

Old meets new in faith lives of two New Mexico women

Tom Roberts | Oct. 7, 2009



From left, volunteers Cathy Maestas, Maria Gomboa and Connie Trujillo make sandwiches for a lunch program St. Francis Xavier Parish runs for the poor and homeless. (Tom Roberts photos)

Sarah Nolan, 28, was a sophomore at the University of San Francisco at the turn of the millennium. She was a long way from her home in southern New Mexico and had already moved through progressive stages of personal change ? from a fascination with science and wanting to be an engineer to interest in marketing to undecided ? when she found her window to deeper faith and a life's work steeped in the church's social justice tradition.

Dominican Sr. Bernice Garcia was in the fourth grade when she knew she wanted to be a religious sister. Now 72, she has witnessed the trajectory of religious life through the latter part of the 20th century into the 21st and the concurrent changes in church life. She's currently parish administrator, effectively the pastor, of St. Francis Xavier Church in a poor neighborhood of Albuquerque, N.M. It is a ministry she could not have dreamed of doing as a young girl, nor for most of her long career with the Dominicans of Grand Rapids, Mich.

Though separated in age by at least two generations, and worlds apart in life experience, Nolan and Garcia represent some of the strong impulses within the Catholic community that are shaping its future: the growing role of laity in the church, especially women, despite prohibitions against ordination of women; the conviction reinforced by the Second Vatican Council that Catholics, by virtue of their baptism, have an essential part to play in salvation history; and the rising awareness throughout Christianity of the social dimension of a life of faith.

I spoke at length to both women during my recent visit to New Mexico, Garcia in the Santa Fe archdiocese, covering the central and northern portions of the state, and Nolan in the Las Cruces diocese, which stretches across the state's southern tier.



Sarah Nolan

Nolan may have been feeling a bit adrift in her second year at the University of San Francisco, but the Jesuits had a new way of focusing a young adult's attention. Nolan had joined one of the new Living and Learning Communities the Jesuits had begun establishing on campus. Members lived on the same floor of a dormitory. They prayed together and reflected together as a community, and they took a class together.

The class she attended that began to change her life dealt with globalization. A video shown during the first class opened with a scene of the Organ Mountains, a southern New Mexico landmark she knew well, a rugged range said to have received its name from early Spanish colonists who thought one of the formations resembled the stacked pipes of organs in European cathedrals.

Nolan recalled, "And then they showed the mountain range that went from El Paso to Juárez, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. And then they started talking about the machiladoras," the factories that were springing up just on the other side of the border in Mexico, places that often were described as sweatshops, with terrible working conditions and low wages, where products were manufactured cheaply for consumers in the developed world.

The documentary dealt with wrenching issues along the border: women being killed trying to get to work, divided families and the dangers of illegal migration. "After class, I sat with my roommate and I bawled. I was just crying, and I couldn't figure out why it had affected me so much. I think after some reflection I realized I was just really angry. I was angry first of all at what was happening ? the realities that were uncovered to me. Second of all, I was angry because no one had taken the time to teach me or to tell me what was going on in my own hometown. ... I was mad because I had to move 2,000 miles away and pay a private institution to teach me what was happening in my own backyard. That moment was for me my first kind of conversion experience."

She didn't leave things at the anger stage.

She began to "dig a little bit deeper" into the why of her anger and the why of the conditions she was learning about. "I started doing a lot of justice work. I worked with the School of the Americas Watch on campus. I was working on Students Against Sweatshops. We started our Peace and Justice Coalition." She went to Washington to lobby, and she began to realize the distance between "the people I was organizing and doing justice with" and "the people I was going to church with."

Church was important to her, an anchor in San Francisco and at university, places dramatically different from her home. "I could go to Mass and I would feel like home because it was the same. I could go and I knew the routine, I knew what the words meant, and I knew it just felt familiar, so I would just dive into Mass."

She was invited to become more involved with liturgy planning and began to learn the deeper significance of liturgical elements and practice. "I was just fascinated by it, so I started taking more theology courses, and then I started taking more Latin American history courses."

She spent five months in El Salvador in 2001-2002 in a Jesuit program and lived and worked in community

"and saw these Catholic women organizing cooperatives because their families didn't have enough meat, so they had a soy cooperative where they would make soy products."

"I saw finally what I had realized was missing at the University of San Francisco, where the justice and peace work was over here, and the faith work was over there. I realized what was missing was what the women and people in the community were doing in El Salvador. ... They were utilizing their faith and their faith formation as a lens for their justice work. There was like a switch that went off in me. I was like, 'Oh, it doesn't happen in a vacuum. Both don't happen separately. It's because we're Catholic that we do this justice work.' "

When she returned she was convinced "there has to be something of that equivalent for the United States and for our communities." During the months she spent in El Salvador, she kept thinking about Las Cruces and the surrounding towns and villages of the Mesilla Valley.

Today, at age 28, she's married, the mother of a young child and doing "faith-based community organizing" back in southern New Mexico, gathering religious leaders across denominational and political boundaries "to negotiate the interests" of the region.

She explains that the state ranks at the wrong end of many national lists: 48th in high school graduation, second in teen pregnancy, low on the list in children's health. The counties of southern New Mexico fall even below the state rate, she said, while "most of the money and power is in northern New Mexico."

"Who is speaking for the residents of southern New Mexico and who is able to focus all the needs and interests? I think it's our churches and our congregations." It is there, she said, that values and needs align. She is the "affiliate" in the region for the national group People Improving Communities by Organizing. One by one she has involved members of the clergy from a variety of denominations across southern New Mexico, with a great deal of involvement by Catholic priests.

From immigration issues to poverty to homelessness to feeding people through ubiquitous food banks, she is putting liberals in touch with conservatives, evangelicals with Catholics, connecting African Americans, Hispanics and Anglos, and doing the painstaking work of figuring out how they can work together.

There is tension over some issues, particularly immigration, a condition she believes exists between some Hispanic and white pastors "because they don't know each other." So she's stepped up her efforts, with the help of a Catholic priest and Methodist minister, to meet individually with other pastors "to engage them a little more deeply before we bring them all together again."

And then there is the occasional surprise, like the rabbi at the local reform synagogue who said his biggest concern was the need to work on immigration. She noted that his congregation "is mostly retired, white, not from New Mexico." But the rabbi responded by recalling Jewish history and its multiple exoduses. He said he viewed the immigration centers as "modern-day concentration camps." His problem was that he didn't know any immigrants, and that's where Nolan came in. "There's this desire to be in relationship with people who are directly affected by the problem so that they can not only get to know people who are going through this problem, but so they can also have a path for their theology" and to apply it to the realities that people are going through.

How does she see a solution to the seemingly intractable immigration issue?"

"My stance is very much a Catholic one, where countries have rights to secure their borders" but at the same time a responsibility to minimize harm. "And right now, people are dying in our desert trying to cross. Families are being separated."

People Improving Communities by Organizing has undertaken a campaign helping immigrants qualify for

citizenship, offering them free legal advice and assisting with paperwork and fees. The group also counsels immigrants with "Know Your Rights" workshops detailing what they should do if immigration authorities come to their front doors, their places of work and worship, or their schools.

"I think long term we're going to have to legalize many of the people who are already here. It is unrealistic for us to think that people are going to have to return to their native country and then come back. There has to be some kind of compromise.

"As a church, we need to be prepared for that conversation and we need to start preparing our congregants to have this discussion because if we think health care is a divisive issue in our congregations, holy cow, just wait until immigration."

In El Salvador, Nolan learned that religion there did not remain a "mountaintop experience." As she recalls it, they said: "Go back down the mountain. Don't pitch your tents up here. Go back down and use what you're learning and what we're teaching in your struggles for dignity and respect."

Now she's doing that beneath the Organ Mountains, and she's discovered that "people are experts on their own lives. They know what's going on and if we're willing to listen to them and be in relationship with them, we would know the solutions so much easier. ... We put people in relationship with one another ? people who are afraid of losing their health care and people who don't have health care; people who have been citizens their whole life and who maybe came here generations and generations ago, and people who are just new to this country. They need to start knowing each other, so that's what we're trying to do here in southern New Mexico."



Sr. Bernice Garcia

On a Wednesday morning in August, Garcia sat in the back of a small chapel as people wandered in for 8 o'clock Mass. It was celebrated by a husky young priest, a member of the Franciscan Friars of Renewal, a relatively new order based in New York, who prayed many of the prayers in Spanish but spoke the homily in English.

His sermon finished, Garcia stood at the side of the chapel and summarized the main points of the priest's reflections in Spanish for the mostly Spanish-speaking congregation.

This is church in New Mexico, at times cobbled together with the help of outsiders, expressed almost always in two languages, simultaneously steeped in tradition and pushing the edges of new forms of organization. Garcia is a member of the Grand Rapid Dominicans of the Sacred Heart, but she grew up in New Mexico, in the parish where she is now pastoral administrator, and she's spent much of her career here as an educator and leading other parishes.

She embodies the mix of old and new, labeling herself "traditional" and drawing a distinction between that and "conservative."

"Conservative people have blinders. They only see one thing. Traditional people see the gamut." That's why she likes the Friars of the Renewal, an order dedicated to living among the poor, and an order whom many would

classify as theologically conservative. But she sees them as traditional, doing great work with youth, bringing young people to an awareness of the Blessed Sacrament and confession during retreats that involve both youth and their parents.

And yet she holds views that are hardly traditional. She was deeply affected by the Second Vatican Council, the 1960s gathering of the world's bishops that enacted wide reform in the church.

"It gave us permission to move forward," she said, recalling the days when "mother superiors made all the decisions. The biggest thing that happened was in our apostolate. That was the most important thing." Prior to Vatican II, she recalled, sisters were sent, "and sometimes when you're sent, you don't commit. You're sent and so you think, 'I have to be here.' "

But it's different, she said, when you have to find your own job. "You had better do that job. I think we have served better. Then, we also opened up. There was nothing that wasn't available to us."

She remembers being interviewed in those early years after Vatican II and asked the question: "What do you think a sister should not do?"

"I thought, 'Well, she probably shouldn't be a bartender.' And then I thought, 'Bartenders are probably the best psychologists in the world. People sit and tell them their whole story.' I couldn't think of any legitimate job a sister couldn't do. We have sisters who became hairdressers. They do it for us and they do it for the homeless downtown. They listen and they have brought people back in to the church. So we preach. Wherever you go, you can preach."

She said she is one of four women in the Santa Fe archdiocese who are pastoral administrators. Whether the role of women will expand is unknown, but in a separate interview Archbishop Michael Sheehan, when asked how the archdiocese would deal in the future with the growing priest shortage, responded that male deacons would probably occupy pastoral administrator spots in the future.

The traditionalist in her is sometimes trumped by the need of the community. "I do what needs to be done," she said. "That's how I preach, that's how I live my charism."

She said she'd never thought, as a novice, that she would one day be running a parish. "I've never wanted to be a priest either, but I think, 'Why can't women serve as priests?' I think we should have married men first, because we have deacons already. It could easily happen. If the pope said, 'Let's ordain married men,' it could happen because so many of them are already working in churches.' "

And that pragmatism surfaces in other ways. Once a priest was objecting because she was blessing people. "I said, 'Heck, I'm baptized. Baptized people can bless. I bless holy water. I bless the person and whatever article they bring.' It's better than saying, 'Wait until Sunday,' because they're not going to wait until Sunday. They're not going to remember. Things need to be done when they're needed."



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