

# Vocations

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Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Sister Connie Derby, RSM

Sister Ann Miller, RSM, president of the Regional Community of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, embraces Sister Connie Derby, RSM, during her solemn blessing at the Mercy chapel on Oct. 12.

## Women take orders' vows

A casual observer of the religious life might think it rather restricting to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Yet, "freedom" is the word most often used by two diocesan women when describing the religious vows they recently chose to take.

"They free you to share yourself with others, your time, your gifts, your life in community," said Sister Connie Derby, RSM, 39. She professed her final vows as a Sister of Mercy Oct. 12, in the chapel at the order's motherhouse in Brighton.

Her comments were echoed by Sister Elizabeth Leonard, SSJ, 48, who made her first, or temporary, vows as a Sister of St. Joseph on Sept. 7 in the chapel at the order's motherhouse in Rochester.

"I think the vows free me to be a part of many people's lives," Sister Leonard said. "I don't look at the vows as giving up."

Both women noted that they see religious life as an opportunity to realize their true selves.

"It's the best way for me to become who I really am," said Sister Derby who works as the bookkeeper for the Diocesan Missions Office.

"Christ has become the center of my life," said Sister Leonard, who was a Monroe County social worker for 28 years and is currently studying nursing at the State University of New York College at Brockport. "I just couldn't see living any other way at this point in my life."

Both women noted they took a long and winding road before arriving at their current station in life.

Sister Derby pointed out that she grew up in Geneseo as a member of a Catholic family attending St. Mary's Parish, but didn't remember ever being particularly pious.

"I never really thought of myself as incredibly spiritual," she said.

A graduate of SUNY Fredonia, Sister Derby became a librarian after college and said she met a



Sister Elizabeth Leonard, SSJ, professed her first vows on Sept. 7.

few women religious in the various cities she lived in as a young woman.

"There was just something about them in the way they lived," she said. "There was a sense of joy and purpose, a sense of peace in who they were. I guess I wanted that for myself."

She added that she possessed no stereotypes of religious life because she knew almost no women religious as a child.

"I guess I don't remember having a lot of preconceived notions ... which I think a lot of people do," she said. "I found (women religious) to be human and real people."

Sister Leonard, on the other hand, grew up attending such Catholic schools as St. Ambrose and Bishop Kearney High School in Irondequoit. However, she noted that she actually left the church for a while during her adult years and came back to find the role of women religious had changed considerably from the one they occupied when she was a child.

"It was a whole different lifestyle," she said. "They're much more individualistic. Most don't wear the habit. They're in a variety of services rather than just teaching."

Both women, who live with small groups of fellow religious in Rochester homes, stressed they enjoy such aspects of religious life as communal prayer and their orders' devotion to serving others.

"The common denominator is God in our lives," Sister Leonard said.

Although both women expressed concern about the position of women in the church, neither considered it an issue that would preclude them from serving the church.

"I know there's a lot of women who suffer a lot of pain," Sister Derby said, explaining her order has dedicated itself to promoting the equality of women in the church. "I love the Catholic Church,

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Sister Connie Derby, RSM, (center) reads her profession of vows. She is accompanied by Sister Janet Korn (left) and Sister Ann Carpella (right), who served as her witnesses.

Story by Rob Cullivan