



The sisters live as family in a Norfolk convent, united by a vision of shared ministry.

By Steven G. Vegh
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NORFOLK

At 6:15 a.m. on a late spring weekday, the women in the dorm-sized home at 7813 Halprin Drive are already up and dressed in signature blue skirts and veils, ready for prayer.

In their chapel, the size of a two-car garage, the six nuns pray aloud for the military, for parents, for peace. They read from Scripture. They sing, a cappella: "Come dance in the forest, come play in the field, and sing! Sing to the glory of the Lord."

Twenty minutes later, most are at Mass across the street at St. Pius X Catholic Church. In the communion serving line, they bow heads briefly before receiving the wine and wafer.

After Mass, though, the reverence relaxes. Some nuns scoot to their day jobs as master's-degree professionals at parochial school or parish.

A threesome, Sisters Brenda Query, Marita McGonigle and Bernadette Taraschi, settle down to a leisurely breakfast at the brick and avocado-colored convent.

In the bright yellow kitchen with a crucifix over the cupboards and chocolate cake on the counter, Sister Bernadette smooths peanut butter on a banana and bagel and scans The Pilot's sports section. Sister Brenda, the convent's superior, munches a powdered-sugar doughnut.

Conversation is all household chit-chat: A big, overnight storm knocked down the garden fence. What will a plumber charge to unclog the sink in the five-stall bathroom (where a copy of America, the Jesuit magazine, is handy)? What flavor of cake will Sister Marita bake for a nun's birthday?

Sister Bernadette rounds off her meal with a slice of the chocolate cake, still poring over the newspaper. "Oh, the Phillies are in second place! Yes!" she exults.

"Here comes our plumber," Sister Brenda says as a handyman knocks at the back door.

Easygoing collegiality, practical dress and liberty to roam outside the convent — in many ways, these nuns' lives differ from the ways of yesteryear.

"It was very restrictive. We seldom went out — most of your life was in the convent," says Sister Marita, a nun since 1937. "What the superior said — that was that! I remember those days. I don't think it would be acceptable in these days."

Yet the core of a religious sister's vocational life remains unchanged since the 1845 founding of this order, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

"Poverty, chastity and obedience," Sister Brenda says. "That's important, very important to our religious life, the three vows or sacred promises that we make."

In the 1970s, as many as 14 religious sisters lived in the Halprin convent, which opened 53 years ago.

This spring, the convent was down to six, and then it dropped to five in July, matching the de-



The sisters of Halprin Drive pray at the convent chapel earlier this year. In the foreground, from left, are Sister Bernadette Taraschi, Sister Regina Stupak and Sister Marita McGonigle; back row from left are Sister Linda Taber, Sister Roseanne Rodgers and Sister Brenda Query.



After Mass, Sister Brenda walks across the street to the convent that has housed the nuns of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for 53 years. The convent was originally created as housing for St. Pius X Catholic School's teachers.

cline in Catholic nuns nationwide, from 173,865 in 1965 to 79,876 in 2000. Yet among this small group, who range in age from 40s to 90s, the flame of faith still burns brightly, each woman proud to be an "IHM."

There was Sister Brenda, a Norfolk native whose cheerful even-handedness upends the stereotype of autocratic mother superiors.

Sister Regina Stupak, a lap-swimming coal-miner's granddaughter who directs religious education at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church.

Sister Linda Taber, a military brat from Virginia Beach and one-time missionary in Peru who is principal of St. Pius X Catholic School.

Sister Roseanne Rodgers, a St. Pius X schoolteacher whose "beeoteeful" betrays her Philadelphia accent.

Sister Bernadette, "Battlerstar Galactica" fan, a shorts-and-T-shirt gardener and the religious education minister at St. Pius X Catholic Church.

And Sister Marita, a retired St. Pius X teacher and grandmotherly cake baker extraordinaire who came to the Norfolk convent in 1972.

At its best, the convent feels like a family, united by a religious vision of shared ministry and closeness to God.

"Everyone puts down their roots, and this is my family group right now," Sister Regina says. "In a sense, we're all in the same boat."

All professional women, most with graduate degrees, they live like college roommates. Each nun chooses when she'll perform her "charge," or house-keeping duty. Sister Marita,

for example, was responsible for cleaning the kitchen until she left last month for the order's retirement home in Immaculata, Pa. Sister Roseanne takes care of the hall and dining room, while Sister Regina pays the bills and cleans the chapel.

Everyone contributes to the shopping list that Sister Brenda fills when she goes to the supermarket.

"Sister Bernadette is the cookie monster; she loves her chocolate cookies — she might say, 'How about getting some Chips Ahoy, or Double Stuf,'" Sister Brenda says.

Each sister also chooses her own time for private daily prayer, reciting the rosary and spiritual reading, a separate obligation from the chapel services.

Once a month is local assem-

bly, a house meeting where anything from the need for a new kitchen mixer to the need for new IHM recruits is discussed.

Occasional personality conflicts are a given as mature women live cheek-by-jowl, particularly when a nun gets transferred to an unfamiliar convent.

"I wouldn't say that in every place I was, I was totally accepted," says Sister Regina, a sunny personality. "There was one place where I couldn't figure out what was wrong with them — because I'm a really nice person!"

Sister Bernadette knows the feeling. "There's usually always one person I rub the wrong way, or they rub me."

The IHM order tries to smooth such friction.

"It's written in our rule: Every sister you live with deserves your fidelity, your comradeship," Sister Bernadette says. "For us, your first priority is your personal relationship with God, your soul; second is the sisters you live with."

She adds: "We have a very nice community here, but you also have your bedroom where you can close the door."

On another day, Sister Roseanne's seventh-grade religion class stands, facing a crucifix, wearing St. Pius X school uniforms of white shirts and blue pants or plaid skirts.

"Pray for my cousin who's going to Iraq," one pupil says.

"Pray for my aunt who has cancer," says another.

"Pray for my dad who's in the Navy and has to go to sea," says a third.

Sister Roseanne leads the boys in an "Our Father" and "Hail Mary." In the moment, it's like nothing has changed since the heyday of teaching nuns — familiar to cradle-Catholics of the Depression and baby-boom generations.

The Halprin Drive convent



Sister Regina Stupak takes a swim at the Norfolk Fitness and Wellness Center. The Vatican relaxed rules on nuns' dress, including bathing suits, in the 1960s.



“We were anachronistic; we had to change.” Sister Regina Stupak, on the Vatican's ruling in the 1960s giving nuns greater freedom

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