



Poor Clares Visit St. Joseph's

By Steve Newton

It's a Sunday in mid-October, and Father Steve Kluge has conspired with a parishioner to have a loaded question posed to a group of Poor Clare nuns visiting St. Joseph. About 45 people have gathered in Father Friend Hall to learn more about the Poor Clares and their 15-member monastic community located near the city of Travelers Rest. After Father Steve opened the question-and-answer session with a reminder that "The Poor Clares need to be home quickly!" his co-conspirator asked the following:

"So—what are you nuns doing out of your monastery anyway?"

Suspecting correctly from whom the question really came, Sister Nancy Shively gave a look to Father Steve that spoke of the good-natured back and forth shared among siblings, which is what the Franciscans Friars and the Poor Clare Sisters are. "Well...we don't usually leave our home, as ours is a ministry of prayer," she said, "but we can go out as needed, and we just can't say no to our brothers."

Joining Sister Nancy were three other sisters from the Poor Clare Monastery, which has been part of the Upstate for 60 years. There was Sister Bernadette Marie Cappola, currently celebrating her 50th year as a nun. She had started in another order and traveled around much of the U.S. and Canada before arriving with the Poor Clares in 1998. Sister Mary Connor has been at the Poor Clare Monastery since 1975 and serves as the community's Abbess. And there was Sister Sharon Ratteree, who recently made her solemn profession following a multi-year discernment process.

The Order of St. Clare (OSC) was founded by Clare of Assisi more than 800



From left, Poor Clare nuns Mary Connor, Sharon Ratteree, and Bernadette Marie Cappola from Travelers Rest listen to Father Steve Kluge during a recent visit to St. Joseph's.

years ago. St. Clare was an early follower of St. Francis of Assisi, and it was her desire to form a contemplative community based on Franciscan principles. With a membership of around 17,000, the Poor Clares are the world's largest contemplative order. Like their Franciscan brothers, the Sisters wear a habit that contains a knotted waist cord symbolizing their religious vows. The Poor Clares' cord bears four knots as the Sisters have an additional vow—one of enclosure within their community—in addition to the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience taken by their male counterparts.

The community in Travelers Rest is one of 30 Poor Clare monasteries in the U.S. As explained by Sister Mary, the Poor Clares first arrived in this country back in the 1870s when Poor Clares from Europe settled in the Midwest. The order spread out from there, and in 1954 the area's original Poor Clare Monastery was established on North Pleasantburg Drive near Greenville to support the

Continued on next page



The “Privilege of Poverty”

Continued from previous page

growing number of Franciscans in the area. The order’s new home in Travelers Rest was opened in 2008.

In response to a question about what a typical day is like for them, Sister Nancy said their day is based on the ideals of St. Clare, who said that the community will be dependent on God’s providence and enjoy the “privilege of poverty.” Their communal days begin with morning prayers followed by an hour of Eucharistic adoration before the Eucharist celebration at 9 AM. A work period follows until lunchtime. With a 25,000-square-foot building on a 15-acre plot, Sister Nancy says they have a lot of work to do each day. The Sisters also manage several small-scale enterprises to help make ends meet, including preparation of altar breads for several parishes across the nation, creation of prayer remembrance cards, and the operation of the La Foresta Retreat House at their facility. Nevertheless, the main service provided by the Poor Clares is their prayer ministry, and donations to the monastery account for 80 percent of the community’s income.

At noon, the sisters observe the Office of Readings followed by a communal dinner—their main meal of the day. After

this, a brief rest period is observed followed with an evening prayer service held at 5 and a final communal night prayer at 6:15. The Sisters get one week-long period away from the monastery each year to visit family.

A question about the formation process was fielded by Sister Sharon, the community’s newest member. Sharon explained that the process involves a one-year postulancy, a two-year novitiate period, and then three years living under simple vows. Final vows are taken at the end of this total six-year period. Sister Bernadette added that the Sisters make vows to their individual communities. As such, it is very rare for a Poor Clare to transfer to another Poor Clare community or to be reassigned to different areas like their Franciscan brothers. The discernment process is rigorous. “First, one must discern a religious vocation,” said Bernadette. “Secondly, one must discern a vocation to be a Poor Clare. Finally, you must discern a vocation to be part of a particular group of women.”

The event concluded with some speculation about a “Wow! Who knew?” factoid about St. Clare—she is the Patron Saint of Television. Asked how this came to be, Sister Mary said it was due to a story about how St. Clare had a real-time vision of her community’s Christmas Mass service while she was confined to a sickbed. Father Steve offered an alternative theory—back in the old days of cloister, those knocking on the door of a Poor Clare monastery were greeted by a nun looking through a small rectangular window, which served to frame the nun’s head like a television set.

The Sisters looked dubious upon hearing Steve’s explanation. Finally, Mary sighed with a bemused resignation echoing that of an older sister dealing with an errant younger sibling and said, “Well—if you say it, then it’s true.”

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