

Vocations

Women religious wish to meet needs of the '90s

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — As far as Sister Ann Miller, RSM, is concerned, there's no better time than today to be a woman religious.

"For so long we've been saying 'We're getting older, fewer and poorer,'" observed the president of the order's regional community. "I think it's no longer helpful to dwell on that."

Both the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of St. Joseph boast less than a handful of women who have stated their intention to become a vowed religious. Yet, rather than bemoan declining vocations, neither order seems terribly concerned that its future bespeaks shrinking numbers of women.

Indeed, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas are gearing up to enter into new areas of ministry, Sister Miller said.

"What's happening now is that we're much more conscious of our need to work with the poor," she said.

Sister Miller's comments were echoed by Sister Janice Morgan, SSJ, assistant superior general of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester. Along with Sister Miller, she attended a national assembly of more than 900 women religious from 380 congregations who gathered for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious Aug. 26-30 in Chicago.

Like Sister Miller, Sister Morgan recalled one of the LCWR speakers, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Amata Miller, telling her colleagues that "poverty is widening and deepening, and the plight of the poor is worsening."

Sister Morgan added that women religious can no longer fret about their own declining numbers, but must concentrate on their mission to the wider world, seeking practical ways to use their limited numbers to help end spiritual and physical poverty.

"Even though we may get smaller, they won't," she said of the poor.

Both women religious pointed to areas where their congregations are expanding their efforts to stem poverty's ill effects — efforts which often include a healthy dose of lay Catholic input.

The Mercy sisters, for example, recently celebrated completion of renovations at the new site of the House of Mercy, a neighborhood outreach center the order operates at 725 Hudson Ave., Sister Miller said. In addition to two Mercy sisters, several volunteers help keep the center going.

In order to better serve low-income people, the order this year moved the center from its original location in a smaller building on Central Park to the larger Hudson Avenue structure, the center's directors said.

Meanwhile, the Sisters of St. Joseph are developing their own neighborhood outreach efforts in the city's South Wedge, Sister Morgan remarked.

In collaboration with the Community Nursing Center of the University of Rochester, the sisters are providing the poor with health, counseling, legal and educational services through the St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center on South Avenue.

Sisters Miller and Morgan outlined several other new and continuing ministerial efforts in other areas that their colleagues have pioneered despite their declining numbers.

Sister Morgan explained, for example, that several St. Joseph sisters have volunteered to provide health care and spiritual counseling for the sick and the elderly in East Rochester.

And of the 232 Mercy sisters who belong to the regional community, for example, 39 percent now work in parish or pastoral ministry, Sister Miller noted. That's far more than work in one of



the Mercy sisters' most traditional ministries — teaching — which employs 26 percent of the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester, according to figures provided by the order.

Indeed, women religious from all orders have been replaced to a great extent by lay teachers — a development Sister Miller does not lament.

"Wherever lay people can do the job as well or better than us, we can move on," she remarked.

That doesn't mean that her order plans to abandon education by any means, Sister Miller said, but only those who choose it as a path may find themselves working as pioneers in new instructional settings, as well as in such traditional Catholic schools as the order's Our Lady of Mercy High School in Brighton.

For example, Sister Miller explained that her order in August established a mobile school for children of migrant workers in Ohio. According to information from the Mercy sisters, the school was created to help keep migrant children in school long past the seventh grade — the grade in which the majority of them drop out of formal schooling for good.

Along with her five-member staff, Sister Gaye Moorehead, RSM, the school's coordinator and a Sister of Mercy of Rochester, will follow 30 migrant fami-

lies from Ohio to Florida and back each year in an effort to keep the children in regular studies.

Along with education, also a traditional field in which St. Joseph sisters have worked, other enterprises are calling the order's members, according to Sister Barbara Lum, SSJ, the order's vocation director.

Traditionally, for example, sisters of many orders worked in institutions operated by their order, like hospitals, she said.

But today's women religious, like herself, can often be found working in secular environments, Sister Lum said, noting that she is a nurse practitioner in women's health care at Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital. Such experience makes women religious more knowledgeable about the world in which they operate than ever before, she and other women religious noted.

Indeed, although both orders no longer

pull the scores of novices they did 20 to 30 years ago, the sisters coming in — and the ones who have stayed — represent the most diverse group of women religious the orders have probably ever seen, observers said.

In past decades, for example, Sister Miller recalled that she and many of her colleagues lived together in convents on parish grounds, usually located next to

the school in which most of them taught. The sisters, often living in groups of 20 or more, shared a common routine, rising together, working together, eating together and praying together, she remembered.

Now, Sister Miller pointed out, many Mercy sisters live in smaller groups located in a wide variety of locations related to their divergent ministries. Even those who do live together often find it challenging to schedule communal moments because their different job schedules often conflict.

"It's not as easy as it used to be, but it's more interesting," she said.

Despite the difficulties encountered in maintaining togetherness, she and other women religious in the Sisters of St. Joseph still find value in being connected to a wider spiritual community — despite often lacking a common place of employment. All observers agreed that in 1994, belonging to an order is still a tremendous asset for its members.

Women religious find a strength in belonging to an order that operating alone simply cannot provide, according to Sister Deanna Gears, SSJ, religious education coordinator at St. Paul's Parish in Webster.

For example, she said, sticking to religious vows is easier when a sister knows she is supported and encouraged by others attempting to keep the same promises to Christ.

"For me there's something about the way I can prayerfully reflect with others," she said. "I'm nourished and fed by people."

Belonging to a religious community also allows individual sisters to encourage each other and their orders as a whole to take risks that lay members of the church may not be able to take, commented Sister Marilyn Pray, SSJ, the Sisters of St. Joseph's novitiate program coordinator. She noted, for example, that the order has publicly supported several economic boycotts designed to foster a better ecological and economical world environment.

Indeed, Catholic News Service reported that the LCWR assembly also found spiritual strength in numbers last August, passing a statement that presses the U.S. government to sign three U.N. documents that further human rights around the world — the U.N. Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The women religious, many of whom sponsor major hospitals and health care systems across the country, also overwhelmingly approved a resolution calling for universal health coverage "for all those resident in the United States."

"This resolution passed virtually by acclamation," said Sister Margaret Cafferty, LCWR executive director and a member of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, CNS reported.

"Our members want to be on record — and want our congressional delegations to know our concern — for comprehensive, truly universal health care coverage," she said. "We deliberately chose the word 'resident' rather than simply 'citizen' to express the breadth of that concern."

And that's where women religious should be, Sister Gears asserted, taking stands on behalf of the overlooked people they serve, like the illegal aliens implied by the word "resident" in Sister Cafferty's comments.

"We have to begin to ask ourselves questions," she said. "We have to do politically unpopular things."

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