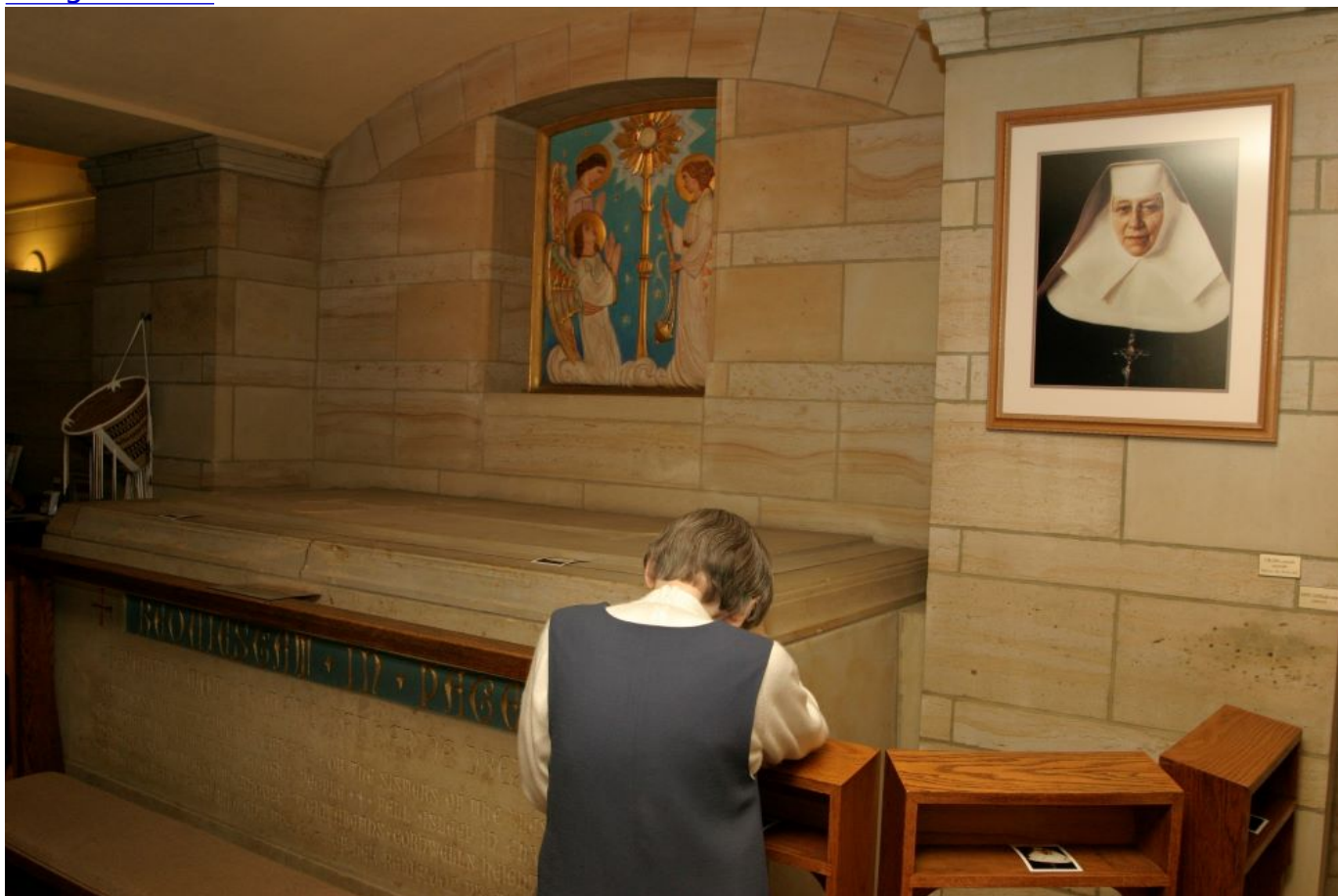


[Opinion](#)  
[Soul Seeing](#)  
[Religious Life](#)



A Sister of the Blessed Sacrament prays before the tomb of the congregation's foundress, St. Katharine Drexel, in May 2016 at the former motherhouse in Bensalem, Pennsylvania. (CNS/CatholicPhilly.com/Sarah Webb)



by Francine Dempsey

[View Author Profile](#)

[\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

October 1, 2022

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

In January, our bird and squirrel neighbors lost their homes because we took down some invasive species infected decomposing trees. Did the creatures feel sad when they fled the tiny but powerful emerald ash beetle's attack and searched for new shelter, sadness like that expressed by some sisters as they ponder the looming loss of a building long called home? Indeed, some of them mourn aloud, "But *this* is our *home*."

"This" refers to the typical "motherhouse" in which retired sisters reside in independent living, assisted care and infirmary care wings. To passersby the building looks substantial, but those inside know the reality: aging plumbing, leaky ceilings, creaky stairs, always breaking down elevators and an aging religious community — no members below 60, median age 80. Religious orders, like once sturdy trees, are decomposing.

And those words, "but this is our home," hold fear. Yes, many families are far worse off, facing the loss of their homes for inability to make mortgage or rent payments. Some, too many, face homelessness. Religious communities, as they grow smaller, face unavoidable residence, lifestyle and health care changes, but have no fear of ending up on the street. Sale of our current property will support our remaining years, wherever we have to spend them.

Study a map of the United States, highlight the motherhouses of religious communities in 2000, and cross out the ones already torn down or sold. A real blight. Inside most remaining longtime large residences are committees planning how to dispose of land and buildings when they are no longer needed. *When the last sister dies.*

Are we called to discern a deeper way to be prophetic, following Jesus wherever he leads us, knowing the Spirit holds us close? Knowing the journey is home enough?

[Tweet this](#)

Might this looming death of her religious community be the heart of a sister's fear of losing "our home"? Is that why some of us hang on with desperate hope of reviving the former number of vocations, returning to the way things were — back to "normal"?

In 1650 in France, [small groups of Catholic women](#), mostly widows, but some single, living in a war-ravaged, impoverished land, read the Gospel alongside the signs of their times and founded a radical, revolutionary way to walk in Jesus' footsteps. They acted against the Catholic hierarchy's rule that women called to religious life must do so as "nuns," walled up in locked monasteries forever. Our foremothers, holy rebels, chose instead to live in small houses with open doors. Called "sisters," they prayed together in their "convents" but also went out to the city to feed the starving, visit prisoners, establish hospitals and orphanages for the poor, and open schools, even for women.

Thus, began apostolic religious life for women. Bound together in community with vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, they opened their convent doors and created a new role for Catholic women. Over three centuries they crossed the globe. Wherever they opened a new home, God called women to join them.

Until now. As our homes come down and no new members appear, we wonder, what is next?

In the 1600s, when hearing Gospel words and living in the signs of their times, founders of the first women's apostolic communities acted as they saw Jesus acting: serving neighbors without distinction, willy-nilly creating a revolution within the church. Now those Gospel words and 21st century signs need similar discernment, similar response.

## Advertisement

Can I/we look at Jesus in the Gospel and at today's signs of the times and discern a radically new call?

Let's go back to the Gospel and look for Jesus' "home" address. After his eviction from Nazareth, he had no home, no family. After the Transfiguration, he put up no tent. Rather, with a small, traveling cadre of ordinary men and women, Jesus

preached from boats, prayed on mountaintops, socialized in other people's home. He borrowed a kitchen and dining room to celebrate Passover and the first Eucharist. That night he slept in a garden. And then on a makeshift tree, he died and was buried in someone else's cave. Jesus never, in the Gospel story, stayed home. Everywhere was his home; everyone was his family.

"Every day is a journey," [wrote the poet Matsuo Basho](#), "and the journey itself is home."

Jesus' home address was indeed the journey. The journey was his home.

Are we being called to leave our longtime homes and ways behind and discern a new way of walking with Jesus? Do we need to look at not only climate change but other signs of danger to "our common home"? Does Jesus ask us to take down our separate doors and walls and enter both physically and spiritually our "common home"? Are we called to be prophets of universal oneness, of universal love?

Should we in this time of change see not the end but the beginning — of the radically, revolutionary new? Are we called to take down categories like "Sister," to open all dividing walls and doors forever? Should we, like Jesus, find the way to make every home our home and, like Jesus, embrace the world as our common home, see with our soul and be one with everyone? Are we called to discern a deeper way to be prophetic, following Jesus wherever he leads us, knowing the Spirit holds us close? Knowing the journey is home enough?

Might Jesus last words, "That all may be one," be our call today? Might we be called to make Jesus' call a global, universal call? Let us pray.