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Old-fashioned nuns say the past is key to the future

by David Gibson by Religion News Service

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Sisters return from working at the Carmelite Sisters of the Divine Heart of Jesus convent in a suburb west of St. Louis. (RNS/Ryan Gladstone)

KIRKWOOD, Mo. -- The light, clear tones of young women's voices filled the chapel, their chanted prayers drifting across the wooden altar screen that shielded the sisters from the full view of those sitting in the pews.

It was five o'clock on a hot August afternoon, and vespers, the traditional evening prayer of monastic life for centuries, had begun in this Catholic convent located in this leafy suburb west of St. Louis.

The 16 sisters, novices and postulants of the Carmelite Sisters of the Divine Heart of Jesus had been up since 5 a.m. -- "the first Resurrection of the day" as they call it -- starting an unchanging routine of common prayer, quiet contemplation, morning Mass and breakfast in silence. That was followed by a day of work with the aged at a rest home attached to the convent and with children at a day care that is also part of the 24-acre grounds.

As vespers concluded, the women filed back into the cloister for another half-hour of silent contemplation before dinner. The characteristic brown habits of their order were all that could be glimpsed of them through the screen.

It's hard to think of any image that could have provided a sharper contrast with the huge meeting that was taking place at the same time a few miles away in a hotel ballroom in downtown St. Louis, where hundreds of sisters from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious were figuring out how to

respond to the Vatican's plans to recast their organization in a more orthodox mode.

The Vatican's proposed takeover of the LCWR had been the focus of widespread interest since April, when Rome announced that the group -- which represents about 80 percent of the 56,000 nuns in American religious communities -- was infected with "radical feminism," marred by dissent and in need of a top-down overhaul.

There were few habits to be seen among the 900 sisters gathered at the LCWR assembly, and the prayers and speakers evoked New Age comparisons as much as they channeled any old-time religion. Yet the LCWR delegates, buoyed by an outpouring of public support, in the end forcefully rejected the Vatican's charges and opted to try to pursue dialogue with Rome to resolve the dispute.

But what of that other 20 percent of American nuns? Often overlooked in the coverage of the LCWR showdown, they largely belong to a separate organization, called the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, that the Vatican set up in 1992 as traditional alternative -- some say a conservative rival -- to the more progressive LCWR.

The CMSWR umbrella comprises convents with a total of about 10,000 nuns, including the Kirkwood Carmelites, and you probably won't be reading about any Roman investigation of their practices. These sisters tend to follow a more cloistered existence, with limited contact with the outside world and even with their families, who see them for just a week or so each year.

Most important, the CMSWR communities are growing, and getting younger, which has many fans saying that they represent the future of women's religious communities precisely because they reflect the past with confidence and with no discussion of dissent.

"We know what we are about," Sr. Mary Joseph Heisler, the vivacious head of this community, said with a smile.

Heisler -- who, like all the sisters in her community, took a new religious name with her lifelong vows of poverty, chastity and obedience -- was an "Army brat" who heard her calling while a junior in high school on a pilgrimage to the Marian shrine of Fatima in Portugal. She put aside her application to Georgetown University, her plans to become the first woman secretary of state and her boyfriend, and entered this community at 18.

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Back then, the Carmelites in Kirkwood were as stagnant as any order. But about 15 years ago, they started to focus on attracting new vocations by playing up their traditional life and their "authenticity, sure identity, shared vision, awareness of purpose and community living," as Heisler put it.



Soon, the recruits started coming. The community now has three

sisters over 70, but then there is Heisler at 45, followed by members ranging from 18 to 34, with most in their 20s. (It helps that CMSWR orders generally do not take women over the age of 30.)

"The choice has to be made either for renewal or further diminishment," Heisler says. "We are in that period of renewal."

In fact, the data show that the traditional orders of the CMSWR are drawing about the same number of vocations as those of the LCWR. But their relative youth and distinctive ways -- not to mention their favor in Rome -- have helped fuel the debate over Catholic identity and orthodoxy and the future for Catholicism in the U.S.

It is an argument the younger sisters here have followed closely and can take up with passion as well as humor.

Sr. Mary Elizabeth Riesser, 26 and a Cincinnati native, said she knows many sisters in LCWR congregations and admires the work they do. But when she wanted to join a community, Riesser, like many of her peers considering a lifelong vocation, "wanted that radical living out of the religious life."

"I sense that totality here more so than in one of the LCWR-type communities," she said during the hourlong "recreation time" that starts at 7 p.m. each evening.

Strolling around the grounds as cicadas buzzed in the oak trees, several sisters -- including the two novices and three postulants in preliminary stages of discernment before final vows -- spoke of the visual appeal of the old cloister and especially the habit, though they quickly added that the draw went much deeper than fashion.

"It was a pretty selfish reason that had to be purified," Sr. Mary Michael Reiss, 27, said with a laugh. "I thought if I'm going to do this with my life, to give everything, I want people to know about it, darn it! I wanted the whole church. I didn't want to wear a denim skirt the rest of my life."

But Reiss eventually realized a deeper connection between the habit and "faithfulness to the church," and how a habit broadcasts that stance. Indeed, when she walked into her first day of classes for a communications degree at nearby Fontbonne University -- a Catholic school run by a women's order belonging to the LCWR -- her surprised professor said, "I haven't seen a sister in a habit here in 40 years."

The Carmelite sisters of Kirkwood convey joy at their vocation because of the structure and strictures, not in spite of them. And they are uniformly respectful and complimentary of the work of the nuns of the LCWR.

But like other tradition-minded Catholics in this ongoing debate, they also don't see the path of the progressives as simply another legitimate option among many.

"I still sense the need for them to return to the faithfulness of their original charisms, and the purpose for which they were founded," Riesser said of the LCWR communities. "In their disobedience, to the church, to doctrine, they are departing from that."

It is a debate that won't be settled this day, or anytime soon. In a few minutes, the convent bell rings for compline, the final communal prayer of the day, to be followed by the "Grand Silence" of nighttime in the cloister, a period of sleep and individual meditation that ends only with the coming dawn.

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