

# Community explored via Medaille program

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

With the Second Vatican Council, the definition of the word "vocation" was broadened to include more than a calling to life as a priest or as a member of a religious order. And since that time, men and women — both lay and religious — have sought ways to explore their own senses of vocation in light of this understanding and their Christian faith.

Marie Bellavia, for example, wished to undertake such an exploration. She did not feel called to be a woman religious, but did feel called to examining her own sense of vocation and faith. "I think if you're not interested in becoming a nun but are interested in having a more focused life in terms of the faith, it's hard to find a place where you can do that," she said.

Bellavia found such a place: Medaille House, a program created by the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1983 to allow lay women and women religious to live together in community.

The program includes two residences — the original house at 48 Peck St. and, since 1987, a second house at 115 Rosewood Terrace. A total of 12 lay women and eight women religious have lived in the houses at one point or another.

Some of those lay women have used their time at Medaille House to explore possible callings to become women religious, but thus far none has opted to enter religious life. Ann Marie Williams, for example, spent a year at Medaille house "to see what it was like living in a faith community. I also thought it was a way to see what religious life was like."

At the same time, Medaille House has also helped the women religious who live there examine their own callings, explained Sister Kathleen Weider, SSI, who developed the program and continues to direct it. "It helped us to articulate our choice of vocation and what that vocation means to us," she said.

Nevertheless, Sister Weider cautioned that the program was not designed to bring new members to the Sisters of St. Joseph.

"The program was never intended to be a recruitment technique," she explained. "It was meant from the beginning as an alternative for women who share the values which we hold."

Those values include a commitment to prayer, serving the poor, living simply and trying to live out one's Christian faith. For Kathleen McGarry, who has lived at the Rosewood residence for two

years, Medaille House "was a good way to have contact with people who were mulling over the same ideas, and who had (an) awareness of the way God is moving in our lives."

Williams found living with people who shared the same values the best part of the experience. "People don't always understand what it's like to help people," she explained. "Everyone here is concerned with helping people."

Both the Sisters of St. Joseph and Sisters of Mercy offer other programs for women seeking to share their sense of faith and of God in their lives. The Sisters of St. Joseph, for example, have the Agregéé program, and the Sisters of Mercy offer the Affiliate program. But these programs feature open-ended commitments, and neither presents the live-in community opportunity that Medaille House does.

Sister Weider developed the idea of Medaille House while serving as vocations director for the Sisters of St. Joseph. "I came in contact with women who were drawn to the ideas of serving others and of Christian community, but who didn't feel called to a permanent commitment to life as women religious," she explained.

The women who live at either of the Medaille Houses commit on a year-to-year basis to live in community for as many as three years. During that time, they continue to work in their jobs, but agree to set aside one evening each week as a community night, to live a simple lifestyle, to find time for common prayer, and to volunteer in some form of social ministry.

The result is an intense living experience that forces the women to look at their own ideas about vocation and the meaning of community.

McGarry, for example, came to Medaille House having already lived as part of the Cephias Attica community, a Rochester-based group dedicated to living and working with ex-offenders.

After McGarry left Cephias to live on her own for a while, she realized that she needed to be in community again. "I was looking for support in vocation discernment and community," she explained. She came across a brochure describing Medaille House, and thought the program would be a good way both to live in community and to look at that calling, so she applied for the program.

Although the women shared some common beliefs, living together was not always smooth. McGarry, for example, said she learned fairly quickly that although the women shared many of

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Members of new members. The above photograph shows Sisters of St. Joseph

in the work of Jesus Christ. Nor at the church is not the stable and continuity of disciples. But it does mean church — thus within the world — need the stable and enduring witness of women and men publicly consenting to the following of Jesus Christ and his grace to endure beyond the mortal individual members.

I my heart that today I am enabled carry on new forms of the witness trusted to Catherine McAuley the woman who founded the Sisters of St. Joseph. And I trust that in the year 2089 I will be weak like myself but enabled by the grace of God — will carry on whatever works of mercy are appropriate for our time. But between now and then, the witness of Mercy and all religious congregations — members, women who will try to live out what we are called to be and do, and devote themselves to this life and death.

In no sense would thoughtful women or men religious say today that we have "arrived" at what God asks of us. We know we have barely taken the first steps toward the Holiness and Mercy of God outstretched before us. We are — like the whole church — simply pilgrims seeking to respond to the God who already is in our midst.

And this is where being explicit about our purposes gets painful and where I dearly wish that others — who have continual opportunities to preach from pulpits — would say for us what I am now trying to say: Religious life is meant by God to be a clear, encouraging sign and a helpful beckoning promise in the center of the tension that is

among us today as if she lived now in one of our communities, worked in Mount Carmel Parish or offered rural ministry in Tioga County. Her spirit is yet present, even though on November 11, 1841, she died of tuberculosis on Dublin's Baggot Street.

Do we think we are fully faithful to the vocation and charism of Catherine McAuley? No. No one of us can or would say that, in the complete and true sense in which we yearn to do so. We realize that between the desire and actuality "falls the shadow," as T.S. Eliot would say. But between the hope and the reality, between the call and our response, we honestly try to be "Sisters of Mercy," and we beg daily for God's grace to make us so.

At the heart of our congregation — and, I am sure, at the hearts of all congregations of women and men — stirs a great love and gift of God, a profound recognition of God's mercy toward us, and a deep desire to extend God's merciful love to our world.

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Women who live at Medaille House's Rosewood Terrace residence gather one Sunday evening to talk about the weekend's events. From left to right are Ann-Marie Williams, Kathleen McGarry, Sister Mary Clooser, Sister Diana Dolce and Sister Mary Ann Mayer.

Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

# Insight