

Vocations

Lay associates embrace orders' traditions

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Ever since Donna P. Warner was taught by the Sisters of St. Joseph at Nazareth Academy in the 1950s, she has retained a special fondness for the sisters in that congregation.

"I say I have three loves in my life: my God, my family and the Sisters of St. Joseph," commented Warner, a parishioner at Rochester's Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Although she never became a nun, Warner has shared in the sisters' ministerial work for the past 14 years. She belongs to Agreges, a French term that means "Companions on the Journey." The lay associate program operates in conjunction with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester.

Warner is among a growing number of Catholics nationwide who have chosen to become lay associates — lay people who model their prayer and service lives after particular religious orders.

According to the Catholic News Service, there were 14,500 lay associates in U.S. religious congregations in 1995. Some of the larger groups in the Rochester Diocese include Agreges, with approximately 100 men and women; the Sisters of Mercy Associates, also with about 100; and Cistercians of the Strict Observance, with a total of 60 in their two associate programs.

"After Vatican II, a lot of lay people decided, 'We really have an obligation to do something,'" Warner said. She noted that lay associations gained popularity following the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on empowering the laity.

Warner has belonged to Agreges since 1984, one year after the group's formation. She currently serves as lay director, overseeing programs for the men and women



Greg Francia/Staff photographer

Lay associate Donna Warner, left, jokes with Sisters Veronica Freida and Beverly Guyle while they try out a treadmill walker for the the Sisters of St. Joseph Dec. 18.

connected with Agreges.

"I also interview candidates and journey with them. It's like a 'big sister' kind of thing," Warner said.

In addition to a strong focus on prayer, many lay associates perform volunteer duty to assist the order. For instance, Sister Audrey Synnot, RSM, coordinator of the Mercy Lay Associates, said that associates work at the Mercy Prayer Center; at the motherhouse switchboard; and at Kate's Tea Shop, a gift shop located at the motherhouse.

Meanwhile, Warner has utilized her nursing background by assisting at the Sisters of St. Joseph convent infirmary. She also takes the ailing nuns out for lunch and runs errands for them.

Mary Ann Pietrzykowski, who has belonged to Agreges since 1982, said her experience as a councilwoman in the town of Sweden has meshed nicely with her many leadership roles in Agreges over the years.

"It's something that enhances what you already do," said Pietrzykowski, a member of SUNY Brockport's Newman Oratory.

Similarly, Dick Clark frequently offers his carpentry skills toward upkeep of the Mercy Prayer Center.

"You can be doing prayer and ministry even though you're up to your elbows in dirt and dust," Clark commented.

In 1988, Clark became one of the first men to join the Mercy Associates. His wife, Judy, has been a member since 1981.

"There was just a magnet that drew me to the way of life and the charism the sisters had," he remarked. The Clarks, parishioners at St. Joseph's Church in Rush, added that there are now 13 men in the Mercy Associates.

Involvement in such associations usually begins with a period of inquiry, including an interview and formal application.

After the initial screening, associate "candidates" undertake a period of study and reflection. Candidates learn about the history and traditions of the order, its particular calling or "charisms," and its ministries and missions.

At the end of the inquiry period, the candidate becomes formally affiliated with the order during a commitment ceremony. In some orders, associate candidates write their own commitment promises, while in others they follow a standardized set of commitments. In most cases, associate commitments are for one year, renewable annually at the discretion of the associate and the order.

Many objectives of lay associate groups are similar to those of third orders. Yet Father Francis Steger, OCSO, noted that lay associates — while fully recognized by the Catholic Church — have more flexibility in establishing their own rules and norms than third orders. The latter are bound to regulations set forth by the Holy See.

The Cistercians of Strict Observance
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(301) 891-2037

Vocations to Priesthood

Fr. Brendan Darcy, SMA
Vocation Director
256 North Manor Circle
Takoma Park, MD 20912
(301) 270-8435

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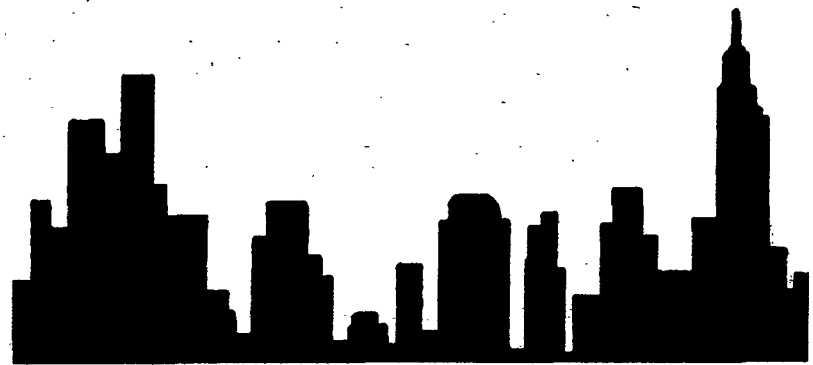
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Tenafly, NJ 07670
(201) 567-0450



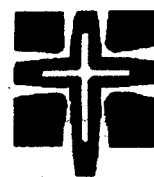
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SISTERS OF MERCY
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Phone (716) 667-1246 Fax (716) 662-9766

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