Concordia congregation adapts as more women are called to join

When Amanda Wahlmeyer and Emily Brito were welcomed into the Sisters of St. Joseph in mid-November, they were also welcomed into a new approach for preparing women for religious life.

Since the Concordia congregation began welcoming candidates for agrégée membership in 2006, there have been two “tracks” of what was traditionally called “formation.”

For “canonically vowed sisters,” it was a formal process that included one year as a postulant and two years as a novice before professed vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. For “agrégée sisters,” it was a less formal but still structured process that generally lasted about three years before professing a single promise of fidelity to the congregation and to God. Taken together, 19 women have come to the community in the past eight years, most as candidates for agrégée membership and two as canonical sisters.

But the new approach does away with the distinction between the two tracks—at least for the first two years.

With the new “Preparation and Integration Program,” Amanda and Emily were welcomed into the congregation together as candidates and will continue preparing for religious life together.

As they enter their third year, each candidate will decide which direction she is called to—either canonical or agrégée. At that point, canonical candidates—who in that final year of preparation will be called “novices”—will complete the study and other requirements of the Church as a woman religious. The agrégée candidates in their third year will continue the study required by the congregation to be received into the Sisters of St. Joseph.

The two forms of membership are the same in almost every aspect, but there are two significant differences:

- A “canonically vowed sister” professes the three vows of poverty, charity and obedience, as defined by canon—or Church—law. As part of the vow of poverty, an individual sister relinquishes all personal wealth and income; at the same time, the congregation assumes complete responsibility for her economic well-being for the rest of her life.
- A “canonically vowed sister” professes a vow of fidelity to the congregation, but it is noncanonical, meaning that it is not governed by Church law and is instead a private vow between that sister and the Concordia congregation. And while it encompasses the three canonical vows, they are applied somewhat differently. The agrégée is called to live a simple lifestyle, but she does not relinquish her finances to the congregation, and the congregation assumes no financial responsibility for her.

There’s a belonging, an inner strength, a different kind of energy, a greater confidence in what I’m about and what I’m doing... That all feels like part of the mystery of religious life in today’s world. — Sister Rosanne Fossum, Toronto

I’d never heard of the word ‘agrégée’ before, but I loved what I heard. It was consistent with how I lived my life. — Sister Shawn Mee, Kansas City, Mo.

I knew there was a calling from God. It’s shown me that what God wants, God gets—even if it takes a lifetime. — Sister Anne Marie Wetzel, Augusta, Kan.

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These quotes are from past articles on individual sisters, to help you understand what drew them to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia.

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