

The Ministry of Sister Mary Daniel Turner

Ken Briggs | Jan. 31, 2010 NCR Today

News of the death of Sister Mary Daniel Turner stirred in me sadness and gratitude.

She had given generously of her time to help me understand the joys and trials of American sisters in responding to the challenges from Vatican II.

The book she wrote with Sister Lara Quinonez, "The Transformation of American Sisters," was a staple in documenting that era. Failures on my part to grasp that period therefore couldn't be attributed to her. She had been a careful guide.

The most poignant memory, however, is the time I spent with her at the home for men off the streets of Washington, D.C., who were dying of AIDS. She had helped found the shelter.

Her work in that center epitomized what it meant to be an apostolic religious. She had forsaken comforts and entered into the suffering of human beings at the very fringe of society.

Her account of her ministry was no fairy tale of an angelic Florence Nightingale gliding unscathed among the sick and dying. To the contrary, she said she had struggled to cope with the pain and agony of poor men ravaged by disease in order to avert total emotional devastation.

She had entered into the world to practice the holiness that Vatican II assigned to everyone. And she had the scars to prove it. She had taken risks in a messy world as a renewed sister who had parted company with the traditional convent's mode of protective order.

She has remained to me both a kind, perceptive, hospitable woman and a model of what a powerful, mysterious calling it is to be a renewed sister of a kind whose integrity is tragically being impugned by a sweeping investigation.

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