

# CATHOLIC COURIER

Answering the Call  
A special vocations section  
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## New patterns emerge in fabric of religious life

*We face the empty loom.  
It looms large before us  
revealing a threadbare moment,  
what has come apart at the seams.*

From *Reweaving Religious Life*  
— *Beyond the Liberal Model*,  
by Mary Jo Leddy, 1990.

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

**A**s Mary Jo Leddy's book asserts, communities of men and women dedicated to religious life now are reaching the end of an unraveling that started with Vatican II. With that unraveling came the need to weave a new garment in which to clothe the religious lifestyle — a lifestyle that has invigorated and challenged the church throughout most of its existence.

Sister Dolores M. Banick, IHM, diocesan vicar for religious, noted that constant renewal has taken place in religious communities since Vatican II, but said "the vision is not clear yet" as to how men and women religious should serve the church in the future.

"What I think is happening to religious life now is we're creating a new path by walking it," Sister Banick observed.

In the Rochester diocese and throughout the country, religious communities — both old and new — are exploring new ministries, taking on growing numbers of lay associates and colleagues, and generally re-examining what religious life "means" in the modern era.

**L**ike other components of the church after Vatican II, religious congregations underwent tumultuous renewal in the 1960s and '70s. Communities discarded their traditional models of life in favor of pluralistic patterns. These new models emphasized the orders' role in developing the vocations of individuals, rather than the duty of individuals to find roles in the existing ministries of the various orders.

Directed by the Second Vatican Council to re-examine their founders' intentions in establishing the communities, order after order rewrote its constitution and diversified its ministries.

But by the end of the 1980s, most religious communities had finished rewriting their con-

stitutions, bringing to a close much of the legalistic change that had marked the renewal process, according to Sister Mary John Van Atta, SSJ, a group-process consultant who works with religious communities throughout the country.

**"H**abit changes, changes in work, that type of thing has pretty much happened," Sister Van Atta said, referring to the external changes in clothing and employment of men and women religious, which had intrigued the general public in the immediate post-Vatican II era.

Today, communities of vowed men and women religious continue to shrink, as fewer young people than in the past seem interested in making a permanent commitment to religious life. This, Sister Van Atta and others observed, those who have chosen such a lifestyle are faced with the question: What constitutes the reason for the continuation of religious life?

Such a search for meaning on the part of modern religious ties them to the spiritual journeys of their forerunners in the church. Observers of religious life note that the predecessors of today's religious often adapted themselves to the needs of each era of Christianity in order to create the meaning of their vocation.

**M**any of the orders, congregations and religious groups well-known to the U.S. public today were formed in the last few centuries with the express purpose of serving the church's needs, whether such needs occurred in the areas of education, charitable works or evangelization.

This ethos directed the ministries of U.S. religious when the Catholic Church was being established here in great force during the 1800s. At that time, the church needed sisters, brothers and religious priests to teach impoverished immigrant children in parochial schools, noted Sister Kathleen Milliken, assistant to the major superior of the Sisters of Mercy in Rochester.

"In this country, the great need was for education," she said. "That's why we set up this tremendous Catholic school system."

By the time of Vatican II, many religious congregations had become closely identified in the public mind with a particular ministry in such areas as education, health care or mission-

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