

# Who will replace today's religious?

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

The murders in Liberia of five American sisters, members of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, innocent victims of a three-year-old civil war, were lost in the pre-election media blitz.

Their photographs flashed momentarily across our television screens, competing for precious airtime with President Bush, President-elect Clinton, and H. Ross Perot, and they graced the inside pages of our nation's newspapers, safely distanced from the reports and analyses of the closing presidential campaign.

With ages ranging from mid-50s to the late-60s, their faces and general appearance had a remarkably familiar look. Thousands of sisters are just like them.

These five nuns grew up in the small towns of Illinois: Sister Shirley Kolmer, 61, and her cousin, Sister Mary Joel Kolmer, 58, both of Waterloo; Sister Kathleen McGuire, 54, of Ridgway; Sister Agnes Mueller, 62, of Bartleso; and Sister Barbara Ann Muttra, 69, of Springfield.

Their order has been sending missionaries to Liberia since 1971 — not to pound on doors and jam Bi-



bles and other religious materials into unsuspecting hands, but to teach and to heal.

All of the slain sisters had been in Liberia for at least five years. Sister Barbara Ann Muttra had been there for two decades, after having worked as a volunteer in refugee camps in Saigon.

Two years ago, as the civil war in Liberia worsened, the sisters returned reluctantly to Illinois, but in August of 1991 they went back, these Adorers of the Blood of Christ, to shed their own blood for Christ.

Religious women like them have been the bulwark of the church throughout most of this century — particularly during the post-Vatican II years when so many sisters exercised a special kind of pastoral leadership.

Naive complaints about their not wearing veils or their not observing traditional decorum did not deter these dedicated religious women from their ministerial commitments in parishes, schools, hospitals, diocesan offices, and wherever else people were in need.

Elsewhere in the same issue of *The New York Times* in which a story on the murders appears, a photograph of six French sisters in traditional religious garb watching the New York Marathon was shown. The caption notes that the veiled sisters "cheered wildly each time a runner wearing the colors of France went by."

The image is reminiscent of those 1950s photographs of sisters on ferris wheels at amusement parks or attending a baseball game on "nuns' day" at the stadium.

Two images of religious women: one unthreatening, demurring, almost child-like; the other, strong, opinionated, mature.

Some Catholics believe that reli-

gious life began deteriorating with the shift from the first to the second image, and that the change came about through some primordial error in judgment — a mistake that can still be corrected.

They seem to understand little or nothing of the social and cultural realities spoken of in the council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World."

The five sisters martyred in Liberia lived and served in the modern world, motivated — to be sure — by the Gospel's timeless values.

When these sisters had their chance, they freely returned to a war-ravaged country to minister once again to the people they had left behind.

But religious women like these are now passing from the scene. Who will replace them?

The recent three-year study on the future of religious orders in the United States, to which I referred in two columns last month, challenges the comforting view that the trend can be reversed by traditional spiritual means alone.

According to the study, significant institutional changes are also required. For some, however, the cost of change is too high. The cost of resistance will be higher.

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