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Episcopal nuns, priest join Catholic church

by George P. Matysek Jr. by Catholic News Service



Sister Emily Ann Lindsey and Sister Margaret Muraki pray in the chapel at the Society of All Saints Sisters of the Poor convent in Catonsville, Md., Aug. 24. (CNS photo)

BALTIMORE -- After seven years of prayer and discernment, a community of Episcopal sisters and their chaplain were to be received into the Catholic Church during a Sept. 3 Mass celebrated by Baltimore Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien.

The archbishop was to welcome 10 sisters from the Society of All Saints' Sisters of the Poor when he administers the sacrament of confirmation and the sisters renew their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in the chapel of their convent in suburban Catonsville, Md.

The Rev. Warren Tanghe, an Episcopal priest, also was to be received into the church and is discerning the possibility of becoming a Catholic priest.

In an interview with *The Catholic Review*, Baltimore archdiocesan newspaper, Mother Christina Christie, superior of the religious community, said the sisters are excited about joining the Catholic Church. The women religious have been studying the church's teachings for years, she said.

Two Episcopal nuns who have decided not to become Catholic will continue to live and minister alongside their soon-to-be Catholic sisters. Members of the community range in age from 59 to 94.

"For us, this is a journey of confirmation," Mother Christina said. "We felt God was leading us in this direction for a long time."

Once the sisters join the church they hope to form the first diocesan institute in the archdiocese.

Diocesan institutes differ from religious communities of pontifical right, such as the Dominicans, whose governance model is under the authority of the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Members of a diocesan institute are overseen directly by a diocesan bishop.

Chancellor Diane Barr said the archdiocese is working with the Vatican in developing the diocesan institute. Whether or not the order will retain its name also is being discussed, she said.

Wearing full habits with black veils and white wimples that cover their heads, the sisters have been a visible beacon of hope in Catonsville for decades.

The American branch of a society founded in England, the All Saints' Sisters of the Poor came to Baltimore in 1872. They have been at their current location since 1917.

In addition to devoting their lives to a rigorous daily prayer regimen, the sisters offer religious retreats, visit people in hospice care and maintain a scriptorium where they design inspirational religious cards.

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Throughout its time in Baltimore the order has followed its charism, which focuses on hospitality. The order has ministered with Baltimore's poor, children with special needs and AIDS patients. Together with Mount Calvary Church, an Episcopal parish in Baltimore, the sisters co-founded a hospice called the Joseph Richey House in 1987.

Orthodoxy and unity were key reasons the sisters were attracted to the Catholic faith. Many of them were troubled by the Episcopal Church's approval of women's ordination, the ordination of a gay bishop and what they regarded as lax stances on moral issues.

"We kept thinking we could help by being a witness for orthodoxy," said Sister Mary Joan Walker, the community's archivist.

Mother Christina said that effort "was not as helpful as we had hoped it would be."

"People who did not know us looked at us as if we were in agreement with what had been going on (in the Episcopal Church)," she said. "By staying put and not doing anything, we were sending a message which was not correct."

Before deciding to enter the Catholic Church, the sisters had explored Episcopal splinter groups and other Christian denominations. Mother Christina noted that some of the sisters had independently contemplated joining the Catholic Church without the others knowing. When they learned that most of them were considering the same move, they took it as a sign from God and approached Archbishop O'Brien.

"This is very much the work of the Holy Spirit," Mother Christina said.

The sisters acknowledged it has not been easy leaving the Episcopal Church, for which they expressed great affection. Some of their friends have been hurt by their pending departure, they said.

"Some feel we are abandoning the fight to maintain orthodoxy," said Sister Emily Ann Lindsey. "We're not. We're doing it in another realm right now."

The sisters have spent much of the last year studying the documents of the Second Vatican Council. They said there were few theological stumbling blocks to entering the church, although some initially had difficulty with the concept of papal infallibility.

In addition to participating in ordinary Catholic Masses, the sisters are expected to receive permission to attend Mass celebrated in the Anglican-use rite, a liturgy that adapts many of the prayers from the Episcopal tradition. Mother Christina said several archdiocesan clergy members, including Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden, have stepped forward to learn how to celebrate the Anglican-use Mass.

The sisters expressed deep affection for Pope Benedict XVI. The pope exercises an authority that Episcopal leaders do not, they said, adding that the unity Christ called for can be found in the Catholic Church under the leadership of the pope.

"Unity is right in the midst of all this," said Sister Catherine Grace Bowen. "That is the main thrust."

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