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was created to provide teachers for St. Pius' school. These days, Sister Roseanne is the school's only teaching sister, leading six religion and civics classes.

Her salary, like those paid by outside employers – including Sister Brenda, who gets a Navy wage as a religious education coordinator at Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base – goes directly into the convent's bank account. Shared expenses like utilities are paid out of that kitty.

Each sister gets \$50 a month in spending money. (Five dollars of that goes to charity.) No one owns a car. Sister Linda, a keen cyclist, saved for nearly two years to buy a bicycle.

But nuns today also have freedoms once unheard of.

In the old days, IHM nuns in training were denied home visits with family. Nuns in the field stayed in the convent when not at their outside jobs as teachers. Swimsuits had to extend to the knees. Habits were head-to-toe black, with only face and hands showing.

Those rules are history, revoked by IHM itself after the reformist Second Vatican Council in the 1960s urged orders to examine whether practices hindered modern ministry.

"We were anachronistic. We had to change," says Sister Regina, who wears a polka-dot "fraulein" costume and plays the accordion at her parish's annual Oktoberfest. She also swims in an ordinary bathing suit at Norfolk's city pools.

These days in convents, there is "freedom to be yourself, freedom to express yourself," she says. "We've got great conversations – you don't have to be afraid that something isn't the community line."

At 5 p.m. the sisters regroup for evening chapel, which includes prayers for every IHM nun who died on the next day's date.

"Sister Louise Devine, 1934, Sister Julia Kelly, 1946 ..."

Twenty minutes later, the nuns are forking leftover Chinese food and pork roast onto their dinner plates; their week-night cook is off this night.

In the dining room, where pictures of IHM's founding priest and sister hang, the meal is full of chit-chat about nieces, Beijing's air pollution, Polynesian dance lessons and a Sav-A-Lot bargain on apples – \$2.99 a bag.

"Over at Farm Fresh they were \$4.99," Sister Regina says with satisfaction.

Moments later, the ceiling light snaps off. "Happy birthday to you!" the sisters sing, presenting a candlelit cake to a beaming Sister Roseanne.

"Oh, it's beeooteeful!" she says.

The white cake with butter cream frosting is cut and passed around while Sister Regina kids Sister Marita about last Saturday night.

"We're playing dominoes and the regional superior calls, and Sister Marita takes the phone and keeps playing!" Sister Regina says, to howls of mirth. "None of us would talk to her because we were all concentrating!"

Sister Roseanne, whose bedspread this day was sprinkled with birthday cards, is also celebrating her 50th anniversary, or jubilee, as a nun. That means gifts from the household: an Our Lady of Lourdes card, two Surf Rider restaurant gift cards and a 700-minute telephone card. "Oh, my gosh, I'll be talking for a long, long time!" Sister Roseanne exclaims.

"Now, don't expect anything else," Sister Brenda says, to laughter.

The banter rolls on until the superior ends the meal with prayer. "We give you thanks for your benefits, O mighty God, who lives and reigns forever," she says in the hush.

In 1932, Sister Marita was among more than 100 first-year trainees joining the Immacu-



CHRIS TYREE PHOTOS | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Sister Marita McGonigle, who took her final vows in 1937, takes some time to herself in the Halprin Drive convent. After 36 years there, the retired Catholic school teacher left last month for the order's retirement home in Pennsylvania. With her departure, the convent was down to five.

late Heart of Mary order. Sister Linda had 34 in her IHM entering class, or band, in 1969. By 1983, Sister Bernadette's band had just 12. These days, the order sees only two to four new recruits a year, she says.

Locally, a lack of nuns forced IHM to give up supplying teaching sisters to Star of the Sea parish school in Virginia Beach, and the old Norfolk Catholic High School, in recent decades. The order still has a convent at St. Gregory the Great Catholic Church in Virginia Beach.

At the Norfolk convent, where many of the second floor bedrooms are vacant, the sisters ponder the whys of the vocational slump.

Back in the 1940s and '50s, "we were more spiritual, not material. I didn't have my own car, my own apartment," says Sister Roseanne, who joined at 23. "I

kept thinking about giving back for what you received."

For Sister Bernadette, the difference is 40 years of women's gains in career options and roles in the Catholic church.

"It's not that God has stopped calling," she says, "it's that it's harder for people to listen – there's more things in the way."

Sister Linda isn't sure what's behind the slump, but she bristles at greeting cards and wind-up toys – "Nun-zilla" carries a ruler and shoots sparks from her mouth – that lampoon Catholic nuns and perpetuate stereotypes.

"Some of that subliminally perpetuates things that don't really exist," she says.

Yet the possibility that their order could wink out of existence – it has 980 nuns, down from its heyday of about 2,000

– is not a big worry. The sisters are upbeat about IHM's trickle of novices; some orders have none.

And they simply trust. Sister Bernadette says she doesn't pray for an uptick in vocations.

Rather, she asks God, "Are we doing what you want us to do as a community for this century? And may we keep listening, Lord, to follow what you want."

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The sisters live as family, celebrating birthdays – Sister Roseanne Rodger's on this day – and commemorating the deaths of those who came before them. Everyone contributes to the running of the household.



Sister Linda Taber visits with students at St. Pius X Catholic School in Norfolk, where she serves as principal. Her salary, like the rest of the nuns', goes into the convent's shared bank account.

“It's not that God has stopped calling, it's that it's harder for people to listen ...” Sister Bernadette Taraschi, on the dwindling ranks of nuns

online
Watch a video about the sisters and their convent at Hampton Roads.com.