

FEATURE

'Retiree' pursues own spiritual quest

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — As the last co-founder of Mercy Prayer Center stepped down from that ministry this summer, she knew what she wanted to do.

"I am looking forward to more time for my own prayer life," acknowledged Sister Mary Maureen Flood.

It might seem that 18 years of focusing on prayer — after 43 years in education — would have done much to satisfy that desire. However, the prayer center has proved a busy place, sometimes offering little time to concentrate on her own spiritual needs.

"Hospitality is a key for this place," Sister Flood explained.

Continuing that tradition of hospitality, she took a break last week from sorting through her accumulation of papers to take a comfortable living room seat at the center, 65 Highland Ave., and set aside time to talk. By the weekend she would retire to the Sisters of Mercy motherhouse.

"When you live at a prayer center, it's kind of a 24-hour day," she continued. "People call any hour of the day or night, and we have guests all the time."

No matter if you're engrossed in reading Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckart, or the contemporary contemplative, Thich Nhat Hanh, author of *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, when someone calls, you answer, she said.

But hopefully her work has helped to integrate many a head and heart, using a holistic approach to spirituality that takes psychology into account, and soon, the physical — the Mercy Prayer Center will have a massage therapist in house.

From the beginning, she said, the center's focus has been on responding to men and women longing to grow in their relationship with God.



Photo provided by Mercy Prayer Center
Sister Mary Maureen Flood, RSM, (above right) greets well-wishers at a retirement party at the Mercy Prayer Center June 30.

"It's been our vision," Sister Flood said.

Of the other prayer center founders, Sisters Virginia Wilson and Mary Mercy are living at the motherhouse, and Sister Margaret Mary Mattle works with the poor in the Southern Tier. Before they joined efforts, Sister Flood spent 30 years teaching French, Latin and religion at Our Lady of Mercy High School; three years revising curriculum at Notre Dame High School in Elmira to correspond to Second Vatican Council teachings; and 10 years as assistant principal at Cardinal Mooney High School.

"Earlier in religious life you were sent," she noted. Although she's always been happy where she has ministered, she said, working at the prayer center was an answer to a call.

"We developed a place men and women, especially laypeople, could come and feel free to find a quiet place, and you

know how important that is," Sister Flood said. "God is the center of our lives and the center of this place."

The center's programs help people learn the language of the spirit, she added.

Although she retired from the prayer center June 30, Sister Flood plans to continue serving as a spiritual guide to about 40 individuals. She will also return upon request to the center. This fall, for example, she'll be back by popular demand to offer a morning of reflection on angels.

Such reflection provides the opportunity to do what the prayer center does best, she said.

"We try to take a person where he or she is and bring them along with the development of theology of where the church is today," she said.

Sister Flood's specialty since the 1980s, however, has been leading the 19th Annotation Retreat, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. These 30-week retreats, based on a system of meditations dating to the 1500s, have oriented numerous men and women to a disciplined prayer life and the ability to discern the Spirit in their lives.

St. Ignatius, she said, saw God in "all things."

"He found God in persons, he found God in nature, he found God in the simplest things of life," she said. "I see the connection in all of that."

Like St. Ignatius and many of her other preferred theologians, she sees God in nature, as well as in the people who share their lives with her.

At one favorite site, Letchworth State Park, she recalled one "experience of God" at a cavern with a tiny stream emerging from the middle of the rocks.

"All of a sudden there was a rainbow," she remembered. "The rainbow was so embracing. You felt called really into it. It seemed to circle around. You just wanted to say, 'Wow.'"

Instead, she said, people watched in awe, in quiet. "But I was wowing inside," she laughed.

Such experiences are a matter of being open to God's presence as each day unfolds, said Sister Flood. But she isn't one to set goals and expectations.

Aug. 7, her 81st birthday, was to be no different. Asked about her plans for that day, she said, "I'll be surprised."

Seniors

MONTHLY FEATURE



OASIS seeks nominees for '96 role model award

The OASIS Advisory Council is seeking nominees for an award to honor a Rochester-area senior who is a positive role model for other seniors.

Criteria for a Role Model Award contestant are that the person be 55 years old or older, a resident of the Rochester metropolitan area, and is involved in activities that have had a positive impact on the lives of individuals or the community at large. The person's contributions may have been made through a group or organization, or through the individual acting alone.

Nomination forms may be obtained by calling OASIS at 716/262-4970. The deadline for nominations is Aug. 20. The award will be presented in October at the annual OASIS anniversary celebration at Midtown Plaza.

Office for Aging plans senior games Aug. 15-30

The Monroe County Office for the Aging has scheduled the 12th annual Monroe County Senior Games for Aug. 15-30.

The games will include athletic competitions in such areas as track, softball, swimming, basketball, horseshoes, golf and racquetball. This year's games will also include euchre and bridge.

The games are open to individuals 50 and older. A \$5 fee will allow athletes to compete in as many events as they wish.

The registration deadline is Aug. 9. For more information, call 716/274-7825.

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