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# Catholic Courier

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## Prayer and common life fulfill some callings



**W**hen a Muslim neighbor in Rochester's Public Market area asked about the ring she wears on her left hand, Sister Sharon Bailey, SSJ, acknowledged it did indeed signify commitment.

"Who are you committed to?" the neighbor asked.

"God," she replied.

"You mean you're married to God?" he asked.

"Well, it isn't so much like that," she replied.

Exactly what it was like, even after 36 years as a Sister of St. Joseph, was tough for Sister Bailey to explain. Clearly, sisterhood to her has always meant commitment to living the Gospel as a member of a religious community.

But unlike her early days at St. Joseph Hospital in Elmira, when she worked side-by-side with members of her congregation, her sisters are now fewer and scattered; they are more a presence "inside" her, said Sister Bailey, now in central administration for the Sisters of St. Joseph. "It is very different than when we were in charge of the hospital."

Particularly with the ratio of nuns to U.S. Catholics reportedly at its lowest since 1860, she and other women religious realize the future, as well, may be very different; they just don't know in what way.

Sister Patricia Wittberg, SC, of Indiana University, Indianapolis, states that most religious congregations in their current form may die. But she believes the hunger that helped form them still exists and can lead to a rebirth.

It takes the right combination of ideological, po-

litical, social and economic factors for a religious community to remain viable, she has written. Of religious orders founded before 1800, she stated, 64 percent are extinct.

God and the Spirit have brought her through changes in religious life, Sister Bailey said. The religious life remains a way to grow in relationship with God, and a way to serve freely without attachments, she said.

### Seeking God, community

The religious life for Sister Patricia Prinzing, RSM, who, like Sister Bailey, entered a congregation straight out of high school, more heavily focused "on what you do," she recalled of her entrance in 1958. Today she serves on the Sisters of Mercy leadership team.

"I think we are moving more toward really looking at the prophetic vision, how we are called to that and call others toward that," she said.

While changing roles of women religious seem hard even for them to define, to Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister of Erie, Pa., their role has always been pure and simple.

"The truth is that there never was any good reason whatsoever to enter religious life other than 'to seek God,'" she wrote in *The Fire in These Ashes*, published in 1995.

"What Joan Chittister brings out is anybody can do the work," said Sister Barbara Staropoli, SSJ, chair of Nazareth College's music department. She entered her community in 1960 right out of high school.

In fact, a nun's life isn't always what it seems, she noted.

"We looked at the women who taught us," she said. "They were role models because of what we thought their life was like. It was pretty fictional actually. Most of the time they were looking for community."

As she and others watched the numbers of nuns begin to drop in the 1970s, she recalled, the initial reaction was, "We're all going to die out. It was pretty devastating. But it is like a plant being pruned, and bringing forth new life."

The number of women religious in the United States has gone from about 180,000 in 1965 to under 88,000 in 1997. Meanwhile, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester today have 436 members, 204 of whom remain active, in contrast with 1,000 in 1965. They have three temporary professed, one novice and one postulant. And the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester have 210 women, 133 of whom are active, in this diocese and in Chile. Another three in Chile are considered "pre-candidates." Their peak membership was 488 in 1966.

"We may live by ourselves or with two others or 10 others, but we are part of a community," Sister Prinzing said of today's lifestyle. "We pray together every morning and every night."

### Sea change

Sister Wittberg, an assistant professor of sociology who has written such books as the 1994 *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders* and the 1996 *Pathways to Re-Creating Religious Communities*, sees this era as a time of major transition.

"Possibly a lot of mainstream religious communities would not appreciate my saying this, but

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Story by Kathleen Schwar • Photo by Greg Francis