

FEATURE

Memoir offers sketch of nun's life

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

PITTSFORD — Julian of Norwich's writings have reached a growing audience over the centuries as more readers seem to find something that touches them in her words.

Sister Bea Ganley, SSJ, who greatly admires that 14th century mystic, is hoping that her most recent literary effort, though less ambitious than the mystic's musings, will nevertheless find an audience "who will find what they need in it."

Sister Ganley is the author of *The Sea of Connection*, a memoir that looks back honestly, sometimes even uncomfortably, at her life and her years as a Sister of St. Joseph.

Her memories include parents whose love for her was sometimes clouded by their drinking; a religious vocation that included both joyful awareness of God's presence and painful experiences of community life; and a love of teaching and writing.

Released by last fall, the book is already entering its third printing.

Sister Ganley, 64, will be promoting the book through a reading and book signing Saturday, Feb. 22, from 2 to 4 p.m. at the Newman Center of SUNY Brockport.

She said the book has had a positive reception. She's been especially pleased with how people in her congregation have reacted.

"Stories beget stories," Sister Ganley explained. "It's created new connections

among people in the community."

In addition, people beyond religious life have told her they have found elements in her story that resonate in their own lives.

"It's calling up things in them," she said. The book itself is the result of her "calling up" memories from her own life.

That process began in 1991. She was pursuing a master's degree in creative writing at Brockport, thinking her thesis would be a collection of her poetry. But then she took a writing class with Peter Marchant, who encouraged her to write about her life, and to enroll in Judith Kitchens' creative essay class. Her pieces for those classes became her thesis — and the book.

The memoir consists of a series of vignettes. The first half includes her memories of early childhood, her decision to enter the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1948, and her first 14 years as a member of that congregation. It ends in 1962.

The second half picks up in the early 1970s, examining changes in the congregation, her mother's final illness and death, her trip to Nicaragua with the Witness for Peace project, and participation in protests at the Seneca Army Depot.

Some of her memories are pleasant. Some are painful.

She recounts, for example, the exhaustion of trying to balance family concerns — including her parents' drinking, her father's death in 1956 and her mother's physical problems and reliance upon her —

and the demands of being a religious in the 1950s and early 1960s.

In 1961, the superior, Mother Helene, even confronted Sister Ganley about her breaking of rules — such as reading the magazine section of the Sunday paper — and her attempts to take care of her mother. The superior suggested that she leave the congregation, stating, "You are not an asset to the community, you know."

But she remained, losing herself in her teaching.

"What a salvation teaching was for me," she said. "It sounds funny when I say (the students) took care of me, but in some strange way they did."

Writing the book helped to deal with such painful events, "kind of like an exorcism," she said.

In addition, in the process of reexamining her life, she sensed God's active involvement in it.

"What I got out of it is the witness to the presence of God in my life," she said.

Because the work is series of vignettes, and not a strict autobiography, there are gaps. Indeed, the entire period between 1962 and 1971 — covering, for example, such key church events as the Second Vatican Council — is left out.

Sister Ganley said such subjects as Vati-

can II and changes in religious life may provide material for expanding the book, or for separate, more objective writings.

"There are so many rich resources among our sisters who shepherded us through that period," she suggested, adding, "I'd like to get away from myself."



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Sister Bea Ganley, a Nazareth College teacher who also has taught at Nazareth Academy and diocesan schools, is awaiting the third printing of her memoirs.

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