

Nun population dwindling

Sisters still find peace in fewer numbers

By JUDITH CEBULA
Gannett News Service

In 1934, Sister Agneta Buckley arrived at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse in Tipton, Ind. She was 27 years old and ready to begin a career as a teacher and nun.

It was very different, she says and still is.

"There was only one grave in the cemetery then. A sister died the night I arrived, so I lit a candle for her," she says. "I was 27 years old and I was in a convent — and I was alone."

Now there are more than 100 local sisters in the convent's grounds. The average age of the 81 nuns is 48. The oldest sister will turn 90 this year. The youngest is 43. A new member last year entered in 20 years. The community of Catholic nuns here in 1934 is dying.

The Sisters of St. Joseph in Tipton is like most congregations of Catholic nuns in the United States. They are losing nuns to death without attracting and retaining new members.

"Only God knows why," says Sister Raphael O'Driscoll in the rich brogue of her native Kilkenny, Ireland. The nearly 90-year-old nun came to Tipton when she was 23. To be a nun back then, she says, you had to be a nun.

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The Washington-based organization collects and distributes money to care for retiring clergy. The Sisters of St. Joseph receive funds annually as part of the solution.

Opening the doors of the once private community is another answer.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Tipton motherhouse gradually became a conference center for the Lafayette, Ind., diocese.

An elegant dining room once reserved for visiting priests is a formal conference hall. Simple bedrooms that once housed girls attending the St. Joseph Academy are available for retreats.

The brightly lighted bedrooms and corridors on the second floor serve as an infirmary for elderly sisters, as well as a limited number of elderly lay women.

Both new elements of the convent bring in needed money. And they renew a sense of value among the retired sisters that have dedicated their lives to teaching, nursing and helping the poor.



Once each month, Sister Buckley is visited by a group of mentally handicapped adults from a day-care center in town. Other sisters tutor adults who are learning to read.

Adrian Quinn, 82, has lived at the convent since he was 6 years old. Both blind and deaf, he was brought to the sisters by his mother, who was unable to care for him.

The nuns raised and educated him. In return, Quinn spent his adult life caring for them as head of maintenance.

"He knows every inch of this building, every corner and every fixture," says Sister Veronica Baumgartner, president of the congregation.

The diversity at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse reflects a spirit of openness in the Roman Catholic Church that began with Vatican II in 1965.

Diocesan and religious communities began opening themselves to lay people. Non-clerics were able to help priests run parishes, teach in Catholic schools and work in Catholic hospitals.

In the early 1970s, just when the Sisters of St. Joseph closed its academy, U.S. communities began accepting associates, or co-members.

Single men and women, married couples and families joined congregations to be part of an intimate religious experience, Sister Baumgartner says. Her community has 48 active co-members.

Pat and Gene McCormack, of Tipton, joined the convent as co-members in 1986. They didn't make vows to the community as the sisters did, but they are committed to the ministries of the order.

The McCormacks work at the motherhouse, helping sisters pay bills, schedule conferences and make long-range plans.

"It fills a need on both sides," Pat says. "My husband and I joined to help the sisters. But being close to them makes living with the burden of faith easier."

Traditional members — the elderly sisters like Buckley — inspire Sister

Baumgartner most. The 51-year-old South Bend, Ind., native joined the convent when she was 16.

"Vocation grows and changes, but my reason for entering was that, as a child, I saw sisters caring for one another," she says. "I made a firm commitment that I wouldn't look back, and I haven't. But when I have doubts, I look at the women here. It's their strong commitment that keeps me going."

Sister Veronica is uncertain who will take care of her when she is too old or sick to work. Although she keeps in close contact with two young women who have expressed interest in entering the community, vocations are never certain.

"I don't know what the future means for me," she says. "All we can do is live fully, and that's what we're doing. Our community is growing and changing even as our numbers are getting small," she says.

"Without the need we would never have opened up. We've taken the loss of our school and the loss of new sisters and made something positive."