

Religious

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the community of all God's people. Some-how men and women religious and their congregations are intended by God to be a sign and a promise of what God is always doing for all God's beloved, bringing them slowly in Jesus Christ to the fullness of life and love which is the Resurrection.

This is a great mystery, and women and men religious are the first to see the fragility and clumsiness with which they are this sign of God's love and this human evidence of God's promise. Yet when they strive to be poor, celibate, obedient and to work on behalf of the values of the God of Jesus, they do so not for themselves but for the sake of their brothers and sisters in this world.

In and through my experience as a woman religious I have known something unalterable of the wonderful depth and breadth of Christ's love, not because my name or face has occasionally been in the newspapers or because I seem to have some human talents, but because every day of my life as a Sister of Mercy has been filled with the beckoning presence of God and because Jesus Christ has always been before me in a most inexhaustibly tender and demanding way. I have known joy, sorrow, intimacy, loneliness, sin, forgiveness, the desire to give, the inability to give enough, the power of God's Word, the weakness of my own response. And in and through all of these experiences, I know that in some sense I have known God — not completely, but truly.

What I am trying to say is that a life consecrated to the merciful work of God can be a profoundly happy and meaningful life — a life in which happiness and meaning are defined in terms of the life and purpose, the happiness and meaning of Jesus Christ himself.

Therefore — and perhaps really because of the sheer humanness of our testimony — I unabashedly beg other women to seriously consider joining us. On behalf of all religious orders, I invite men and women — young, "middle" and older — to let themselves really think about the possibility of this sort of consecration of their lives for the sake of God's pilgrim people now and in the future. And I ask the people of the church to call forth and encourage this kind of discernment in one another.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council dared to say of religious life what perhaps no religious congregation of women or men would dare to think of itself:

The religious state reveals in a unique way that the Kingdom of God and its overmastering necessities are superior to all earthly considerations ... it shows wonderfully at work within the Church the surpassing greatness of the force of Christ and the boundless power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, although the religious state constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels (among them, poverty, chastity, obedience, mercifulness, humility, and the following of Jesus unto death) does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, nevertheless it belongs inseparably to her life and holiness.

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The greatest blessing of the last 30 years of religious life is that —through many scriptural, theological, social, historical and ecclesial means —men and women religious have been brought face to face with the fuller reality of the person, life, purpose and example of Jesus Christ. In many ways, we are still trying to comprehend more fully the depth and urgency of that most precious of all encounters, and what it means for our personal lives and for the ongoing life and work of our congregations.

We and the whole church now need to renew our own confidence in the work God has begun in us. We need confidently to believe that no "sign of the times" indicates that God does not desire the stable endurance — through future generations — of groups of men and women who treasure religious life, and who freely commit themselves through perpetual vows to follow Jesus Christ with all the ardor of their being, and to carry on in ever old and new ways the redeeming works of God's mercy.

And we need simply and earnestly to beg others to join us in this effort as both vowed and associate members, not for our own sakes but for the sake of God's poor and needy people of today and of future ages. We need to do this also for the sake of God, who has generously risked the way of incarnation and who relies on human beings — poor as we are — to be the visible, audible, tangible means and signs of God's love and help for needy people throughout the ages.

Medaille

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the same ideas, they sometimes understood those ideas in different ways. In particular, she noted, "community" can mean different things to different people.

"It really took me by surprise at first," McGarry said. "I didn't realize how varied the ideas of community could be. I'm glad I learned that. I don't assume (now) that because people are using the same words they're talking about exactly the same thing."

Sister Diana Dolce, SSJ, who has lived at the Rosewood house since 1987, suggested that one factor that made discussions of such concepts as community so intense at Medaille House was the length of the commitment. Whereas women religious have their entire lives to work out what community means to them, she explained, "I think the difference is with lay women, they're taking it very seriously because they know it's not a life commitment."

This summer marks an important time of transition for the Medaille House program. All three of the lay women who have lived at the Rosewood house are leaving, to be replaced by two new lay women. In addition, no lay women lived at the Peck Street house last year, and none will be moving in this year as part of the Medaille House community. Instead, the house will be used to house associates — women in the process of becoming Sisters of St. Joseph.

Sister Weider acknowledged that the program has experienced a drop-off in the number of women applying. This may be caused, in part, by the number of volunteer-type programs that have become available to women since Medaille House opened, she suggested. In addition, the number of informal communities had increased in the Rochester area, giving women additional opportunities to share their values and faith with others.

"We see it as a positive sign that there are more opportunities for people who want to be involved in some community experience," Sister Weider said.

Meanwhile, the three lay women who are moving out of Medaille House this summer express sadness at leaving the community, but are looking forward to moving on.

Bellavia, for example, said, "The time was right for me to move on. I needed to take another step. We had reached a certain level together, and for the journey that I'm on I needed to live alone for a while."

Although McGarry is moving out of the community, she said she plans to remain in contact with it. In addition, her two years as part of the community has made her interested in the Sisters of St. Joseph, and she hopes to join the *Agrégeé* program.

She plans to use her time alone to look at her possible calling to be a woman religious. "I feel like I've gotten a lot of the stability and support that I was looking for when I came here. I've decided for right now to live on my own to look at what my life will be like with the values that I have if I'm not going to be living in community with women religious," she said.

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