

## A CALL TO SERVE

SPECIAL MISSIONS/VOCATIONS SUPPLEMENT TO THE CATHOLIC COURIER

# Elmira native, 24, devotes life to labor, prayer

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ROCKFORD, ILL. — Sister Marie Christine, PCC, remembers receiving the call for her special mission vividly.

"It happened on Holy Thursday of my sophomore year in high school," said Sister Marie Christine. "I was just shocked; I had never thought of it before. I started going to Mass more."

Prior to 1984, Sister Marie Christine displayed herself as "like most kids. I played a lot of sports; I was a skier and a swimmer and would go on hikes with my family."

No longer, though, would the former Mary Elizabeth Schwenkler's life resemble that of a normal teenager. The Elmira native and former parishioner at Our Lady of Lourdes Church, 304 Demarest Parkway, contacted approximately 30 communities of women religious before eventually deciding to become a Poor Clare Contemplative nun.

Sister Marie Christine's decision was met with some surprise, but she recalled that "my family was really supportive. My friends didn't understand it, but they said that if this was what I wanted to do, they were going to support me, too," she said.

Shortly after her 1986 graduation from Elmira Notre Dame High School, she moved 800 miles away to Rockford, Ill. She has resided there ever since.

And, just this past summer, the 24-year-old sister further solidified her commitment to the Poor Clares by pronouncing her solemn vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and enclosure.



Courtesy of the Schwenkler Family  
Sister Marie Christine, PCC, the former Mary Elizabeth Schwenkler, pronounced her solemn vows as a Poor Clare Contemplative nun on Aug. 2.

The ceremony took place on Aug. 2, the sixth anniversary of her arrival at the monastery.

According to Sister Marie Christine, the Poor Clare community is among the strictest in existence. Sisters live a life of nearly constant labor and prayer. Poor Clares survive on the very basics: they go barefoot, never eat meat, sleep on straw mattresses, and grow their own vegetables for food.

In addition, the 30-member com-

munity — which ranges in age from 22 to 102 — always rises shortly after midnight for more than an hour of prayer and meditation.

Poor Clares have almost no contact with the outside world. Sister Marie Christine noted that she is allowed to write to her parents, Edward and Janet Schwenkler, four times per year.

Visitors are not allowed in the monastery's chapel, and the Poor Clares are only allowed to leave Cor-

pus Christi for such necessary situations as dentist and doctor appointments. You won't find a television or radio at the monastery, and the sisters are not allowed to use the telephone except under special circumstances.

In fact, her interview with the *Catholic Courier* marked the first time in six years that Sister Marie Christine had made or received a phone call.

Despite the Poor Clares' secluded lifestyle, Sister Marie Christine emphasizes that she still feels connected spiritually to the outside world — especially through the multitude of prayer requests received by the sisters.

"Some people think we're running away from the world. But we're just trying to stand back and see what's going on," said Sister Marie Christine. "It's like going up to a high mountain and looking back down at all the material things you can get caught up in."

Although the Poor Clares' lifestyles wouldn't initially appear to be very stimulating or exciting, Sister Marie Christine said her experience has indicated the opposite.

"Each day there's something to learn," she said. "You keep growing in your comprehension and love for God; it's incomprehensible."

Now that Sister Marie Christine has professed her final vows, she's more certain than ever that she's chosen her proper mission in life.

"I'm so happy," she exulted. "You could offer me a million dollars to leave, and I'd never do it. I'm so overwhelmed that God called me when He could have called so many others."

"If you lived here, nothing else would make sense," she added.

## Missionary priest finds different cultures make work more interesting

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When I asked the Philippine Lay Missioners about spirituality among our people, they gave examples of the African's appreciation of the paschal mystery — suffering, death, and resurrection through the strength of Jesus Christ.

The African poor are very resilient. The people of Buru parish's Carton City — so called because the homes are made of cardboard and cast off metal sheets — stayed with their belongings through a week of cold nights after the police pushed down their dwellings. Then they patiently rebuilt their homes when officials stopped harassing them. Right now in Athi River, the poor are being shifted from place to place to make room for roads and factories.

As in many cultures, women suffer the most and yet give the greatest example of strength. Father Richard Quinn, MM, and I have just finished a video presentation on the Catholic liturgical calendar. The best sequence we could find about Christ's passion is a play presented by an all-girls' school in Kenya. The students perform all the parts, including that of Christ. The symbolism is both moving and appropriate.

The tradition of sharing is meeting new challenges as society in Kenya rapidly undergoes transition from rural to urban. I notice that corn and beans planted by one person will not be taken by others. If a bicycle is left untended, however, that is a different matter.

New traditions of justice are being developed. The Catholic Bishops of the Kenya publicly and courageously criticize trends in the government toward greed and corruption.

On an intermediate level, however, Catholics seem no different from the rest of the citizens — eager to overcharge and ask for bribes. And I'm afraid that the reckless driving that causes two thousand deaths each year in Kenya is done by Catholics as well



Ethiopian refugees, parishioners and Philippine Lay Missioners prepare a meeting place in Athi River, Kenya in May, 1992.

as others.

What about spirituality? Catholicism is growing in Africa at a remarkable pace, perhaps faster than anywhere else in the world. Seminaries and novitiates are filled. I continue to be deeply impressed.

But I now find that it would be unfair to make any judgment about the quality of the spirituality of the people compared with the Catholics of the Rochester diocese.

Many factors are conducive to "old time religion" in Africa that are realities today, but are rapidly changing.

Kenya has one of the highest birth rates in the world, which means more Catholics now, but raises questions about adequate Catholic education in the future. Kenyans are hungry for education and the good reputation and subsidized fees of the seminaries attract candidates who do not intend to go on to priesthood or religious life.

Many homes are without TV, and even with TV, the

choice of programs is very limited. Therefore, parishioners young and old are willing to come to the church hall for talks and activities or to meet as Small Christian Communities.

Sharing time and provisions with visitors and older members of the extended family continues, but it is becoming strained as people live longer and food and basics soar in price.

At this point in my limited African ministry I would say that we share with America, in a profound way, the same spirituality, made real through our very different cultures.

Catholics of the Northern Hemisphere and Southern Hemisphere have much to learn from each other as we all seriously ponder the life, the words, and the spirit of the one Jesus Christ.

A Rochester native, Father Metzger has been serving in Africa since January, 1989, as part of the Maryknoll Associate Priest Program.