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OLDER VOCATIONS

Religious vocations appeal to older-than-usual postulants

Those making their vows later in life offer 'significant' contributions

By Michelle Martin

Benedictine Sister Barbara Smith is not the image most people have of a new sister.

She entered the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica Monastery in Atchison, Kan., last year at age 40, and when she first expressed interest in religious life she was not Catholic. She had a career in management until a car accident in 1992 left her with a brain injury that caused seizures. She had to seek a new work environment and began volunteering at a house belonging to the School Sisters of Notre Dame that she had read about in Life magazine.

"Up until that point in my life, I had never known a sister," Sister Barbara said. "So, as I look back, God was leading me in a direction I did not know about. During my stay with them and working for them, I fell in love with the religious lifestyle of prayer, work, service to others and community."

Because she was not Catholic, Sister Barbara had to enter the Church and then wait three years before she could apply to a religious congregation. During that time, she volunteered at Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation in Belcourt, N.D., with Benedictine sisters. "They lived a balanced lifestyle of work and prayer, which I thought was a better fit for me and what I desired," she said.



Benedictine Sister Barbara Smith making her monastic profession. PHOTOS COURTESY OF MOUNT ST. SCHOLASTICA

Making adjustments

For some communities of religious women, it's not so unusual for new members to enter after age 30, or even 40. Mount St. Scholastica Monastery accepts women up to age 50, and perhaps older on an individual basis, said Sister Suzanne Fitzmaurice,

the vocation director there.

"Throughout history, some women and men have come into religious communities in midlife or later," said Holy Cross Brother Paul Bednarczyk, executive director of the Chicago-based National

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Religious Vocation Conference. "Often, the men and women who founded religious congregations did so in their middle years or later. There are certainly some men and women who can contribute to the charism of a community if they enter later."

Over the last 15 years, new members of the School Sisters of St. Francis in Milwaukee have been in their 30s, 40s and 50s, said Sister Nancy Sell, the congregation's vocations director.

Two have been in their 20s.

But there can be some issues when people who are well-established approach a congregation, Brother Paul said. The biggest consideration is whether, after living on their own for many years, people on the high side of 35 will be able to adjust to community life. "No matter how much life experience they have, they are still novices at living in a religious community," he said.

Sister Suzanne of Mount St. Scholastica acknowledged that adjustment can be difficult. "As a monastic community, community life is foundational to our tradition," she said. "We live together in the monastery, we share all our meals, we pray Liturgy of the Hours and have Eucharist daily together. Our lives are formed by prayer and lived in community."

"While apostolic communities often have sisters who may live and minister alone, that is not a part of our monastic life," she said. "Due to this nature of our lives, we find that women who have lived alone or with one individual for so many years usually have

Younger vs. older candidates

In some communities, a perceived easier formation journey leads to a preference for younger candidates. The Dominican Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, based in Justice, Ill., seeks vocations among women from 18 to 35 years old.

"Formation of younger candidates promises better effects — they are more moldable," said Sister Margaret Lekam, the community's vocation director. "They bring to the community their young age, health and enthusiasm, and they grow old while being a sister."

Holy Cross Brother Paul Bednarczyk, executive director of the Chicago-based National Religious Vocation Conference said that when someone older seeks to enter a religious community, the discernment process must be very careful to be sure the person is being called to the religious life, and not simply to a deeper level of spirituality or

ministry within the Church.

Many, if not most, religious communities sponsor affiliate programs for people who want to join in a community's mission and spirituality, but don't have a vocation to the religious life. For the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica, it's called an Oblate program, Sister Suzanne said, and includes prayer and ministry with the sisters.



Sister Suzanne

difficulty adjusting to monastic life. The sense of adapting to common life with so many is very difficult after living alone or even with one other individual."

'Significant' advantages

But the advantages are also significant, Sister Suzanne said, including life experience, fully developed skills, possible larger life perspective.

Sister Nancy agreed. "Older women may enter the community already educated, with experience in professional life and life in general," she said. "They bring a maturity and lived experience. They can readily contribute their gifts, talents and life experience to the community."

For her community, dialogue with the woman expressing interest is more important than her age. "Who is the woman inter-

ested in coming? What is her life experience?" she said. "What is her experience of church and ministry? What draws her to religious community life? These are all factors in determining openness to a woman seeking to join our community. We try to stay open and flexible as we dialogue with a woman interested in our community."

Sister Barbara said she wonders what it would have been like had she joined as a younger woman, but she has no regrets.

"I think it was a very good experience to have lived on my own for a while and pursued my education and work," she said. "I think God wanted me to do that and bring my gifts to community and share them just when he wanted it to happen."

Michelle Martin writes from Illinois.

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