

Different roads, SAME SPIRIT

Lorren Harbin and Kathy Schaefer first met just a little over two years ago. And while their physical paths have been markedly distant — one lives near Grand Junction, Colo., while the other lives just outside Wichita — their spiritual paths brought them together in Concordia on a Saturday morning in June.

Lorren and Kathy became the two newest members of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia during a special Mass and ceremony at the Nazareth Motherhouse June 9. Each professed a vow of fidelity to God and to the congregation as an agrégée sister.

The term *agrégée* — pronounced *ah-gre-ZHEY* — comes from the French for “attached to” or “aggregated with.” (See story at far right.)

The congregation received Sisters Lorren and Kathy as agrégée candidates in June 2010. And, they note, they are the first two who entered together and who took their vows together.

Sister Lorren, who lives in Fruita, Colo., now teaches at-risk high school students. But the 59-year-old Alabama native spent 30 years in the tourism industry in Florida before moving to Colorado about seven years ago.

At that time, she described herself as a “Sunday and holiday Catholic.” But, she notes, “Throughout my life, because I was always single, I’d wonder about religious life. It was always a curiosity, but I never pursued it; I didn’t know any sisters.”

That changed in the fall of 2006 when she signed up for a “Just Faith” class at a Grand Junction church and met Sisters Pat Lewter and Faye Huelsmann, both Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia.

“I was being introduced to modern sisters for the first time,” she recalls. And then she met Ann Ashwood, who

entered the agrégée program in 2008 and professed her vow as a Sister of St. Joseph in 2010.

“Ann said she wanted what (Sisters Pat and Faye) had: Happiness, peace, serenity, fun and an openness to new ideas and adventures,” Lorren said on the day before she was to profess her vow at the Motherhouse. “I want that, too. My life experience has led me to this.”

And people from throughout that life experience were here June 9 when she became Sister Lorren. Her special guests included her mother from Kissimmee, Fla., a sister from Kalispell, Mont., one brother from Houston and another from Dallas, her best friend and neighbor in Fruita and a family from her home parish.

Father Mike Smith, the pastor at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Fruita, was also on hand, to jointly celebrate the Mass with Father Jim Hoover, the Motherhouse chaplain.

Unlike Sister Lorren, Kathy Schaefer was attracted to religious life early on. “At my eighth-grade graduation, I told my mom I was interested in being a sister,” the 62-year-old recalls. But she was counseled to wait until after high school to make a commitment.

By that time, it felt like the call had lessened, she says now, but it returned intermittently over the next couple of decades.

Finally, in the early 1990s, she entered the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, a small monastic community in Clyde, Mo. “The prayer life called to me, but the monastic life did not,” Sister Kathy says now. She remained with the Benedictines for just two years.

It was about that time that she met Jean Ann Walton, who had entered the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia in the early 1980s but left after seven years in the congregation.

So the former Benedictine and former Sister of St. Joseph decided religious life was probably just not for them.



SISTER LORREN
HARBIN



SISTER KATHY
SCHAEFER



Kathy Schaefer, left, and Lorren Harbin join in prayer just moments before they profess their vows of fidelity June 9 in the Sacred Heart Chapel at the Nazareth Motherhouse.

BELOW: Sister Marcia Allen, right, leads the vow ceremony for Lorren and Kathy, with their agrégée mentors looking on.



“But God is patient,” Kathy notes with a laugh.

By 2000, Jean Ann had reconnected with the Concordia sisters, and she invited Kathy along to a retreat in Concordia. Here Kathy met Sister Mary Julia Stegeman, who shared her love of gardening.

In 2004, Kathy explains, “Sister Mary Julia asked me if I

ever thought about being an Associate, and in 2006 I became a CSJ Associate. Then in 2007 she asked me if I ever thought about being an agrégée, and in 2010 — just two months after Sister Mary Julia’s death — I became an agrégée candidate.”

In the meantime, her friend Jean Ann Walton had also become a candidate; she professed her vow as an agrégée in June 2010.

Today Sister Kathy lives in Augusta, Kan., where she works in the laundry at Lake Point Nursing Center. She also offers informal pastoral ministry to both residents and staff there, and assists at her parish, St. Vincent de Paul in Andover, Kan.

Guests attending her profession included her brother from Marblehead, Mass., and a nephew from Scottsdale, Ariz., as well as a number of friends from work.

A special guest was Sister Patty Johnson, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet in St. Louis who is executive director of the Sisters of St. Joseph Federation. She and Sister Kathy met while they were both attending a monthlong program at Manna House of Prayer in Concordia.



FRONT, from left: Sister Bette Moslander, Sister Marcia Allen and Dian Hall. MIDDLE, from left: Sister Kathy Schaefer, Sister Jan McCormick, Sister Jean Ann Walton, candidate Virginia Flax, Sister Ann Ashwood and candidate Crystal Payment. BACK, from left: Sister Sharon Hayes, Sister Rosemary Foreman, Sister Lorren Harbin, candidate Susan Klepper, candidate Beth Weddle and Sister Rosabel Flax.

Ah-gre-ZHEY? A return to our roots

In reaching back to our roots in 17th century France, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia discovered — and revitalized — a type of committed spiritual life for women known as “agrégées.”

The order, which has grown worldwide over the centuries and now has autonomous congregations in more than 50 countries, began in the French city of LePuy in 1650. Based on research into the original constitution and rules for the congregation, written by founder and Jesuit priest Jean-Pierre Medaille, the sisters now recognize that in addition to vowed members of the order, there were also “agrégées,” from a French word meaning “attached to” or “aggregated with.”

An agrégée — pronounced *ah-gre-ZHEY* — did not make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. But she lived according to the rules of the Sisters of St. Joseph, and was recognized by the local people and the local churches as a Sister of St. Joseph.

In the past decades, the modern Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia studied their origins and their original spirituality, and have now revived that early practice based on what they learned. The details came together in a committee led by Sister Bette Moslander, and the Senate of the Concordia congregation approved agrégée membership in 2006.

The first modern agrégée — Rosabel Flax of Ness City, Kan. — professed a vow of fidelity to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia in 2008. In 2009, Rosemary Foreman of Topeka, Kan., became the second agrégée to join the Concordia congregation. Jean Ann Walton of Augusta, Kan., and Ann Ashwood of Grand Junction, Colo., professed their vows in June 2010, followed by Sharon Hayes of Kansas City, Mo., and Jan McCormick of Chapman, Kan., in 2011.

Four other women are currently agrégée candidates, while another candidate has left the agrégée program to move toward canonically vowed membership as a novice.

Agrégées are defined as those persons who commit themselves to active and inclusive love of God and the dear neighbor as expressed in the spirit and spirituality of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia. In almost every aspect, they are viewed as full members of the congregation, meaning they have a voice and a vote on congregational issues.

There are three significant differences, however.

► “Vowed sisters” profess the canonical — meaning governed by Church law — vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. As part of the vow of poverty, an individual sister relinquishes all personal wealth and income; at the same time, the congregation assumes responsibility for her economic well being for the rest of her life.

► “Agrégée sisters” profess a vow of fidelity to the congregation, but it is noncanonical, meaning that it is not part of Church law and is instead a private vow between that sister and the Concordia congregation. It also means that the

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Saturday, Sept. 22
in Concordia
to learn more about our
Agrégée Membership
(a 21st-century call to religious life)
& meet our Sisters.

Please RSVP to
Sister Rosabel Flax
rosabelflax@csjkansas.org
785/798-0327

agrégée does not relinquish her finances to the congregation, and the congregation assumes no financial responsibility for her.

► Also, vowed sisters begin their religious life with a formal “formation” that includes a postulancy and novitiate that are, together, about three years. During this time, they have left their previous life, but haven’t yet taken up their work as a Sister of St. Joseph. For agrégées, the period of being a candidate may be about the same length of time, but they do not leave behind their outside lives. Instead, they meet with mentors and study around their regular work and life schedules. And once they have professed their vows, they return to that work and life schedule.

Other congregations of St. Joseph have developed similar definitions or are doing their own studies, but the Concordia congregation is the first to recognize agrégées as full members of the community.

In Concordia, the definition of who may be an agrégée is continuing to be refined as individuals feel called to the community, explained Sister Marcia Allen, the president of the congregation.