

'THE CHANGED LIFE OF OUR TIME'

Women Religious in Transition:

A 20th Anniversary Retrospective of Renewal

Part IX in a Series

By Emily Morrison

Breaking bread with visitors is a revitalizing experience for the Sisters of Mercy of Melrose Street, on the city of Rochester's southwest side. The doors of the light brown two-story house swing open frequently to guests from every stratum of the surrounding community, in a "ministry of hospitality" that might serve as a model for the spirit of Vatican II renewal in one of its most visible incarnations.

"Renewal speaks to the future. I think this is an important focus for a new Church," said Mercy associate Gloria Hanson on just such an occasion earlier this week, when the five sisters who make 303 Melrose Street their home invited Mercy associates and members of the Courier-Journal staff to dinner.

With lower occupancy levels in larger institutions and many convents being sold, such single-house dwellings are becoming a thriving alternative to convent life. Dwindling vocations and the increasing numbers of innovative living arrangements inspired by the relaxation of rigid pre-Vatican II rules are often cited as primary reasons for such changes.

Sisters choose to live in private houses, either purchased or rented by their congregations, for several additional reasons directly linked to the dictates of renewal. Among these goals are a return to the founding charisms of their orders (frequently, to more effectively living out commitments to poverty or community), a fuller espousal of gospel values, and living according to the signs of the times.

Residents of the Melrose Street house include Sister Barbara Moore, director of Rochester Interfaith Jail Ministry; Sister Rita Sullivan, pastoral assistant at St. Augustine's, which frequently houses homeless people; Sister Anne Maloy, a gerontologist and director of Mercy Center with the Aging; Sister Sheila Sentiff, who does catechesis at Trinity Montessori School; and Sister Janet Korn, a member of the Council for the Sisters of Mercy and a missionary in Chile for 16 years.

"There has been a Sisters of Mercy presence in this neighborhood for 10

convent," continued Sister Barbara. "When we mow our lawn, the neighbors mow their lawns. When we put out the garbage, the neighbors put out their garbage. We share the tomatoes from our garden with our 80-year-old neighbor."

"It's not so much what we give by our presence as what we gain," she added, to thoughtful disagreement from Gloria Hanson, an articulate Melrose Street enthusiast and advocate who is one of three members of an associate program that allows single or married lay women to share in the social and spiritual activities of the Mercy community. Her two sister associates are Mary Ellen Fischer, who also attended the Monday night dinner, and Jean Arnold.

"I think it's both what you give and what you gain," said Hanson, who cherishes the opportunity to share in the sister's commitment to gospel values and the Mercy charism: service to the poor, the sick, and the uneducated. Important spiritual contributions from the sisters and their neighbors, Hanson asserted, "broaden the perspective on all sides."

Broadened spiritual perspectives surely add an important ingredient to the melting pot of this economically and racially mixed neighborhood, where community is still so important that neighbors regularly prepare food for the sick or incapacitated, and many people come frequently to Mercy prayer groups and Friday night liturgy. The quality of mercy apparently is not strained in this ethnic and religious soup that retains its savory diversity in large part because of the hospitality of the Melrose Street sisters.

"We've taken people in," pointed out Sister Barbara, "and the house has an ecumenical flavor."

"I think the variety of personalities that come to this house — guests, visitors from the varieties of ministry the sisters engage in — exposes those people to the stability of community life," said Hanson. "One of the sisters (Sister Rita Sullivan) works with 'street people' perhaps never before exposed to religious life. The sisters' commitment to hospitality makes this possible."

Sister Anne said the blessing at dinner

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years," explained Sister Barbara, as Sister Anne and Sister Rita took their turn in the home's sunny kitchen, preparing the evening's meal. "We moved in here in January of '75 and rented the house, which has since been purchased by the congregation," she added.

"We moved here because we wanted to have a presence in a city neighborhood, and we wanted to live in a setting that put us in relationship with neighbors and family and community," said Sister Barbara of the house's primarily outward focus. "As the larger convents are sold, the options for living in the city narrow — and I think you have to plan for the future, so you're present. I hope this doesn't sound judgmental, but this style puts you in closer relationship with neighborhoods."

"This is different from a traditional

— "our first time around this new table," as Sister Barbara explained. The dining room table, which she described as "late attic, early cellar," like the other assorted items of furniture the house has collected, is "second-hand, but new to us."

Sisters and associates passed around generous helpings of Brussels sprouts, honeyed carrots, roast beef and tossed salad as the conversation turned to music, community and renewal. Such topics as dress, lifestyle, changed rules and the vital dimension of ministry were taken up in their turn, in a lively discourse punctuated by frequent interludes of humor.

As to the apparently endless debate over the post-Vatican II modification or abandonment of the habit, Sister Barbara brought up an interesting point. "I found it isolating," she observed. "I think (re-



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Residents and associates of the Sisters of Mercy's Melrose Street house gather around the fireplace. They are (foreground, left to right) Sister Barbara Moore, house mascot and guard dog Ladybug and Mercy associate Mary Ellen Fischer; and (back row) Sister Sheila Sentiff, Sister Rita Sullivan, associate Gloria Hanson and Sister Anne Maloy. Not pictured is Sister Janet Korn. A sunporch adjoining the living room is used as a chapel during the summer months.

ligious) should have the choice; that's fundamental. But if people thought the wearing of the habit separated you from them somehow, is it not possible that they might also feel that God is separated from the people? I think this house represents that — although I feel that if someone came here who *did* wear the habit, she'd be welcomed and loved by the neighbors." Ordinary dress, she added, is, to her mind, "like being one with the people," as certain communities of women religious traditionally were at the time of their founding.

Sister Barbara dislikes the rarefied atmosphere of the pedestal she believes sisters have often been put on by some lay people. "You know," she pointed out, "the air gets awfully thin up there. And if you slip, it's a long way down."

Gloria Hanson expressed her view that perhaps a certain element of jealousy creeps into what people perceive the "privileged" lifestyles of religious to be. "I don't feel that the convent has given me a great deal in the way of material things," observed Sister Rita. "It's given me a great deal in the way of spiritual things."

"It really doesn't make much difference where you live; it's what you do in the setting," Sister Barbara concurred. "It doesn't make much difference what you wear; it's who you are in the clothes. If you find that you can be a better gospel woman living this way, then you have to ask yourself what is the setting that enables you to be more truly who you are and more able to live the gospel. If that setting for you is a structured setting, that's wonderful, too."

"It's choice, and respecting the choice," she added. "I think the Sisters of Mercy, through struggle, have come to respect the diversity."

That respect apparently has sent out healthy roots in the surrounding neighborhood. "When people come here, they just feel love," said associate Mary Ellen Fischer. "There are no words to express it."

"I would hope every home would have that quality," said Sister Barbara. "Every religious house, certainly, but this house is also a home."

Sister Sheila Sentiff, who has lived in a *pensione* run by sisters in Rome and in an apartment with a roommate in Washington, D.C., vehemently agreed. "The happiest place I've been is here," she laughed.

"And nothing beats home? Not even Rome?" queried Hanson.

"Nothing beats home," replied Sister

Sheila, who once came across a telephone at the Vatican and called Melrose Street, at the rate of only 50 cents for a single minute.

Such vital concerns as changes in ministry and rules of silence or particular friendships have certainly affected this group of sisters, many of whom entered the Sisters of Mercy in the years just prior to Vatican II. "I think there's a consciousness here that we almost went to the other end of the spectrum (from silence and relative isolation)," posited Sister Anne. "Now there's a need for quiet, for prayerful reflection, because there's such a 'busyness' in our lives now."

"Ministry," she added, "is more important than home."

"But your home setting nurtures it," Sister Barbara pointed out. "It's a place to re-create."

"A place to ventilate," added Sister Anne, who agreed with the others that it was unfortunate that Sister Janet Korn couldn't be home that evening for the shared meal.

"She's unique in the sense that she's been able to come back from a Third World experience and feel at home," said Sister Barbara, who added lively commentary to an ensuing discussion over the merits of living in private houses as part of a commitment to living out one's vow of poverty. "Some people have a real root call to strip themselves of material things," she noted. "Others of us are called to be hospitable, which really can lead to poverty, in terms of the amount of our time that we spend." Such conditions, as several of the gathered company observed, are always relative, and the element of a free choice again makes all the difference.

After dinner and much hilarity, Sister Barbara made mention of a cookbook the evening's meal was not prepared from, a gift from a priest who apparently shares the delightful sense of humor that abounds in this unorthodox household. Its title? "The If I Can't Be Ordained I'll Cook Book," edited by Sandy and Martin Hintz (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1978). Such spirited recipes as one on page 67 for "The Old Vatican One-Two Punch" caused hosts and guests to nearly collapse in barely suppressible mirth.

"If you can't laugh, no matter where you live, you're in serious trouble," Sister Barbara concluded.

Such wise counsel from the sisters of Melrose Street might serve us well, renewed or otherwise, as the definitive sign of these troubling times.