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Dominican Srs. Amata Rojewska (left) and Dominika Bartkiewicz are running the Herbarium of St. Dominic in Biala Nizna village in southern Poland. The sisters emphasize that in the charism of their congregation, besides evangelization and education, there is also a dimension of caring for the sick. That's why they decided to revive a tradition of herb-growing, started by their foundress, to heal both body and soul. (OSV News/Courtesy of Witold Goreck)

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Religious orders have grown herbs throughout the centuries, and careful mixing of medical plants was a well-kept secret for many. Now, Dominican sisters in Poland want to revive the tradition started by their community's foundress, even though 10 years ago, herb mixing was the last thing they were thinking of doing.

In the tiny village of Biala Nizna in southern Poland, hidden between picturesque hills of the Beskidy mountains, the Dominican Sisters of the Immaculate Conception Province run the Herbarium of St. Dominic. The herbs grown there are used to care for the sick — a part of the Dominican tradition that also includes evangelization and education, the sisters say.

"There are diseases where you can use herbs for a particular ailment," said Sr. Dominika Bartkiewicz. While they make clear that they are not medical doctors, the sisters often use herbal mixtures that work just as well as when their great-grandmothers used them.

The sisters started their modern herbarium by serving other sisters with their treatments, then expanded to serve the local community and now "people from all over Poland and even abroad turn to us for help," Bartkiewicz told OSV News.

In their gardens in Biala Nizna, the Dominican Sisters cultivate herbs for their own use. For preparing blends, they source herbs from trusted growers, as they want the plants they use to always be of the highest quality.

The creator of the current blends was the late Sr. Bożena Pieróg (1928-2017), whose books of recipes Dominican Sisters consider a "treasure."

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The foundress of the community of Dominican Sisters, Servant of God Mother Kolumba Bialecka, started the order in 1861 to care for "any sick and needy who called upon them," [according to her biography on the Dominican Sisters website](#). Mother Kolumba also started the convent in Biala Nizna in 1895.

"We sell teas according to the recipes of Sister Bozena, who, in addition to contributing greatly to the development of the charism of Mother Kolumba, became the creator of the idea to combine natural medicine with traditional medicine," Sr. Amata Rojewska told OSV News.

But striving to multiply the good they have achieved, the sisters don't want to solely base their herbal teas on Pieróg's notes. They are constantly working on new recipes.

"Whenever a thought or an idea comes to me, I bring it first to Jesus. When God gives me a strong inspiration on what herbs to use, only then do I write it down because I hear the strong voice of God," said Bartkiewicz.

"Our plans are adjusted to meet the current needs, so that it is for the benefit of the people who come here, because it is not about us," Rojewska added.

The sisters believe that healing is possible on two levels — the physical and the spiritual.

"Sometimes, on a human, physical level, what I want to advise people about herbal medicine may not seem sufficient. Herbs are one thing, but the other is the prayers that we offer to God, through a novena to the Servant of God Mother Kolumba Bialecka, that works great miracles," said Rojewska.

"I have come to realize several times that these individuals that come here to our herbarium want to talk, they simply want a smile that will give them hope that not all is lost, that there is Someone who watches over everything. And when a person raises their hands, God begins to work," Bartkiewicz said.

"Once, a man came to us, and he sought herb treatment. But when we started to talk to him, he said he hadn't been to confession for decades. We eventually led him to see the priest, and it turned out that was the treatment he needed most," Bartkiewicz said.

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— Sr. Dominika Bartkiewicz

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Bartkiewicz, who manages the herbarium in Biala Nizna, admits that she didn't immediately discern her vocation.

"When I was in novitiate, Sister Bozena told me that I would be working with herbs, but of course, I laughed at her," she told OSV News.

It was only after the death of Pieróg that Bartkiewicz understood this calling: "The voice of God was very palpable."

"For me, it was new and extraordinary when I discovered a vocation within a vocation," she said.

Similarly, Rojewska discovered her calling within a calling. Before joining the Dominican Sisters, she was a sales manager in a secular company.

"For me, it's like an extension of what I was doing before. I used to work in trade before joining the order. Upon entering the Dominican Sisters, I entrusted everything to God and what was important to me, I gave it to him. And after five years, he gave it back to me," said Rojewska.

Joining the convent didn't mean giving up her passions. "God does not take away from me what I love the most. He simply stores it for another time when it can be used where it is needed," she said.

For the sisters, each prepared package of herbal tea gains added value.

"It becomes an evangelization tea, an extension of the 'cult' of our foundress," Bartkiewicz said.

"At the very beginning, when Mother Bialecka founded the congregation in 1861, what she chose as her mission was to serve the sick, those whom no one reaches. It was she who established a hospital for wounded insurgents in our house," said

Bartkiewicz.

The sisters are determined to uphold the work initiated by their foundress. In the near future, they plan to open the Center of God the Father, a medical facility next to the monastery. "We want to create a center for our herbal activities where we would work hand in hand with professional doctors. We want to leave to the doctors what needs to be left to them, and help with what we can do on our side," said Rojewska.

Enormous funds will be needed to invest in the center. Nevertheless, entrusting everything to God and to their foundress, the Dominican sisters believe that they are on the right path.

As Rojewska said: "Green is not only the color of herbs, but also of hope."