

# Sacrifice enables celibates to serve others fully

Editor's note: Last in a series.

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

When they hear the word "celibacy," most Catholics automatically think of the priesthood. Priestly celibacy has in fact been the focus of the two previous articles in this series (Oct. 17 and 24).

Yet there are many other states of life in which people follow the biblical ideal of celibacy outlined in Matthew 19 ("There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.") and 1 Corinthians 7 ("Those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. ... I want you to be free from anxieties.").

Among Catholics who live an obligatory celibate life are women and men — sisters, brothers and order priests — who take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience as part of their consecration to religious life; women and men who, along with clerics, commit to these same vows as members of secular institutes; and men who make promises of celibacy if they are not married at the time of ordination to the permanent diaconate.

Here are the stories of two diocesan Catholics whose vocational paths involve a celibate lifestyle: Mary Jackson, a 23-year-old parishioner of All Saints in Corning, who will enter a convent in early 2003; and Deacon Robert Stowell, 66, of St. Mary's Parish in Elmira.

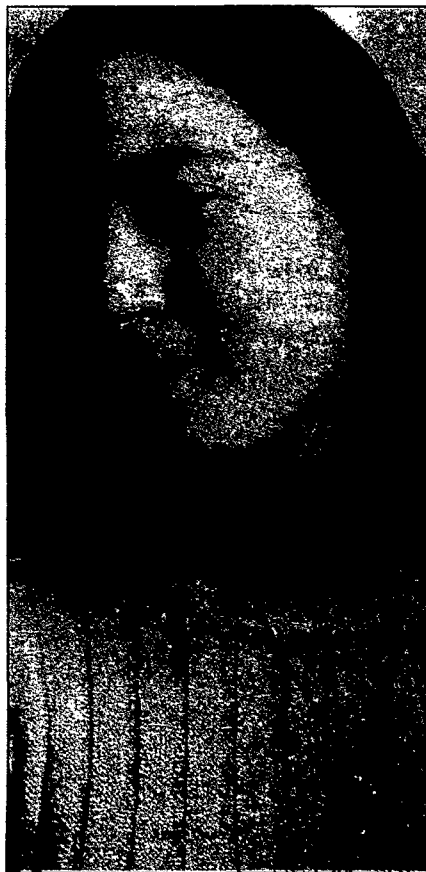
## 'GOD IS NUMBER ONE'

A 1995 *Catholic Courier* profile on Jackson, then 16 years old, noted: "Mary said she has considered becoming a woman religious (but) is still uncertain. 'I know ministry's in my future somehow. I'm willing to do whatever God wants me to do.'"

She has apparently become more firm about her vocational path: In January she will move to North Haledon, N.J., to join the Salesian Sisters of St. John Bosco, an international congregation that emphasizes youth ministry.

Jackson will begin formation by taking classes and performing ministry. Temporary vows would most likely be taken in four years, with final vows occurring in 10 to 12 years. "They give you a lot of time to feel if it's the right thing," she said.

Jackson, who has attended daily Mass since high school, says the vow of celibacy has been a major factor in her discernment process, and that she has dated frequently. "I'm definitely not going to the convent because I can't find a man,"



Jason Rearick/Catholic Courier

**Mary Jackson, a 23-year-old parishioner of All Saints in Corning, plans to enter a New Jersey convent in early 2003.**

she said with a laugh.

In fact, she said she regarded her dates as potential husbands, saying, "I could see a life as a wife and mother and I think I'd like that." However, "It's almost like I've had an invitation for this other life. I'm so lucky I have a choice. I can choose between two great lifestyles."

Jackson currently is a student teacher at Elmira Southside High School. She no longer dates, explaining, "I don't have to take the vows (yet), but I should live them. I need to give this a fair shot."

She doesn't rule out the possibility of changing her mind about the celibate life before taking her vows, saying, "If someone were to come into my life I would have a nice chat with God. I believe we always have choices."

Jackson said she wishes more people involved in vocations awareness for women religious would openly discuss celibacy. During her discernment process, she said she had to rely mainly on magazine articles and a few close friends in whom she confides.

"We don't hear about it enough. It's touchy; people get uncomfortable talking about it," she remarked. "There's nothing we can't talk about. It's part of human nature to want to

be with someone, and to know them and have them know you."

However, Jackson believes that a celibate lifestyle makes sense for women religious because it allows them to perform ministry to the fullest, saying, "It's something deeper than my relationship with another person. God is number one."

"People say, 'Don't you think nuns should be married' and all that stuff ... (but) celibacy is completely freeing. I'm free to get up and go for whoever and whenever. If I had a family, my number-one priority would be getting up in the night and checking the baby and making sure I have enough money for the family."

Despite its freeing aspects, Jackson acknowledges that a celibate lifestyle on some days may feel burdensome.

"But you know what? It's amazing when things that seem so hard, things I would struggle with, when I'm willing to give them over to God — I say 'This is such a heavy load, God, take it off of me' — and he does," Jackson remarked. "When I dare to trust him, he takes care of everything."

## SEEKING GOD'S GUIDANCE

The early 1990s brought a series of life-changing events for Bob Stowell. He and his ex-wife, Nancy, had been working toward a reconciliation when she died in 1990. A year later, he retired from his management position at Sears, Roebuck and Co.

Around this time he entered formation for the permanent diaconate. But he recalled proceeding with hesitation due to the promise of celibacy he'd be required to make if he weren't married at the time of ordination, as stated in Canon 1037 of the Revised Code of Canon Law: "An unmarried candidate for the permanent diaconate and a candidate for the presbyterate (priesthood) is not to be admitted to the order of diaconate unless in a prescribed rite he has assumed publicly before God and the Church the obligation of celibacy or professed perpetual vows in a religious institute."

"The big 'D' — discernment," Deacon Stowell remarked. "I was recommended to date. Everybody was trying to fix me up." He considered delaying ordination until he had a chance to remarry but ultimately decided that "I wanted to be ordained with my classmates. That was very, very important to me."

So he opted for the celibate life, saying, "I didn't want to think of it as a punishment; I chose it. What

matters is I asked God to guide me through it. This was not a quick decision, but I thought that trusting in the Lord it would carry me through. On the other hand, I don't want to think God just tapped me on the shoulder and made everything easy."

Being in the minority didn't make things any easier, he remarked: "It wasn't a main issue in our (diaconal) class. Everybody was married except myself, so it wasn't talked about too much. I read a couple books, and celibacy kind of pertained to priests. Classmates would kind of kid me."

Deacon Stowell was ordained in 1993 and has served since that time as the deacon at his home parish in Elmira, St. Mary's. A part-time paid staff member, he moved six years ago into St. Mary's rectory, where the pastor, Father Rick Farrell, also resides.

Deacon Stowell says his instinctive desire for a woman's companionship hasn't diminished, admitting that "I have my good days and my bad days. There are times that I'm extremely lonely and wish I had someone to share intimate things with, especially when I see a couple hand-in-hand working at their marriage."

But he realizes that he must now keep these longings in check, so he proceeds with caution: "Don't put yourself in a situation. You try to look at why are you out for breakfast (with a woman), and inside what your motive is. You have to be honest." If he senses a dangerous situation, he said, "Believe me, I pray on it. You know in your heart when you're starting to cross over the line."

Deacon Stowell, the father of four (one of his children died earlier this year) and grandfather of five, said his faith has allowed him to be at peace with his vocation.

"There are still times I ask myself, 'Did I make the right decision?' And then in the next breath it's 'How can I best serve you?'" he said. "I just hope God will act through me."

Overall, Deacon Stowell said he finds great satisfaction as a deacon, such as when he baptizes the babies of people he once coached in athletics. He particularly enjoys connecting with fallen-away Catholics. "I feel like people who are in pain, confused, can talk to Bob Stowell. To be in a rectory, single, I have these opportunities. Someone might call the rectory and ask 'How can I get back in the church?'"

"It's a wonderful, fruitful ministry for me."