

Women examine ways to answer God's invitation

Women religious offer witness of dedication

By Mary Sullivan, RSM
Guest contributor

Recent *Courier* articles have focused our attention on the declining number of ordained priests, the need for young and older people to consider vocations to ordained priestly ministry, and activities designed to encourage such discernment. I strongly support Bishop Clark's new vocation endeavor, "A Call to Priesthood," and I wish here to focus on an additional aspect of our need as God's people: the need for vocations to religious life.

Many complaints — both legitimate and illegitimate — have been brought against women religious during the last 20 years. Yet one complaint we should probably lodge against ourselves is our own silence and self-effacement about vowed religious life itself: what it means, what we honestly try to be and do, and why that is important.

Perhaps women religious have not maintained too low a profile with respect to our individual activities and ministries, but we certainly have been reticent to explain explicitly to others the deepest purpose of our lives as women religious, the value we attach to this purpose and the desire we have that others will join us as life-long members.

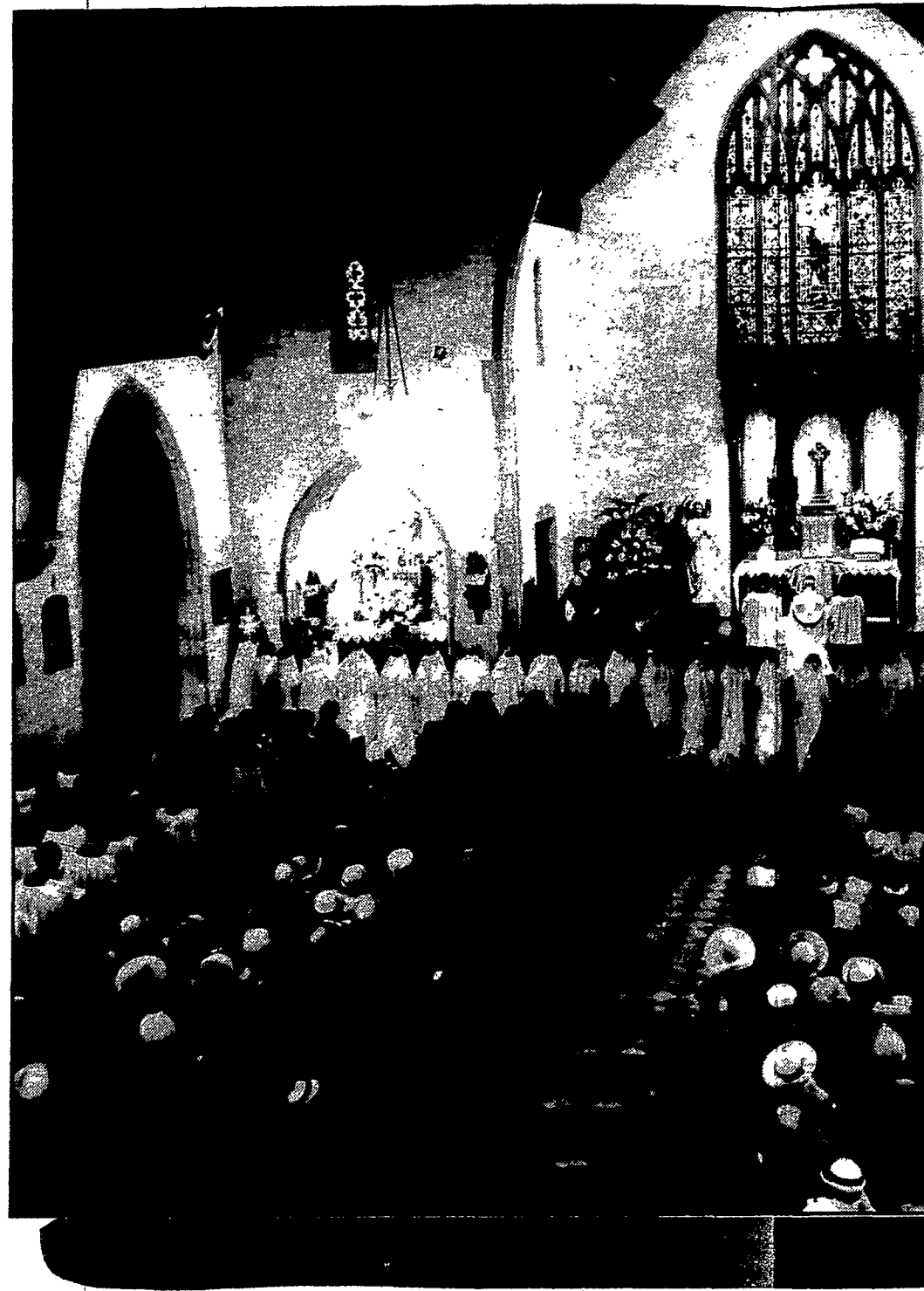
Undoubtedly our reticence about overtly recruiting new members stems largely from three factors: our strong and increasing respect for the diverse and ardent Christian vocations of lay men and women; the embarrassment many of us experienced at certain recruitment methods used in the

past; and our recognition that it probably is unwise to enter religious life at a very young age — even though today there is a six- to 12-year formation period before one professes perpetual vows.

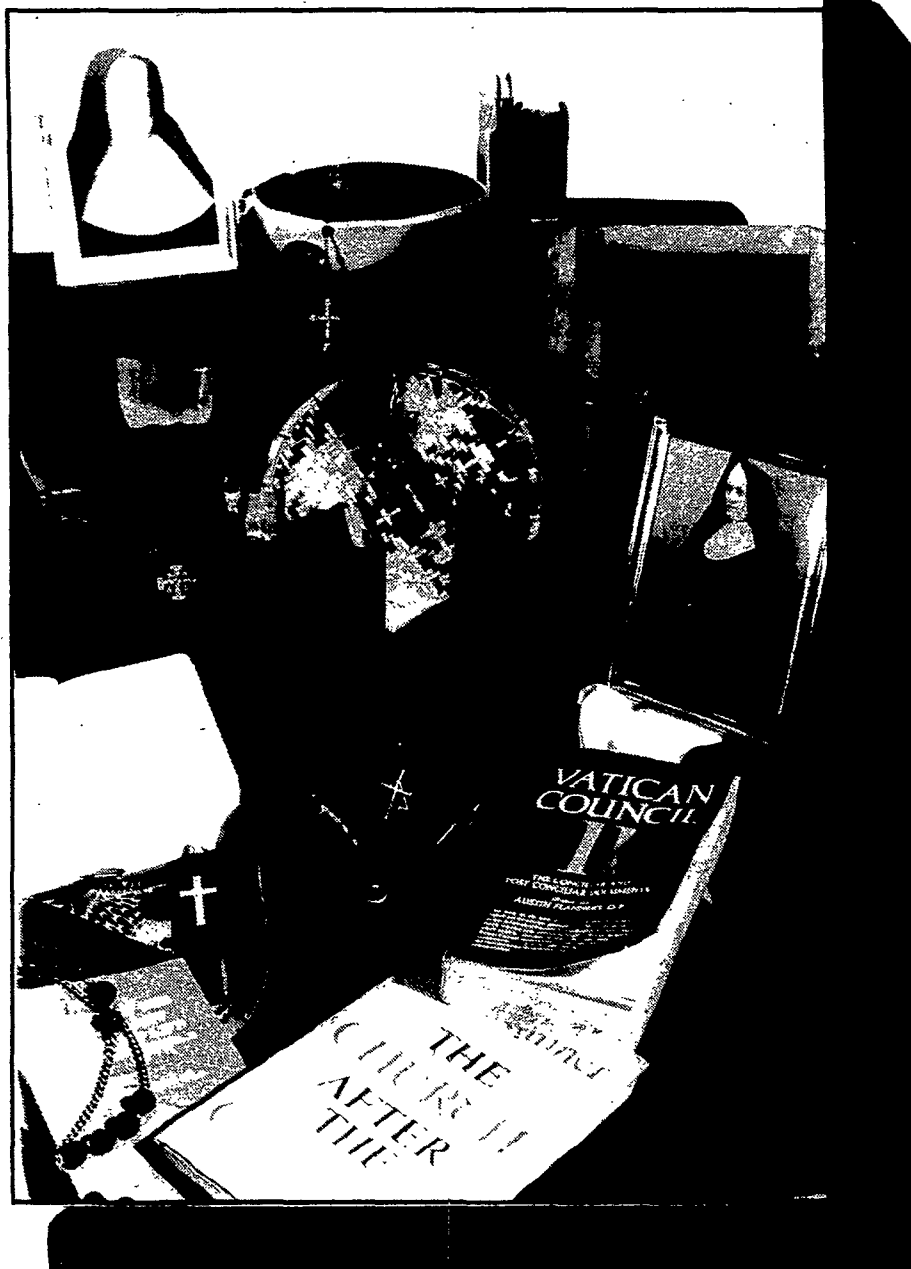
So, for example, in the Sisters of Mercy we have in recent years been generally reserved about saying directly, "Please join us — the People of God and our mission need you to be with us." We have relied instead on what we hoped and prayed would be the attractive — though often wordless — example of our lives and efforts, even as we were ourselves humbled by our own shortcomings.

I have come to the personal conviction, however, that this indirect method is not sufficient, and that for the sake of God's beloved people of the 21st century it must be supplemented. While the language of much overt "recruiting" to religious life goes against the self-effacement I regard as essential in those who consecrate themselves to following Jesus Christ, I also believe that the prophetic purpose of our lives as women religious — in all religious congregations — demands that we say aloud what we understand ourselves to be, what we intend, and why we treasure our lives and work for the sake of the church.

Before the Second Vatican Council's emphasized the Christian vocation of *all* baptized people and thus recognized the essential dignity of the vocation of lay Catholics, it was possible to appeal to religious consecration as a categorically "better" thing to do with one's life. During the centuries before the council, the theology of religious life



Congregations of women religious once enjoyed large numbers of new members receiving their vows in 1951.



This collection of memorabilia reflects the changes in religious life that have occurred since the Second Vatican Council.

had been elaborated, often at the expense of the single and married states of Christian life. So if a young woman "really wanted to follow Jesus Christ," she would enter a convent.

Thus, in the 1950s and early 1960s, large numbers of young women — many of them only 18 years old — entered congregations of women religious. Later some of them left the convent for one good reason or another, but still religious communities of women grew. In the mid-60s, for example, the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester comprised 460 women; today that number is 252. In many ways, size surely is the *least* significant fact about religious congregations of women, but in one crucial sense it is not insignificant: the relation of size to historical continuity.

Today some people are murky about why anyone in this day and age would choose to enter a religious congregation and take vows of obedience, celibacy and poverty unto death. Many even ask whether such vows have any meaning and value in today's church.

It is not possible here to say all that could and should be said about the enduring theology and purpose of religious life, but I am going to say a few things I feel the Christian community is now called to consider. I do not want one day to stand before God among the needy of history and there regret that — despite my propensity to speak my views — on one important subject I neglected to open my mouth on behalf of God's people.

The purpose of apostolic congregations of women religious is not a peripheral or optional matter in the ongoing historical life of the church. It may be true that all who try to be "sisters" constantly fail in one way or another to live up to the completeness of their calling. However, this observation should not obscure the fact that God has given his people a great gift of the Spirit in the presence and stable endurance — through generation after generation and century after century — of congregations of women seeking to devote themselves completely until death to certain ultimate values of God and to their particular tasks in the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ. As God's gift, these congregations are a blessing within the church that must be cared for and developed.

This is not to say that Christians who are not members of religious congregations do not or cannot devotedly and completely testify to the reign of

God or carry on the work of Jesus Christ. But it does mean that the church is not the enduring community of disciples. But it is that *within* the church — thus *within* the we continuously need the stable and endurance of *groups* of women and men publicized by vows to the following of Jesus enabled by God's grace to endure beyond their individual lifetimes.

I hope with all my heart that today I, by God's gift to carry on new forms of work entrusted to Catherine (1778-1841), the woman who founded of Mercy in 1831. And I trust that in the other women — weak like myself but with the same gift of God — will carry on forms of God's works of mercy are needed in that era. But between the Sisters of Mercy and all religious congregations need new members, women who understand what we are called to be a who will try to devote themselves to work until their deaths.

Religious congregations — as well as God gives them to do and the Word of God to proclaim — cannot continue in of God without new members. Religious congregations are not theories or buildings or doctrinal human people joined together by vocation, a common desire to be faithful vocation, and common gifts of God given despite their own weaknesses.

I can speak best of the purpose of the Sisters of Mercy, although I have profound respect for the purposes of the Carmelites, Basilians, St. Joseph, Trappists, Daughters of Charity, Sisters of Notre Dame, and other ancient and new orders of men serving in our diocese and consecrate gift to the particular life and work asked.

The Sisters of Mercy are not too old. We came together in 1828-1831 because we were called to comfort the sick and dying poor, to instruct poor children and adults in the faith, to protect homeless women and girls, and to say by our lives tenderly merciful. In Catherine, our founder of our order, we are blessed with an inexhaustible source of inspiration and courage. Her spirit is as alive