

Young

Life of women religious appeared to be 'fun'

Story by
Rob Cullivan

Sister of Charity Melissa Camardo, 26, a 1992 graduate of Our Lady of Mercy High School, Brighton, became a nun because it looked like fun.

That's right, it was the light-hearted spirit of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kan., that attracted Sister Camardo, who grew up attending Our Lady Queen of Peace and Our Lady of Lourdes schools.

"They balance ministry and prayer, and they're also fun," she said of the members of her congregation, which was founded in 1857. "They know how to celebrate well and balance life, and these were the things that I was looking for in the community."

Sister Camardo entered her congregation in fall of 1998, and took her temporary professed vows Aug. 19 of this year in Denver. She will now spend three years studying her vows and working on behalf of her congregation before deciding whether to take permanent vows.

"These steps in between help to make sure this is the right decision," she said of her next three years. "Right now, it feels like this is the right choice for me."

Sister Camardo spoke to the *Catholic Courier* in the Brighton home of her parents, Roberta and Gerry. The Camardos have another daughter as well, Julie, who was married this year.

"It took a little bit of the pressure off of me," Sister Camardo said jokingly of her sister's decision to marry. She noted that both her family and friends have supported her choice to enter vowed religious life.

"I've dated enough to know ... I'm not looking for (married life)," she said. "It's an issue because every person has a need to be loved. I don't feel that I lack for deep relationships with other people. I am able to keep family, friends. There's not a giving up in that way. Religious life doesn't mean you give up intimacy."

Sister Camardo grew up with an interest in the church developed by attending youth group sessions at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, and by attending Mercy, she said.

"Both of these combined to help me to understand what it means to be part of a Christian community, beyond going to Mass every Sunday," she said.

She was also active in the Catholic student center at Duke University, from which she graduated in 1996 with a bachelor's degree in biology and a minor in religion. At Duke, she met women religious who began to make her think about the religious life, she said. After college, she spent a year in Denver as a member of the Colorado Vincentian Volunteers, a program of the Vincentian order of priests and brothers. Volunteers who are 22-30 years old spend one year living in shared housing and serving low-income people, and share theological reflections on their work in weekly sessions.

As a Vincentian volunteer, Sister Camardo worked on a job skills training program for impoverished, homeless females in recovery from substance abuse called the Women's Bean Project.



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Sister of Charity Melissa Camardo, during a recent visit to her parents' home in Brighton.

Similar to a program run here in the Diocese of Rochester by Catholic Family Center, the Women's Bean Project taught job and entrepreneurial skills to women by having them prepare and sell dry bean soup mixes.

Sister Camardo stayed with the program an extra year, eventually serving as production manager. She recalled that one woman who was working on the project was, at the same time, trying to get her high school equivalency diploma, all in an effort to escape a life marked by drug abuse and homelessness. This woman chose Sister Camardo as the subject for an essay she had to write on good leaders.

"She was a pretty shy person, so I thanked her for writing it, and I was flattered," Sister Camardo recalled. "But mostly I was proud of her, and what she'd been able to accomplish through the program. She got her own apartment, a place to live, and her kids to come live with her. She was on her way to good things."

"That was probably one of those moments where personally and professionally I knew I was where I was supposed to be," Sister Camardo continued. "I learned from this woman a lot about determination and finding humor in even the hardest things in life."

While in Denver, she also got to know

some Sisters of Charity and became interested in the congregation. Based in Leavenworth, the sisters work in several Midwestern states, and they also work in Peru. In order to discern whether she was called to the congregation, Sister Camardo moved into a Denver convent with six Charity sisters, and took a job at the congregation's St. Joseph's Hospital. There, she managed an incentive program for poor and under-insured pregnant women that rewarded their cooperation with the hospital's prenatal care program by linking the women with material items and other services they and their babies needed.

She also came to realize that she wanted to be a religious.

"It's important to me to be a concrete witness to God's loving presence in the world, and religious life is the best context in which I can do that."

In August 2000, she moved to Leavenworth for her novitiate year with the congregation, and studied such subjects as world religions at St. Mary's College there. After taking her temporary professed vows Aug. 19, she came home to see her family, and has now moved back to Denver where she is once

again working at St. Joseph's Hospital as the manager of an entry-level employee workforce development program. The program assesses the current skill levels of new employees and then links them with educational and training programs they need to improve their skills.

"I'm excited about working at the hospital again because I think it's important for Catholic health care to maintain its Catholic identity," she said, noting the closing of some Catholic health institutions in recent years. "I think that Catholic health care can specifically be concerned about how people's needs can be met in a way that respects the dignity of the human person."

She added that she also wants to be a part of women's religious life even as the numbers of nuns decrease. The vowed life allows her to be strengthened by her fellow sisters' faith as well as to witness the many changes that are happening in women's religious life, she said. Women religious are much freer now than they were decades ago to chart a course of service reflective of their individual goals, and she wants to be a part of the new directions in religious life such freedom allows.

"It's unclear now what the future will hold, but I think the Spirit is moving within religious life today, and I want to be a part of that."

Events

For information on these events, call the hotline for Odyssey, the diocesan young adults network, at 716/328-3228, ext. 375, or 1-800-388-7177, ext. 375.

● **Saturday, September 29:**

Hike with Odyssey in Irondequoit at the Helmer Nature Center Trail. The hike will begin at approximately 10 a.m. and last for one hour. Lunch on Irondequoit Bay will follow.

● **Saturday, October 13:** Day at

Six Flags Darien Lake. A scary time is in store when Odyssey experiences the theme park's Fright Festival. Car pools will leave at 3 p.m. from the Tops parking lot, 2345 Buffalo Road at Pixley Road, Gates. R.S.V.P.s required.

● **Thursday, October 18:** Dinner

at Woody's II, 2758 W. Henrietta Road, Brighton. This popular event, held on the third Thursday of each month, begins at 7 p.m. R.S.V.P.s required.

● **Saturday, October 20:** Breast

Cancer Walk. Take time to not only exercise, but also support a good cause by participating in the fight against breast cancer.

● **Saturday, October 20:** Ghost

walk. Get into the spirit of things this Halloween season by going to the enchanting ghost walk. Meet friends old and new as we hear some interesting stories about Rochester's past. Meet at 6 p.m. at Third Presbyterian Church, Meigs Street and East Avenue. Advance tickets are suggested and can be purchased from the Landmark Society of Rochester.

● **Saturday, October 27:**

Volunteer for Monroe County Special Olympics. Assist Special Olympians during their annual bowling competition 8:30 a.m.-2 p.m. at Clover Lanes, 2750 Monroe Ave, Brighton. R.S.V.P.s required.

● **Saturday, November 3:** Red

Cross benefit. Give the gift of life by donating blood to the American Red Cross. Odyssey donors will be at the Red Cross Henrietta location in the morning. R.S.V.P.s requested by Oct. 20 so appointments can be made.

Logan's

FROM 50 TO
1000 PEOPLE
SINCE 1955

FOR PRIVATE PARTIES
3 DISTINCTIVE DINING ROOMS
SPACIOUS PRIVATE • COCKTAIL LOUNGES

Banquets - Weddings
Retirement Parties - Dinner Dances
Sales Promotion Dinners
Clam Bakes - Buffets

R&R O'Connor's
1420 Scottsville Rd. • Rochester

Phone: 235-6978

Paint Problems Solved!
CALL "DR. PAINT"
Shaheen Problem Hot Line
266-1525
Shaheen's
PAINT & DECORATING CENTERS Inc.
"Over 50 Years of Great Advice"

MAKE ROSARIES
Call for our catalog and special introductory offer
LEWIS & COMPANY
P.O. Box 268-K Troy, NY 12181
518-235-1700
www.rosaryparts.com