

# Ayala: San Antonio's Blue Hole is a source of wonder and inspiration. So is "Blue Hole Wisdom," a new book about the nuns who founded Incarnate Word University

**Elaine Ayala, Commentary**

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The springs at the Blue Hole, the headwaters of the San Antonio River on the UIW campus, fluctuate with rainfall.

William Luther /San Antonio Express-News

Bridget McDermott Flood isn't a San Antonian. Neither is she a member of a religious congregation here, though she is a practicing Catholic.

But in a new book, the woman from St. Louis writes with ease about San Antonio and about Catholic nuns who founded a congregation here more than 150 years ago to serve spiritual and educational missions as well as those focused on social justice and healthcare.

"Blue Hole Wisdom: My Journey with the Sisters" honors a place from which the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word have drawn strength, spirituality and ecological purpose.

It comes two years after the congregation began a yearlong celebration of its sesquicentennial, culminating in a remarkable gift to San Antonio, a 52-acre "spiritual forest" near the University of the Incarnate Word, the school the sisters founded.

A pact between the congregation, its environmental ministry, Headwaters of Incarnate Word, and the Green Space Alliance of South Texas ensures that the nature sanctuary will be preserved in perpetuity.

“Blue Hole Wisdom” is a gift of a different kind. It’s a memoir by Flood, told through stories about individual sisters speaking of their faith and service, which transcend Catholicism.



Bridget McDermott Flood is the author of “Blue Hole Wisdom: My Journey with the Sisters” and executive director of the Incarnate Word Foundation in St. Louis.

Courtesy Incarnate Word Foundation

Although “Blue Hole Wisdom” isn’t a historical text, it reflects on the sisters’ shared history, spanning the order’s early days, when immigrant nuns from Europe left their homelands believing they’d never return, to Vatican II in the early 1960s and its revolutionary impact on their customs.

As executive director of the Incarnate Word Foundation in St. Louis, Flood leads another congregational ministry, managing the foundation’s grants program and community initiatives, including a home-ownership program to help people of color build wealth. It’s named for St. Joseph.

Flood, who’ll be in San Antonio starting Saturday, will meet with congregation leaders about various projects. She hasn’t seen most of the sisters since before the pandemic.

So it’s also a reunion.

Flood, 64, a potter and beekeeper, brings to her work what the sisters bring to theirs: a deep commitment to social justice.

She served on the White House Task Force for the Reform of the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships during the Obama administration, and she sits on the boards of the Headwaters at Incarnate Word, the St. Joseph Housing Initiative, the NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice and FADICA (Founders and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities).

“Like the waters of the Blue Hole, their wisdom runs deep, clear and pure,” Flood writes of the sisters.

She has worked for them for 20 years and writes about “chispa divina” — sparks of the divine — and about Sister Alice Holden, who practices T'ai Chi Chih meditation and is a poet, artist and, Flood believes, a mystic.

She writes about young nuns who left Ireland believing they'd never return and who cried alone in empty playgrounds at the schools where they taught.

She writes of Sister Cindy Stacy, a social worker who worked at Visitation House, a San Antonio ministry for young women and children transitioning from homelessness to self-sufficiency.

A fisherwoman, Stacy taught Flood patience at the edge of the Guadalupe River. She helped her see that the prescription for an empty nest lay not in a flurry of new activities to hide the loss but in seeking deeper relationships with those who matter.

Each time she visits San Antonio, Flood goes to the Blue Hole, a natural spring next to the Incarnate Word campus where the headwaters of the San Antonio River rise. For Flood, visiting the site is a spiritual experience that takes her out of the urban environment, where she can contemplate God and life.

In her time with the sisters, Flood has learned they're wise, funny and human. Even their mistakes arise from their spiritual view of the world, she says.

Congregation leader Teresa Maya says the book is one of the blessings of the pandemic. It gave Flood the time to finish a project years in the making.

Each chapter offers a vignette from an Incarnate Word sister that provides “a why,” Maya said, “and what a difference it makes when people know their ‘why.’”

“We're all called to find what our whys are, to reflect, ‘What is my passion?’ and our reason to get out of bed every morning.”

Each story gives the reader hope, but not because the members of the congregation are saintlier than the rest of us, Maya said.

She says people planting community gardens and pastors feeding people during the pandemic, as well as those working for COPS/Metro Alliance or the Interfaith Welcome Coalition in San Antonio, have their own stories of hope.

In the end, “Blue Hole Wisdom” is a book about friendships, about how relationships are growing in importance in the U.S., about how friends become family when our real families are hundreds or thousands of miles away.

Maya and other members of the congregation are hoping for another gift, the creation of a spiritual reach of the River Walk, akin to the Museum Reach, which now ends just north of the Pearl.

The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word have prayed for larger projects into existence.

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