



The white veil is worn until a candidate takes final vows.

Over the past 400 years, the religious way of life has changed little within the Discalced Carmelite Order.

St. Teresa opened the first Carmelite monastery on Aug. 24, 1562, in Avila, Spain. Similar monasteries housing small communities of not more than 21 men or women have spread across the globe, providing a retreat from the outside world where the religious can lead a cloistered life fully devoted to God in prayer and self-denial.

The 14 Carmelite nuns living in the monastery on Jefferson Road in Henrietta adhere strictly to the Primitive Carmel Rule, living in total seclusion and following a contemplative life style. The sisters deny themselves the company of family and friends, along with television, movies, secular novels and travel, because there would be a diversion from prayer, their primary reason for existence.

The high stone monastery walls enclosing them and the austerity of their surroundings provide protection from outside annoyances that would interfere with prayer.

"By staying within certain limits on our own property, we make our own solitude, but since we are not disembodied spirits, our wall and our grates are simply means to an end — a safe-guard to our leading a more intense life of prayer," The Reverend Mother wrote as a prelude to conversation. "The Church considers our life a particular way of living and expressing the Paschal Mystery of Christ, which is death ordained toward resurrection."

The face-to-face interview was conducted through a lattice work screen.

To the Carmelites, a cloistered life is actually a life of freedom. "We are free here to worship God to the fullest," one sister said. But, she added, "if something of importance happens in the outside world, Reverend Mother informs us. We do keep abreast of current events."

Because of the hours they spend in daily meditation, the sisters have become specialists in prayer. One young nun said that "we live here for a positive purpose, to be in close union with God. All the things we do are for this end. And by our constant prayer, we are greater friends with God and we believe that God will always listen to us."

This special union the Carmelites share with God attracts people to petition the sisters to act as mediators between them and God by asking Him for particular favors. Visitors seeking the sister's help enter a small waiting room equipped with a bell which summons a sister. The unseen sister speaks through a turn, a rotating barrel reminiscent of a dumb waiter. "At first when people come here, they are frightened by the turn. And they find it hard, at first, to talk to a sister they cannot see. But in time, they get quite used to it," sister said.



One of the lighter household tasks is tending plants in winter. Every sister has her chores in house and garden.

For her prayers, the sister usually receives small gifts of money and food, plus other necessities that help maintain the monastery and sustain its inhabitants.

In addition, the sisters sell hand-crafted vestments, altar linens and religious knick-knacks to parishes or individuals. "Each vestment is a community effort. Some sisters cut out the pattern, others sew and a few embroider. We all use our particular talents for the good of the community," a sister said.

The sisters also spend a part of the day doing manual work around the monastery. Cooking, cleaning, gardening and washing are necessary chores the sisters perform while contemplating.

Food in the cloister is simple. The sisters abstain from meat as penance. Except for the meat, their diet is similar to that of the outside world. In September, they observe a "white" fast in which only one full meal is served daily.

Life at the monastery is a community endeavor. Yet, each sister is somewhat of a hermit, spending a great deal of her time in solitude, praying in her "cell," a small unadorned room. "We live as a community but with a strong eremitical spirit. As a community we come together to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist and for the choral recitation of the Divine Office, for meals and for the two daily recreations; as hermits each sister has her separate cell, praying and working alone during the day," sister said.

The Carmelites expressed the need for community life and believe that such a life is essential for religious orders. "Communities are made up of individual persons, yet to develop fully as a person, the individual needs the relationships a community provides. The love and virtue we practice toward each other are the measure of our spiritual progress, for as St. John says: If we do not love the sister we see, how can we say we love God Whom we cannot see."

The Carmelite habit is a simple brown robe, black veil, sandals and a long Brown Scapular. The Order states that the Scapular was given to St. Simon Stock in 1261 by Our Lady as an outward sign of her special protection. "The habit is very comfortable and it also is an inflation fighter, since one will last around ten years," sister laughed.

The original Carmelite Order was established approximately 900 years before Christ by the Prophet Elias. The rule of the Order was strict but in the course of time it slackened. St. Teresa of Avila was responsible for reviving the Primitive Rule and bringing the order back to its original austerity. With the help of St. John of the Cross, she organized 17 monasteries for nuns and 15 for friars before her death in 1582. St. Therese of Lisieux, France, the Little Flower of Jesus, is a notable Carmelite saint of modern times.

The Rochester community was established in 1930 by Philadelphia Carmelites at 151 Saratoga Ave. Currently, there are 64 communities of nuns in the United States and 700 throughout the world.

A candidate for the sisterhood must be prepared for a difficult life of self-denial and a constant giving up of her own will. If the Carmelites feel that the candidate is able to live the cloistered life, she becomes a postulant for one year, then a novice for three years. At the end of this period, she takes solemn vows and the black veil during a public ceremony.

"Today when many see the world as the beginning and end of everything and think man has the answer to everything, they easily reject God and even deny His existence. A life such as ours, totally dedicated to Him in faith and love, is an open profession of the reality of both God's existence and His presence in the world," the sisters said.



The income that maintains the house comes in part from the sale of vestments such as these, which the sisters have made by hand.

e
nney

the refectory.