

## New patterns

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ary work. And, for the most part, active religious communities still retained a quasi-monastic component in their life, structuring prayer and meal times according to the regular rhythms that governed contemplative monasteries.

Much of this pattern changed when the Second Vatican Council called religious communities to re-examine the charism, or vision, upon which they were founded and to renew their communities in view of that vision. Many communities that had become identified with education or health care, for example, originally were founded to perform works of mercy. After Vatican II they returned to their roots by broadening their ministerial scope from assigning members to Catholic schools or hospitals, to sending them out to work in secular jobs, homeless shelters, social-action agencies and other community-minded projects.

Influenced by modern psychological thought, this renewal process also manifested itself in the orders' shift in emphasis from forming members to fit communities in favor of forming communities to fit their members, remarked Father Howard Gray, SJ, adjunct professor of theology at the Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass.

As communities went back to their roots, they also explored the psychological "roots" of their members. Superiors of orders consulted extensively with members on an individual basis so that each member was placed in a ministry that fulfilled his or her personal needs as well as those of the order, said Father Gray, who has spoken and written somewhat about the religious life.

While this shift allowed men and women religious to freely express their individual talents instead of suppressing them for the common benefit of the order, the new emphasis on individuality also may have detracted from the common life of

religious communities, Father Gray said.

As Leddy wrote in *Reweaving Religious Life*, "For many congregations in the 1970s, the diversity of lifestyles and ministries was seen as an important step beyond the uniformity of the more traditional model. Pluralism was thought to be the means for responding to new and urgent calls in the modern world." Yet, she continued, this pluralism also slowly undermined the unity of religious communities formerly held together by a common schedule and vision, causing some members to leave because they no longer had any reason to stay.

Other commentators have noted that the general turbulence of the post-Vatican II era led many religious to leave their communities. That turbulence manifested itself in a questioning of the U.S. government, the country's economic structures, and the traditions and beliefs that held the church together and united the nation.

Today, most observers within the Diocese of Rochester agree that the days of exodus from religious life are over. The tapestry of religious life having been unraveled, communities and their members now are free to pick up its strands and weave a new response to such modern challenges as homelessness, AIDS, drug addiction and war, as well as the spiritual hunger that gnaws in the bellies of many lay people.

Some of those lay people yearning for spiritual guidance are turning to religious communities for sustenance on their journey, observed Father Martin Boler, prior of Mount Saviour Monastery in Pine City near Elmira. The prior noted that his community has found increasing numbers of lay people attending its retreats and services than in years past.

"We have a lot more laity on retreat than priests and religious," he noted. "There's more interest in Bible groups and Scripture."

This "awakening" of the Catholic laity can also be seen in the growing numbers of people formally committing themselves to live some semblance of religious lifestyle outside the boundaries that traditionally

have defined a vowed life in the sisterhood, brotherhood and priesthood.

For example, the Rochester Sisters of Mercy boast 57 lay women and men associates in the diocese, according to Patricia Albrecht, director of associate membership, which was established in 1979. Mercy lay associates do not take vows, but are "covenanted" to the Mercy community, Albrecht said, explaining that after a year of discernment and preparation, each associate creates and recites his or her own series of promises to the community.

Albrecht noted that lay associates sit on committees of the Mercy congregation, participate in the community's services, and practice the order's precept of bringing mercy to where the members are, including a daily job.

Sister Milliken commented that lay associations may be the wave of the future for religious communities. "I see them as extending mercy in ways that (the sisters) can't," she said. "I don't know what the Lord is telling us — maybe this is the direction for religious life in the future."

Another possible pattern emerging in the tapestry of religious life finds itself at the Holy Trinity Community in Hornell, where a married couple and a widow run a monastery run according to the rule of St. Benedict.

Established in 1988 by three former residents of Long Island, the monastery has attracted the interest of dozens of lay people, including single, divorced and widowed Catholics, said Pat Brewster, one of the monastery's members.

"We have many couples in phone and visiting contact," Brewster said, attributing their interest to the fact that "the Benedictine vows are very similar to the marriage vows." She noted, for example, that Benedictines take vows of stability and must commit their lives to a particular community. Such a vow resembles married partners' stated desire to stay together forever, she said.

"In some ways, being married is a Benedictine way of life," she joked.

While Catholic lay people who aren't religious are being drawn to religious life, religious men and women are and increasingly will be drawn to move beyond traditional structures. Many religious today live and work in smaller community groups than in the days of old when a 100 or more

might fill an order's house, sharing meal and prayer times before going off to work in an institution owned by the order.

"I think a lot of them are looking for smaller communities where there is really an accountability to each other," observed Father Joseph A. Trovato, regional representative of Eastern United States to the Basilian order.

Sister Milliken echoed Father Trovato's comments, noting that even in the order's motherhouse, sisters live in separate communities grouped by floors, in which they share prayer and meal times with four to five sisters, or even as many as 10 or 20.

Doubtless the smallest religious community in the diocese consists of a former Sister of St. Joseph and an ex-Mercy sister who have joined the Sisters for Christian Community. The SFCC is a nationwide, 600-member non-canonical order which owns no property or other financial assets and unites its members only by means of newsletters as well as regional and international gatherings. Members of SFCC live on their own or in small units, supporting themselves through jobs in the secular world.


"Each sister is responsible for herself, financially, spiritually and socially," commented Sister Marilyn Reeves, principal of St. John the Evangelist School in Greece.

Her colleague, Sister Judith Hamm, a physician's assistant at Rochester's Park Ridge Medical Center, noted that the order attracted her because she no longer wanted to deal with the many meetings and other demands that came with membership in a more traditional order.

Sister Hamm said that before she decided to leave the Mercy order, she found herself repeatedly asking, "Why were we spending too much time on meetings, preparation and consultation when you could spend all that time on service?"

Despite the newness of some communities and the fresh face being put on by older orders, the religious of today still share one basic desire with their predecessors, Father Trovato said.

"The essentials of the religious life remain the same," he said. "Men and women who want to dedicate themselves to the church very directly, and who want to dedicate themselves to the evangelical counsel."

  
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