

portion of heaven

In the spirit of St. Francis, The Little Portion depends for financial support on donations and on the dedicated volunteer service of 15 lay persons. Staff members are unsalaried.

Asked where the name of the retreat house comes from, Sister Shea explained that it refers to a spot in Assisi, Italy. There St. Francis heard God calling him to rebuild a chapel. St. Francis saw the chapel as "his little portion of heaven on earth," Sister Shea said.

Francis' call was "so direct and immediate" that the question for him wasn't "whether" he had a vocation but only "how do I follow it," she said.

Sister Shea has been an Ursuline Sister for 35 years. At one time she taught history at the College of New Rochelle in New York. For seven years now she has worked as a spiritual director, often training others for roles as spiritual directors. At times she finds herself helping others identify their own vocations.

Recently Sister Shea and a Christian brother met with 25 students at Yale Divinity School at their invitation. The students were looking for guidance, wondering "where their lives were going."

How does she approach a situation like that? "I'm not there to solve anything," Sister Shea said. "As a person of faith and a

representative of a believing community, I'm there to help them express what they are experiencing in their lives."

For Sister Shea, a vocation is "an invitation into relationship." She describes a vocation as a "thread that goes through life. At certain moments, our horizon shifts and we are invited into a new relationship with God, with ourselves and with others."

For most people a vocation is a "sifting and sorting of an inner attraction" to a way of life that gives meaning, Sister Shea explained.

In her view, identifying a vocation is a process best done with friends, or family, or a trusted adviser. "A vocation to the Christian life is always experienced in community" — with others, she pointed out.

Sister Shea's view of her own vocation has evolved over the years, she said. At The Little Portion she works closely with two Franciscan priests and two lay persons who maintain an affiliation with the Franciscan order.

Today, she says, she finds her own role increasingly is "one of collaboration with other members in the church."

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

of Christian living

and the mutual support that characterized these little communities. It was all so different from the hatred, fragmentation, suspicion and cold individualism which marked their lives as pagans.

Eager to share in the benefits of being Christian, the first Christians made inquiries and learned about Christ, the heart of the communities. Gradually new groups formed and gradually, too, society was transformed.

It was to recapture the first Christians' inner vitality and the power of their witness in the world that religious orders were formed. Their members were trying once again to live the Christian life as it had been lived for the first few centuries, in the days before Christianity became a legal religion in the Roman Empire.

These communities — precisely as communities — were meant to serve as models for Christian living, invitations to all Christians to do likewise. They aimed at making a reality of Paul's words to the Thessalonians: "Thus you became a model for all the believers of Macedonia and

Achaia. The word of the Lord has echoed forth from you resoundingly" (1 Thessalonians 1:7-8)

In a similar vein Paul wrote of these communities in the second chapter of the letter to the Philippians: "In everything you do, act without grumbling or arguing; prove yourselves innocent and straightforward, children of God beyond reproach in the midst of a twisted and depraved generation — among whom you shine like stars in the sky while holding forth the word of life."

That "word of life" was the living word of their example, their Christian lives.

This is a role members of religious orders have in today's world: to serve as models of Christian living. They accomplish this through lives of mutual love in community and love that serves other people. The precise form that this witness will take will depend on historical and sociological circumstances.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's University, Plymouth, Mich.)

FOOD...

...for thought

How do bishops and members of religious orders relate to each other?

Today there is "the beginning of a new period of understanding and collaboration placing Religious more fully at the heart of the mission of the church," said San Francisco's Archbishop John Quinn.

He was reporting to the U.S. bishops at their 1984 annual meeting in Washington, D.C.

He heads a special commission named by Pope John Paul II to foster closer collaboration between U.S. bishops and religious orders. Other commission members are Archbishop Thomas Kelly, OP, of Louisville, Ky., and Bishop Raymond Lessard of Savannah, Ga.

Archbishop Quinn said that more than 70 percent of the bishops reported on "listening sessions" held in their dioceses with religious communities.

The sessions gave Religious the "feeling that they are being heard," he said. The meetings brought to the surface strengths and weaknesses:

Some of the strengths:
 • A deepening of the spiritual dimensions of religious life;
 • A greater understanding of the relationship between religious life and the promotion of social justice.

Some weaknesses Archbishop Quinn said most agreed on in the listening sessions were:

• Loss in membership and decline in numbers entering religious orders;

• Tension between Religious and some bishops, priests and lay people because of changes in religious life.

Archbishop Quinn also made some recommendations:

"The next step should be to dialogue (with Religious) about the major themes of religious life." This dialogue would allow Religious to explain how they understand such themes as community life, religious obedience, public witness and religious identity.

It also would give bishops the chance to explain how they see religious communities living out the expectations of the church in these areas, he explained.

The archbishop also recommended that the bishops consider the advisability of preparing a national "pastoral letter on religious life." It would be "a witness to the church's teaching on religious life," he said.

It also would be "an expression of our love and esteem for our Religious...one of God's great gifts to the church," Archbishop Quinn said.

The archbishop noted that "a realistic acknowledgment of problems does not remove the greater reasons for optimism and hope" today. "We are eager to walk the journey with our sisters and brothers in religious life."

...for discussion

1. Father John Castelot writes that religious orders came into existence in the first place because some Christians wanted to live more like the first Christians lived. What does it mean to you to live more like the first Christians?

2. Sister Prudence Allen looks ahead to the 21st century. She suggests that an important role for members of religious orders then will be to help people cope with their high-tech world. What are some special needs you think people have today because of their rapidly changing world? How can your Christian community serve people who have those needs?

3. Why is community life important to members of religious orders?

SECOND HELPINGS

Statements of personal experience by nine women who have chosen to live as members of religious orders are found in "Sister," a 31-page booklet published by the National Catholic Vocation Council. "To be a Sister is to minister in a spirit of hope and justice and peace in a world of violence and alienation and seeming despair," writes Sister Mary Hawkins, SP. She says that her vocation is in a continuing "process of 're-birth' each time I am enabled to respond to the persons whose lives touch mine." To be a Sister, she adds, "is to join a community of faith: it is to choose to live out love in the concrete events of every ordinary and grace-filled day. It is to love and to be loved. For it is in the human faith community that the revelation of God comes to life and continues the mission of Christ and of the church." (National Catholic Vocation Council, 1307 S. Wabash, Suite 350, Chicago, Ill. 60605. \$1.75.)