

# Nuns' commitment survives changes

By ARLENE VANDERLEUN

Can today's nun find happiness and fulfillment in a let-it-all-hang-out era? Just ask four Westland women and you'll get a resounding "yes!" to that question.

If you met Gloria Kelly for the first time, you might guess that she's a suburban housewife — bubbly, Earth Mother to a brood of children. Helen Williams looks like a breezy, confident career woman — perhaps a nurse or teacher.

Sharon Simond resembles an intellectual college student, while Elizabeth Jane Jarvis looks like everybody's favorite aunt — friendly and smiling.

In fact, they are sisters, united not by flesh and blood but by their calling to the religious life. They are Roman Catholic nuns whose lives strike a delicate balance between religious and secular worlds.

All four work as liturgical aides or counselors by day, and return to separate, comfortable Westland apartments at night.

"We are professional women, but we are willing to give our gifts of God and live according to the lifestyle," said Sr. Sharon, 38, a Dominican nun who coordinates religious education at St. Richard Church in Westland.

The vocation is "a mystery, a desire, a force," according to Sr. Gloria, 51, also a Dominican nun. She holds a similar position at St. Bernard of Siena parish in Westland.

Holder of master's degrees in education and religious studies, Sr. Gloria has no feelings of denial. "Security is still there," she said. "It's humanness. It's a free choice."

Sr. Elizabeth, a member of the Immaculate Heart of Mary order for 40 years, works with Sr. Sharon at St. Richard.

Also a member of IMH is Sr. Helen, 47, who coordinates religious education and counsels parishioners at St. Kevin of Dearborn Heights.

She feels her calling was to help people, and confesses that after entering the novitiate at the age of 17, it took her a decade to "come to grips" with her vocation.

"It's like marriage," she explained. "You say 'yes' on a (wedding) day and deepen the commitment."

WHILE THEIR commitment calls for vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, it isn't all piety and prayers. There are also dinners at the Red Lobster and occasional movies.

Friends and neighbors, they form a mini-religious community that began when Sr. Helen moved into the apartment complex at Cherry Hill and Henry Ruff in Westland.

Later, through word-of-mouth, the other three nuns moved in as well. Each of the nuns has her own apartment.

"This is happening all over the country," said Sr. Gloria.

There are no longer enough sisters to fill 'large convents,' she added. "Some will rent a house and others rent apartments."

Sr. Sharon feels "lucky" to be a sister now. "It's exciting, it stretches the mind."

She enjoys attending workshops and seminars which focus on the role of today's nuns. And she talks of changes in the Catholic Church which began after Vatican II, the church's ecumenical council in the early 1960s. It was a time of challenge to the Church's authority, and priests and nuns were leaving in droves.

As a result of Vatican II, nuns were given the option to modify their clothing from the traditional long habits and veils to shorter versions and, eventually, to the same type of clothing that other women wear.

Vatican II also gave nuns the option of keeping the names they were given when they became nuns or going back to their birth names. (All four of the Westland nuns opted to return to using their birth names.)

"The changes came fast, and shook up a lot of people," said the brown-eyed, petite Sr. Sharon whose twin sister is married. "I get really uptight when people talk about clothes. The commitment is the same."

For Sr. Elizabeth, the change in work clothes had its drawbacks.

"I loved my old habit," she commented. "It was blue, and it was beautiful." But beautiful or not, she feels people respond more warmly to the pantsuits and skirts in which she now outfits herself.

"A habit could be a coverup," she added. "It sets you apart."

Sr. Helen agrees.

"I can remember the day I took off my habit," she recalled. "I hadn't worn my legs or hair for a long time."

"The idea was to make us accessible to people," added Sr. Helen. "It wasn't done flipper."

BESIDES CHANGES in outward trappings, there were opportunities for nuns to leave the communal, monastic life of the convent, as the ranks of the sisterhood dwindled. And they began to take more responsibility for their lives.

For instance, nuns now apply for positions which they wish to hold — in teaching, nursing, pastoral ministry (visiting and counseling parishioners) and religious studies. Previously they were arbitrarily assigned to a church or school.

The new rules allow them to remain near family and friends. Helen hails from Flint, and the others are native Detroiters.

Assignment selection is done in "dialogue," which Sr. Sharon describes as a "discussion in the spirit of listening and caring together."

Now they apply for positions and sign a contract for their services. They receive an annual compensation of about \$5,000 — half two-thirds to which is donated for support of elderly, retired nuns.

In addition, they receive a place to live — either communal or separate, depending on the church's resources. Their health insurance also is paid.

After expenses have been budgeted out "we have about \$2,000 to live on," said Sr. Gloria. "It's enough."

MEETING THESE contractual obligations means heavy schedules that often include night meetings, weekend conferences with staff or parishioners and workshops and classes to keep abreast of developments in their field.

Leisure-time activities for Sr. Sharon include reading and music. She also confesses to being "hooked" on football. Sr. Gloria enjoys traveling and the theater, while Sr. Elizabeth loves to indulge a green thumb and her apartment and office are filled with plants.

All four enjoy get-togethers with friends among their sisterhood, especially Sr. Elizabeth, who keenly misses the nuns with whom she shared

convent life at Holy Name Church in Birmingham for 11 years.

They also expressed satisfaction with their role in the church. None talked of wishing to be a priest instead of a nun, although they acknowledged the influence of the women's liberation movement.

"The church was — and is — dominated by men," said Sr. Sharon. "Some are threatened by the idea of women priests."

"I think it's (women priests) going to evolve," said Sr. Gloria. "It's so futuristic, it's hard to get into the skin of it."

"If it happens, it will be because of the Holy Spirit," added Sr. Helen. "We don't know if the Holy Spirit is a he or she."

Sr. Helen added that she finds militancy upsetting. "I don't like to see T-shirts screaming, 'Priest Now,'" she said. "It's too sacred."

What does the future hold for these women? It could mean new assignments and moving to other areas of challenge within the church in another location. Or returning to a communal lifestyle.

"It was circumstances that brought us to this geographical location," said Sr. Sharon, who has been living in her Westland apartment for a little more than a year.

For Sr. Elizabeth, it will hopefully mean a return to communal life.

After two years in her apartment, she misses the companionship and of life in the convent. "I miss prayer time," she said.

"You run dry and need to start fresh (periodically)," said Sr. Elizabeth.

"Women can contribute a lot to the church," said Sr. Helen.

"As the church changes, we must move with it."


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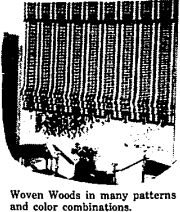
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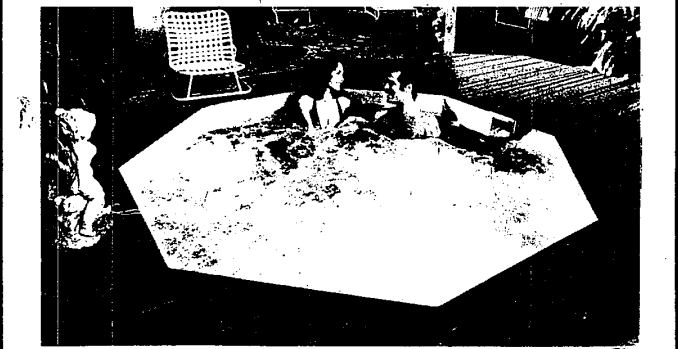
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