

Companions IN PRAYER



Sisters of St. Clare
Saginaw, MI

First to Serve

This weekend is the annual collection for the retired sisters and brothers who have served our communities across the country. Often when we make an appeal to support our retired sisters and brothers, people say, "Well it can't be that big a problem to support retired sisters and brothers since there seem to be a small number left." For example, I'm frequently asked by people who know that I am a Poor Clare sister, "Where have all the sisters gone? When I was young there seemed to be armies of sisters visible in churches, in schools, and in hospitals. There don't seem to be that many now. What happened?"



particular ethnic traditions helped these tight-knit communities preserve their customs and pass them on to the young. These ethnic communities needed schools and health care if they were to survive. Often the parish priest would write to Catholic religious communities in Europe asking them to send sisters to work in their particular community. These pioneering sisters came and established schools and hospitals. They saw themselves as called by God. Their service brought education and well-being to many immigrant families and communities.

The truth is that now fewer women now choose to become Catholic sisters. However, I believe that it is not because they no longer regard the vocation of Catholic sister and brother as worthwhile. The reason lies more in the greater number of career options open to women today than in the past. In order to understand where the "armies of nuns" have gone, we need to look at our history.

If we look at our country's early history, we know that immigrants from many lands settled in the growing nation. Often they lived in predominately ethnic neighborhoods where the parish church was the center of their religious and social experience. Marriages outside the bounds of these ethnic groups were frowned upon. The Latin Mass and their own

As these early pioneering sisters went about dedicating themselves to the needs of the new country, they became important role models for many young women. As the years went by, many religious communities were founded that offered opportunities for women to serve as teachers and nurses, opportunities not always available for women in society at that time. The religious communities also provided opportunities for women whose economic circumstances might have prevented their education and development. As a result, many women joined the religious communities which became firmly established in the United States.

As time went on, the number of sisters grew. Their work provided a vision of what was possible for

women. They showed that women were capable of leading colleges, running hospitals, and organizing many Social Services. Very quietly and effectively, sisters modeled what women were capable of doing. They were educated, competent and capable – they provided a vision to women of what was to come.

As we know, by the late 20th century and up to our present day our society has undergone significant changes. Many young women can enter college and work in careers not previously open to them. They become physicians, lawyers, and business leaders. They run for political office. They even run for President.

These changes in society give women more influence, responsibility and visibility. With education comes new leadership opportunities. Women no longer depend on religious communities as they have in the past. They have many more options when they consider ways to serve. This means that fewer women join religious communities.

However, it is important to remember that while fewer women are joining religious communities, **there are still those women who feel called to serve God as part of a religious community.** Some of these are

quietly going about their work as contemplatives and teachers. Others are modern pioneers serving in new areas of social service. The recent movie, "Dead Man Walking," featured Sister Helen Prejean's dramatic work in prison ministry. Others like Sisters Carol Gilbert, Jackie Hudson, and Ardeth Platte have been willing to face prison in order to take courageous and controversial stands against war and nuclear weapons. Other Sisters work for social issues like immigration reform and equal rights issues.



The next time I am asked, "Where have all the Sisters gone?", I may well respond, "Well, the numbers of Sisters are fewer than in the past, but the prophetic and energetic spirit of those early pioneering Sisters lives on in today's Sisters, as well as in all women who choose to serve outside the religious community." We all owe a debt to those past women

who gave us vision and courage. We may be fewer in number, but the "armies of nuns" from our past still live in all our hearts.

(We are interested in your thoughts. Let us know at: <http://srsclare.com/about-us/companions-in-prayer-newsletter>)

Sr. Laura and Sisters

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