

OSBs see boost in vocations

BY MARY SOLBERG | FAITHLIFE

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie have broken national vocation trends recently by welcoming four women into their community.

It's the first time in nearly 20 years that so many have entered the monastic religious order at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery.

"It's new life," says Benedictine Sister Marilyn Schauble, vocation director. "It gives you a little spark."

The new members of the Benedictine community are:

■ Sister Pat Witulski of Buffalo, N.Y., who professed her first vows in August

■ Sister Ann Michaud of Salem, Mass., who entered the novitiate in mid-November

■ Dina Lauricella of Lusby, Md., who became a postulant in October

■ Karen Oprechok of Windsor, Ontario, Canada, who became a postulant Nov. 2.

All of the women are in their 50s and considered to be in the initial monastic formation stage. Another common denominator, Sister Marilyn explains, is that each of the women researched several other religious communities before committing to the Benedictines of Erie. They all have been working with Erie's inner-city poor.

"It's both exciting and a real call to deepen our own commitment to this way of life," Sister Marilyn adds.

The bump in vocations at the Mount also has impressed Patrice Tuohy, publisher of VISION Vocation Guide, a publication of the National Religious Vocation Conference, based in Chicago. Most men's and women's religious orders throughout the country, she says, have zero to only one new



Sister Marilyn Schauble, OSB, vocation director

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vocation per year.

"What I find interesting about the Benedictines of Erie is that they're more progressive," Tuohy says. "They have name recognition and some popular sisters who are recognized nationally."

Tuohy explains that while there has been an overall dearth in the numbers entering religious communities, researchers are beginning to see a slight increase. One reason might be that more religious communities are using the Internet to spread their message and attract new members.

According to Tuohy, VISION's

online vocation match program receives about 5,000 completed profile forms a year from people considering religious life.

"We're just starting to see the fruits of the new access to information," Tuohy says.

Sister Marilyn, who has been vocation director at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery since 2010, believes that technology helps play a role in increasing vocations. She can easily gauge the interest in the Benedictines by the number of people reading stories about the community on their website and elsewhere in the cyber universe.

In order to remain current, she must react quickly and efficiently, via email and texting, to vocation

inquiries. Right now, she is having conversations with women in their 20s to 40s. Sister Marilyn knows she must draw in younger women.

"You always have to think of the future of the community," she says.

The flip side of increased technology, however, is that it seems to encourage more independence, or isolation, from the very thing that personifies religious orders: communities of sharing. Also, many women being drawn to religious life now are older than those who entered a generation ago.

"I think one of the things that is challenging about religious life now is that they [women] are a little older, have degrees and jobs and own houses and cars, but they don't usually have the monastic experience of living interdependently," Sister Marilyn explains.

The newest Benedictines of Erie have joined 101 sisters living in community.



Pope Francis has proclaimed 2015 a "Year of Consecrated Life," starting on the first Sunday of Advent (the weekend of Nov. 29, 2014) and ending Feb. 2, 2016, the World Day of Consecrated Life.

The Diocese of Erie will begin the year-long celebration with a Mass at the Mercy Motherhouse, 444 East Grandview Blvd., Erie, on Nov. 20 at 7 p.m., with Bishop Lawrence Persico officiating.

Why religious life?

DINA LAURICELLA

"What attracted me to religious life was living life communally with like-minded people, coming together daily to pray the psalms and seek God. It was important to me to be part of an active community and the Benedictine Sisters of Erie have so many vital ministries that serve the area. It has made it easy to jump right in."

SISTER PAT WITULSKI, OSB

"It was my heart's desire to live in a religious community that valued the common prayer life and community living. ... I am humbled, blessed and privileged to work at Emmaus Ministries, a Christian presence and outreach for the forgotten and marginal in Erie's inner-city."

KAREN OPRENCHOK

"I am responding to God's call for me. After many years of prayer, travel and discernment, I believe that God has led me to this particular community, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, to live with them to carry out God's will by means of prayer and ministry. This is what I desire."

ANN MICHAUD

"I was attracted to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie because of their variety of ministries directed toward the needs of the people of Erie, their inclusivity...and their dedication 'to be[ing] a healing presence and prophetic witness for peace by working for sustainability and justice, especially for women and children.' That vision is so needed in our world today. When I finally visited the community, I felt as if I had finally come home."



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The women in initial monastic formation at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery, left to right, are: Dina Lauricella, Sister Pat Witulski, Karen Oprechok and Sister Ann Michaud.