

Sister offers advice for holiday blues

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — No one could have blamed Sister Kathy Weider if she had rated last year's holiday season a total downer.

At that point, the effects of her multiple sclerosis were so severe that she couldn't leave home to celebrate Christmas with her family. Instead, Sister Weider found comfort by focusing on the holidays' spiritual significance.

"In many ways, despite my physical limitations, there were so many blessings. For one thing, it draws you closer to God ... I did experience that strength from God each day," Sister Weider said in an interview Nov. 20.

Those realizations became part of Sister Weider's presentation, "Celebrating When Your Heart is Heavy" at the Dugan Center of St. Mary's Church Nov. 25 as part of the Downtown Community Forum series.

Sister Weider said the holidays can find people in a less-than-festive mood for numerous reasons, such as the death of a loved one, illness, loss of a job, concerns about the economy and the threat of war.

"There are so many ways people are stressed emotionally, physically and financially," Sister Weider said, recalling her grief after her father died not long before the holidays in 1988.

And yet, the world around us says we should be celebrating. "But some people can't make themselves shop, or don't have the money, or can't get into the Christmas carols on the radio," she observed.

She said that one shouldn't feel obligated to attend to such traditional holiday acts as sending out Christmas cards.

"Those who care about you will understand," she remarked, adding that these same people are ready and willing to offer support. "So often we're afraid to acknowledge our need for any kind of help."

Another good coping mechanism, she said, is to "refocus the holidays — really try to capture the true meaning of Thanksgiving and Christmas." A good start is to literally count one's blessings, by writing down one or more blessings at the end of each day. Examples might include acknowledging the people helping us through our difficulties, as well as appreciating spiritual support from above.

"Rather than thinking of God causing the suffering, think of God's comforting presence through it all," Sister Weider suggested. She further noted that Christ's ministry



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Sister of St. Joseph Kathy Weider speaks about coping with sadness at the holidays during her Nov. 25 presentation at the Dugan Center of St. Mary Church, Rochester.

was "for the brokenhearted" and that Christmas itself recalls a time of struggle as well as joy.

"Jesus came as a baby to a poor couple. From the beginning, his life was never easy," she said.

Other activities might include fo-

cusing on charitable causes, either through making donations or volunteering with the sick and homebound. "There's nothing that helps us put our problems in perspective more than reaching out to someone who may be worse off than we are,"

Sister Weider said.

She acknowledged that all these suggestions are easier said than done. "I'm not in any way saying people should be Polyanna about it," she said. "We need to honor bad feelings."

Even so, she maintains that adopting a positive attitude can be a tremendous asset during tough times.

"No matter what the circumstances of our lives, we can all change our attitudes," she said.

Sister Weider, a Sister of St. Joseph for more than three decades, spent 16 years as campus minister at Nazareth College. She retired in 2000 due to the advance of MS, with which she was diagnosed in 1995.

Since her retirement, Sister Weider has been a sought-after speaker and has remained active in such community organizations as the Multiple Sclerosis Society. She gets around mostly by wheelchair and has limited use of several body parts.

But that all-important attitude remains overwhelmingly positive, as evidenced by the many inspirational placards on her apartment's walls — including one that states, "I dwell in possibility."

"As far as I'm concerned, my life has never been better than it is now," Sister Weider stated.

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