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Faith Today

By Sister Mary Collins, OSB
NC News Service

Recently Benedictine Sister Mary Rardin got a letter from eighth graders at St. Matthew's Parish in Topeka, Kan., asking: "Why would a medical doctor decide to become a Sister?"

The 31-year-old physician spent years preparing for the medical profession. Recently she began preparing for religious profession as a Benedictine Sister in Atchison, Kan.

Her answer to the young people was one she'd given often: "The work can be done anywhere. What matters is what you are as a person."

She admits she didn't always think that way. As a college student at the University of Kansas she was attracted to medicine, "partly for humanitarian reasons, but also for status."

When she completed her internship in Wichita, she decided to practice medicine in the military and was happy for a while with the community spirit she discovered working there. Then she talks quietly about "a tug of my heart," the deep need for "seeking God beyond what we do" and the desire for "something else."

Slowly it became apparent to her that the community she sought had to have a deeper source than military life.

Sister Rardin speaks confidently now about her decision to take up the Benedictine way of religious life with her Atchison Sisters. "God is challenging me in ways I had not expected to care for others and to be cared for by them."

And she talks warmly about a Hindu colleague whose small-town medical practice she has joined in her year before beginning the novitiate. "He sees religious life as something to be

looked up to, so there's no pressure to be a full-time partner," she says.

But she acknowledges that pressures on women are real. "Yes, women have many options. The responsibility is on us to make choices."

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Sister Chris Kean talks about the long, slow process of making choices too. She graduated from college after studying sociology, psychology and gerontology in the early 1970s. She told herself then she was "too young" to consider religious life — but not too young for a life of service.

She spent time as a volunteer teacher and then moved steadily forward into professional life. At age 30, she too was ready for "more."

Sister Kean found the "more" she was looking for in Benedictine Sisters living out Christian discipleship in community. "I saw the struggle and pain of the Sisters during those years. But they were healthy in dealing with it and in helping each other. I got good models of religious life."

At age 33, she's anticipating final profession as a Sister in 1986 or 1987.

She talks easily about the pluses of living in a community of women. "It calls me to commitment, to faith and service. It calls me to live what I say. It legitimizes my value system."

Living together and praying daily with her sisters is important. With a sparkle in her eye, she says, "I don't have the total love of any one person, but I am loved by 350."

Sister Kean believes she can bring the values of community life to a society without extended families of relatives living close to one another. Right now she's a pastoral associate responsible for ministering to the sick and elderly in hospitals, nursing

homes and to some people confined to their own homes.

"What I really want, if God wants it, is hospice work, building a faith community with the dying and their families," she says.

These two young women have confirmed with their lives the truth found in a 1980 report of the Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses to their Sisters: The two gifts Benedictine women have to steward in this period are community and contemplative vision.

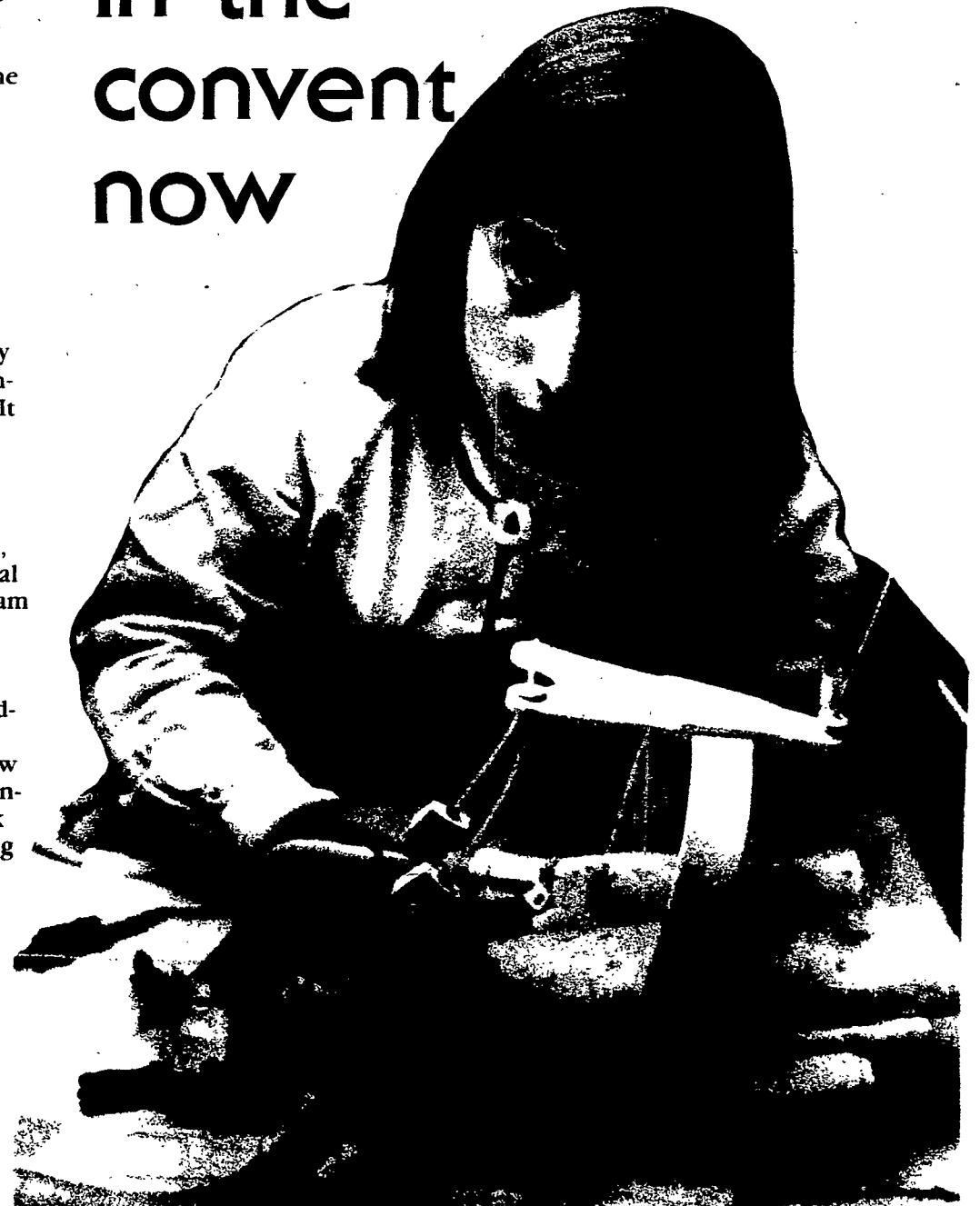
If the Sister Keans and Sister

Rardins who seek God in religious life today are often older, better educated and more professionally established than the girls who came to convents and monasteries in this last century, they reflect the shift in culture everyone is learning to live with today.

These women are living witnesses that religious life for women has a firm future as well as a new face as the U.S. church moves toward the 21st century.

(Sister Collins is a founding member of Holy Wisdom Monastery in Wake Forest, N.C.)

Look who's in the convent now



Vocations

Today's Sister may well be an educated woman with professional skills. She may be a doctor. She may be a lawyer. But, writes Benedictine Sister Mary Collins, it is still the values of community that draw her to religious life.

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