

# Women religious navigate islands of pain at Spirit House

By Teresa A. Parsons

Ten years ago, a woman religious whose vocation was beginning to founder had few choices.

If she was already "sick," she could go to a hospital or treatment center. If she wasn't, she could seek strength and guidance from prayer and from those around her. But if that didn't avert a crisis, she could only wait for the onset of symptoms that would guarantee her the help she needed.

For some, the lack of choices was difficult. In the case of Sister Maureen Murphy, the consequences were tragic. A Sister of St. Joseph, she was tried and acquitted of first-degree manslaughter in the death of her newborn child 10 years ago.

Out of that devastating ordeal grew the recognition that women religious needed a place where they could pull their lives together before they came unraveled.

That's how there came to be a safe harbor known as the Spirit House community, for women religious who get lost amid islands of pain.

Perched on a tree-shaded hill at 428 Mt. Vernon Avenue, the venerable 19th century house that is home to the community seems far removed from the city below.

"There's such grace in these walls. This place has a long history of women growing together," said Sister Mollie Brown, RSM, the community's director. "It has been a very good place to begin."

The year 1987 will mark the end of the beginning. That's when the Spirit House community plans to move to a new home on St. Paul Boulevard.

Last Tuesday, September 30, the Spirit House board of directors submitted a purchase offer on the new house, set on three-and-a-half acres of park-like grounds, complete with a small, spring-fed pond. The following day, the owners accepted the offer.

The house on Mount Vernon is owned by the Sisters of St. Joseph, who purchased it in the 1950s for a retirement center. Since then it has also served as a formation house and prayer center.

It became Spirit House in 1981, when six sisters leased the building with backing from the local Intercongregational Council (ICC) and moved in to begin building a community.

Among them was Sister Mollie, the former outpatient director at Genesee Hospital's Mental Health Center. Trained as a psychiatric nurse, she has been asked to help members of Sister Maureen's local community deal with their reactions and emotions back in 1976.

"From that experience, it became very clear to me that there was no place for women to go for help except the hospital, and that's plain crazy when you're not sick," she said.

In 1977, Sister Mollie began the research that produced a proposal four years later for the Spirit House community. During that research phase, and throughout the program's first three years, Spirit House was subsidized by the ICC. Since then, it has been self-supporting.

Noting that in 1982, Spirit House was only the fourth such community in the country, Sister Mollie termed the council members who supported her proposal "amazing women."

"They know what pain is. They were so compassionate and so willing to walk an iffy road," she said.

Their risk has been rewarded. So far, 26 women have come to the community. To date,



not one has needed subsequent hospitalization. Spirit House is not a place for sick people. Instead, its focus is preventive. "You ought to be ahead of the fire," Sister Mollie said. "By the time you get into the mental health system, you've already learned how to be sick."

"This is a good place to learn how to say 'no' or 'later' or 'OK,' or 'I want to try something else' and feel all right about that," she added.

Three sisters now comprise the community's live-in staff. Sister Mollie and Sister Ann Alderman are the only remaining members of the original group. New staff members are asked to make a two-year commitment to live at the house.

"We chose to have a core community and have something in place because when sisters come to us, they're pretty empty," Sister Mollie said. "There's no energy to begin to build something."

The majority of the residents have been in their 30s or 40s and have not been in a treatment center before. Some come to Spirit House to make the transition from an aggressive treatment facility back to community living. Others are chronically depressed or angry or are struggling with questions about their vocation or ministry.

Spirit House is not equipped to care for anyone who is homicidal or suicidal, or who has serious physical problems or illnesses.

"The women who come to us are basically healthy," Sister Mollie explained. "We take nobody who is actively involved in drug or alcohol abuse."

Although the average stay is about nine months, the community keeps its arrival policy as flexible as possible. "When your pain is great and it's time, we say 'just come,'" Sister Mollie explained.

When each resident arrives, she is greeted with a welcoming prayer service. During her stay, she participates in twice-weekly group sessions and meets with a staff member each week. She also meets regularly with a primary therapist at Genesee Mental Health Center.

Residents keep in touch with the outside community by spending as many as 20 hours a week doing apostolic work. The choice of what type is left to them.

"Ministry is an important part of our identity as apostolic women," Sister Mollie said. "The idea is to move out of the house for a couple of hours each day. It gives them something to talk about besides their own problems."

But ministry is always secondary to each sister's need for healing. "That's very different than the message we give ourselves or that the

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Bishop Matthew H. Clark

# Along the Way

Much of my activity and thinking in recent months have centered on the ways in which we, as a community, express our faith and build up the Kingdom of God in this day and age. That activity is shared by many people and groups within our diocese. As examples of this, I think of our five-year financial-planning group, of a committee researching our ministerial needs and opportunities and of some 45 parish communities working on a needs assessment program.

We are by no means alone in this work, which is being pursued by a large number of dioceses around our country. They may approach the issue in ways different from ours, but a common note is the recognition that the Church is a living, changing body the visible expression of whose faith will take different shapes in changing times.

It is also, I believe, a natural consequence of the fact that each diocese is different from the one next door. While all are joined by bonds of faith and charity, each has its own personality which is shaped by many factors — size, history, ethnic composition, leadership, special needs, opportunities and the like. You may note those differences in your travels or hear them discussed by people who have come here from other parts of the country. All celebrate the same faith, but the Diocese of Rochester is different from the dioceses of Scranton, Syracuse and Albany, and each of the latter is different from the others.

The variety is a delightful reminder of the many ways in which we're meant to show the face of Christ to a searching, starving world. It is also a challenge I believe we must always keep before us. How are we meant to show the face of Christ to those who search their hearts for Him? What kind of Church do we want to be?

Let me share some thematic responses I keep coming back to as I think about this question. I share them with you not simply to let you know what I am thinking, but also as a way of inviting you to reflect on the questions, in order to share the fruit of your thinking in your local communities.

I would like to describe our Church in two fundamental ways:

1) It is a community of faith in which we can experience the love of Christ, come to know our own dignity and holiness, and become aware of our responsibility for the life of the community and our common mission to build up the Kingdom of God.

2) It is a community that has a clear, strong priority in favor of the poor, weak and fragile among us. This commitment is expressed not only by the delivery of services to those in need, but also by patient work to construct a social order in which all life is revered and in which all people have sufficient spiritual and material resources to realize their God-given potential.

To me, it seems that the best way we can work together to continue our growth toward these ideals is to reaffirm the strong commitment this diocese has always made to the training of excellent pastoral ministers. We are very much aware that this commitment — once especially centered in the formation of priests — must now be extended to a variety of people enriching us through their pastoral service. If we do not take up this challenge, those who follow us will be impoverished.

It is important that we develop a variety of ministers. They will be excellent if they know Christ alive in our tradition and in our people, and if they are willing to help give vital expression to the faith in our time.

Peace to all.

## Two Sisters of Mercy presenting family education series

Adults of all ages may benefit from a family education series on aging, which is currently in progress at two parishes in the diocese and which will begin shortly at a third. The series, entitled "No matter what my age, I am a growing-older person," is conducted by Mercy Sisters Anne Maloy and M. Gratia L'Esperance.

The six-session series is set for 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. on different evenings at the following parishes: St. Louis, Pittsford; St. Thomas the Apostle, Irondequoit; and St. John the Evangelist, Humboldt Street, Rochester.

Sessions are underway at St. Louis and will continue on Wednesdays through October 22. At St. Thomas, sessions are on Thursdays through October 23; and at St. John, sessions will be Tuesdays, October 28 through December 2.

The series explores the normal aging process as compared to stereotypical beliefs about the frailty of older people. Issues being covered are: the changing responsibilities, conflicts and guilt frequently experienced by family members caring for older relatives; agencies and services available in Monroe County.

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