downey, LA, CA

Statistics of Convents and sisters

At present there are four convents, and 11 sisters in USA who serve in medical and pastoral ministries. Three visitation convents are in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Tampa. The St. Joseph convent is in Houston. There are eight visitation sisters and three St. Joseph's sisters serving in the USA.

The Growth and development

The vision behind establishing a Visitation Convent in Chicago simultaneously with St. Mary's Parish ten years ago was summed up by Bishop Joseph Pandarasseril during his sermon. He stated that the newly founded convent will serve as the spiritual power tank for the entire Knanaya Region. With this vision, the Visitation Convent of Chicago was established on August 18, 2010, by Bishop Mar Angadiath. Archbishop Mar Mathew Moolakkatt, Bishop Mar Joseph Pandarassery, along with the superior general of the Visitation Congregation and other dignitaries of the community, took part in the solemn ceremony. Vicar Fr. Abraham Mutholath and the parishioners of St. Mary's Knanaya Catholic parish facilitated the humble beginning of the convent in Chicago.

The parishioners took the initiative and responsibilities of supporting the convent because they instinctively recognized the spiritual benefits of having a convent along with their new parish. Sr. Xavier, Sr. Anugraha, and Sr. Jeseena lived in this house and served the parish community. The sisters also serve at the Sacred Heart Knanaya Catholic Parish in Chicago as well. Sr. Xavier was the first superior of this convent. It has been ten years since the founding of the visitation convent and the founding vision has propelled the spiritual growth within the Knanaya community in subtle and explicit ways.

In February 2015, the parishioners of Sacred Heart Knanaya Catholic Church (SHKCC), Tampa, Florida expressed their desire to have a convent of the Archdiocese of Kottayam and get the service of the sisters to Rev. Fr. Dominic Madathikalathil the pastor (vicar) of the parish. He communicated this in writing to the Archbishop of Kottayam and to the superior general of the Visitation Congregation at Kottayam. After due consultation and other procedures, Mar Mathew Moolakkat of the Knanaya Catholic Archdiocese of Kottayam, Kerala and Bishop Mar Jacob Angadiath, Bishop of the Syro-Malabar diocese of Chicago, gave permission to start the convent. The congregation bought a building for the convent on August 29, 2015. This house was renovated under the supervision of Fr. Dominic Madathikalathil and the cooperation of many of the parishioners. Fr. Dominic blessed the convent on October 26, 2015, in the presence of Msgr. Lallu Kaitharam and Fr. Jose Chirappurathu. The trustees of the parish and many well-wishers were also present. Sr. Xavier, Sr. Sandra, and Sr. Meera lived in this house and served the parish community. The official blessing of this convent was held on November 10, 2016 by Bishop Mar Jacob Angadiath. The cooperation of all parishioners in establishing this convent was remarkable.



Visitation Convent in Tampa, Florida

St. Joseph's Convent, Houston

Bishop of St. Thomas Syro Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago Mar Jacob Angadiath invited the SJC sisters to provide administrative support to the staff and record keeping in St. Mary's Syro-Malabar Knanaya Catholic Forane Church of Houston. The SJC sisters started the convent in Houston in 2017 with three sisters. They are Sr. Reji, Sr. Josia, and Sr. Joicy. The SJC sisters serve the church by engaging in personal and community prayer, liturgical preparation, medication, study, and pastoral ministry. Sr. Reji has been the first superior of this convent.

Here is the experience sharing of the SJC sisters in Houston: "The assignment given to us by the Lord Almighty to serve St. Mary's Knanaya Catholic Parish in Houston has been a beautiful experience. Any initial transition has its hardship and pains, especially when moving into a new country with varied culture and language. We have faced few challenges during our journey towards the establishment of the SJC convent in Houston. Few of them include the communication skills and cultural differences with our U.S. born youth and children. We surely moved into this country with the thought of facing such hardships and challenges. However, by God's grace, many helped us in our change.

We really appreciate our previous Vicar Fr. Saji Pinarkayil, who introduced us to the Houston parish. He guided us and introduced us to many families in the church who eventually became family to us. Many people, especially the then trustees Johnson Manalel, Johny Makkora, Noby Kochuveetil, Jose Vanchippurackal, deserve our appreciation for helping us to settle down and to feel comfortable with our church activities. We would like to thank Mrs. Marykutty Mathew Illikkattil who provided us with free accommodation for three months until we found a place to live in. The families who are in Knanaya homes are always ready to help us with our need. Mode of transportation is very essential while living in Houston because of limited public transportation. Mr. Jose Vanchippurackal is among some people who provided us the everyday transportation for six months until Mr. Jaimon Parayamkalayil donated us a used car. One family from our parish (who does not want to reveal their name) was kind enough to donate a new corolla car after one year of our arrival. Our sincere thanks to our current Vicar Fr. Sunil Padinjarekkara, who helped us with finding a mode of transportation and guiding us through the entire process. Our Church

Trustees were an amazing help to guide us through the church assignment. We cannot limit words of appreciation to a few because the names and the help we received are plenty. But as the Bible says: 'For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plan to give you hope and future.' (Jeremiah 29:11). Surely it was an anxious journey in the beginning, but God had a plan for us and with many helping hands, He has made this a beautiful journey. We pray for more blessings and guidance to help our parish family grow closer to God."

Activities in the Knanaya Catholic parishes in the USA

The most important service that the sisters unfailingly fulfill is prayer. Their day starts with spending time before the Blessed Sacrament. In the quiet moments of being with the Lord, they offer themselves up for the salvation of souls and especially the parish that they serve. Many families find solace and comfort in the prayers of the sisters. The service of the sisters does not end in prayer, but extends in meaningful service, including visiting the sick, providing emotional and spiritual support, and counseling.

Today the sisters serve in the parishes including serving as sacristan of the church, office assistant, taking part in the various ministries of the parishes including Catechism and Koodarayogams, visiting families, supporting the sick, preparing children for receiving sacraments of Chrismation, confession, and solemn reception of Holy Communion.

Illustrations on the impact of the Convents:

1. Jyothi Alappatt, a parishioner of St. Mary's Church Knanaya Catholic Church in Chicago, who has served as a Catechism coordinator writes her experience with the sisters, "The famous Chinese proverb says, 'A Journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.' Inception of the Visitation Convent in Morton Grove was a milestone in the annals of St. Mary's Knanaya Catholic Church in Chicago. Without their active presence in the church, our church activities would have been imperfect. The Visitation sisters play a significant role in the spiritual growth of the parishioners. When we look at the past 10 years of St. Mary's Knanaya church history, the relentless efforts of the Visitation sisters are manifold. They have played a pivotal role in the church in spiritual formation and in fostering vocations. The Visitation sisters in Chicago have become an essential part of our lives. They are always available to give us directions and answers that we need. The great effort and initiation that they put forth to decorate our church, altar, and chapel with beautiful flowers are commendable. We have never seen our church and altar without lovely flowers."

"The loving and encouraging presence of the sisters is a great comfort and strength to our community as we go through the stresses and worries of our hectic life in the US. These sisters work as good counselors when we are in trouble and are struggling. In the hardest times of our life, when we cannot resolve our conflicts, the sisters comfort us and encourage us. We can never be thankful enough for all they do. They are very Charismatic, energetic, and enthusiastic about everything they do, including Catechism and Malayalam school."

"I trust in God, and I am sure that there will be many more consecrated men and women from this church following in the footsteps of these humble sisters. Through all the selfless and important

services that these sisters provide to our community, they have become an integral part of our life; a church without the sisters will be like a home without a mother.” (Alappatt, J).

2. One parishioner from St. Pius X Knanaya Catholic Parish in Los Angeles shares his experience: “Our Los Angeles Knanaya Community has been immensely blessed to have the Visitation Sisters as leaders of our church family. Words cannot do justice for the leadership and support that they provide for our church. Our sisters largely involve in the formation of our St. Pius X Knanaya Church. Every Sunday, our sisters are among the first individuals to arrive at our church and ensure that the church is well-kept and prepared for Qurbana before the parishioners arrive. During the Holy Mass, our sisters also lead the choir along with the lay people. After the Qurbana, they lead the Catechism program.”

“The sisters prepare our children for Solemn Reception of Holy Communion and for the annual Solemn Feast of the parish. In addition, sisters play a role in the promotion of our culture for our future generation. They choreograph Margamkali and other Indian dances for various celebrations of the parish such as Christmas, Easter, Solemn Feast and Solemn Reception of Holy Communion. The powerful prayers and selfless physical presence of our sisters have been much appreciated among our parishioners during their times of illness and times of need. Our sisters are well known in our community for their warm, welcoming, humble, and drama free personalities and we as a community are forever grateful to have them in our Los Angeles Knanaya Church community. They also stay connected to the parish community daily by participating in a daily rosary prayer line. In summary they are the heartbeat of our parish.”

3. One child from the Sacred Heart parish, Tampa, Florida, shares her experience with the sisters: “Having three Visitation sisters is a huge blessing to our parish. For the last four years, our church has been developing and growing because of our sisters. They never failed to fulfill their duties and lend a helping hand. They always have a cheerful and glowing face. They never fail to bring a smile to our faces. The Visitation sisters in the Sacred Heart Parish have become a big and important part of our lives and the church. They are such an outstanding role model for the kids to follow. Anyone can depend and rely on them for anything. The hard work and time they take for teaching kids about Jesus’ unending love and mercy, preparing them to receive sacraments such as Holy communion and confirmation, organizing religious events, koodarayogams and decorating the church gorgeously is a tremendous help and support and is something that we should take the time to appreciate them for.”

“From what I have seen, there is not a single event that has gone wrong or not been perfect. They take great responsibility and dedication to organizing events. One thing I always see that they do is how they stay after Saturday Morning Mass to clean up the church, and to prepare for Sunday Mass. They put so much effort into making everything perfect and making sure that not the smallest thing will go wrong. These sisters are people who everyone and me can trust and be open with. We can go to them anytime to talk about our stress, and they are always willing to hear us out till the last word. They help calm us down with their kind, caring, and easing words. They understand our opinions and feelings and try to help in the best way they can.” (*Sanitta Saji, Poovanthunkal*)

4. “Introduction of St. Joseph’s Convent in Houston Knanaya church has been a great blessing for all of us. Presence of our three sisters Sr. Reji, Sr. Josia, and Sr. Joyce have brought in a lot of benefits to our parish community. We appreciate the dedication and amount of time they spent in our church. The sisters are detrimental to our liturgical services as they serve as Eucharistic ministers and Bible readers, choir, or altar servers as needed, especially in this pandemic time. They truly inspire us as we see their efforts in Holy Mass and strive to give it their best efforts. They work tirelessly to arrange flowers and decorate the altar to make the place where we celebrate Holy Mass, more beautiful.”

“Not to forget, our children are privileged to grow amid our three sisters. Their beautiful smile and way of approach make our children take part in church activities attentively. Their lead approach in CCD program as teachers and mentors has been helpful to our students and our CCD teachers. They also play an essential role in preparing our students to receive various sacraments, such as holy communion or confirmation. Weddings, baptisms, and other events happen seamlessly through their guidance. They help lead organizations such as Thirubalaskhyam and Cherupushpa Mission League by serving as a source of spiritual guidance and decision making. A wide range of aged population has sought their help, including our elderly population and our youth, with many counseling guidance. We are truly grateful to the sisters and are thankful to the Lord for allowing them to serve here. They are an asset for our church and their presence is truly a blessing.”
(Mr. Jose Mathew Thannichuvattil, Sacristan and the Parish Council Member)

Challenges

When the sisters came from India to the U.S., they must deal with many challenges in their everyday lives. As they try to help others, especially young generation, to grow in their faith, they face challenges. For example, one obstacle could be communication. Since the accent of English in India differs from that of America, they have trouble explaining and communicating with others. In any setting, the inability to communicate effectively can be very limiting and stressful. It is stressful when you do not speak the mother tongue and cannot understand or make yourself understood. Another challenge is the culture they must adapt to. In America, people do things differently than how they do them in India. So, they must get used to an unfamiliar situation.

Vocations to religious life

As the Catholics believe, the Holy Spirit is the guiding force of authentic vocations. The primary reasons for coming to religious life are a sense of call, a desire to deepen their prayer and spiritual life, and the desire to live with others who share their faith and values. Many influences come together to facilitate a woman or a man to become more fully involved in the ministerial life of the church. The living example of persons in each church ministry can also be an inspiration for the young generation to accept the vocation. Reports show that only thirty percent of newer entrants to religious life show that their parents encouraged them in their desire to pursue a vocation (NRVC, 2013). The Church needs to provide greater education and structures of support for parents and families in their vital role of vocation promotion.

Challenges regarding Religious Vocations

Religious institutes are more likely to attract newer members if they have a strong Catholic identity, if they are hopeful about their future, if their members live together as a community, and if they have a structured prayer life. People who attend a Catholic school, know a priest, sister, or brother, or who have been invited by a priest, sister, or brother to enter the priesthood or religious life are more likely to consider seriously a religious vocation. The church needs to support more structured outreach to younger people to ensure their integration into a Catholic culture.

In this modern world in America, the vocation to religious lives is decreasing. Many choose family life as their vocation rather than religious life. One reason is because God has called them to other vocation rather than religious life. Another reason people do not choose religious life is because they see it in a wrong way. For an example, many see this path as one where everyone only prays. Many do not realize the true meaning of this vocation and they do not understand properly. The youth do not see that religious, such as priest and sisters, can also enjoy life or do things that as humans can do.

Those coming to religious life today are optimistic in their outlook, tolerant of differences among people, and positive in their attitudes toward authority. They believe religious life will persevere. However, a high school student who thinks he/she may be called to the religious life faces a hostile culture today - sadly, even in the secularized environment of many Catholic schools and colleges. Choosing to pursue a vocation is counter-cultural, especially when young people are being told that “what matters in the end is money” and “there is no time to have faith (vocations in the church, 2020). They find it difficult to accept limitations on the use of money, technology, communication devices and other familial gadgets. Some cannot get up early to attend daily Mass. There is anxiety that comes with trying to hear God’s call and deciding what to do next. They likely have fears about not dating, or not having a family, or being criticized by their peers and society. It is not uncommon to worry that you are not worthy of this life based on past sins. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is ready, but the laborers are few. Ask the harvest master to send out laborers to gather his harvest.” (Mt 9:37-38).

Conclusion

This paper provided a brief history, Apostolate, Charism, Motto, and Spirituality of Visitation and St. Joseph Congregations. The paper explained the activities of sisters in the parishes and the impact of having convents in the parishes with illustrations, based on the interviews conducted with parishioners and their written description. This paper also discussed the challenges sisters face now in the Knanaya parishes and how we can promote vacation to religious life from the children in the USA.

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