

New Orleans house gives women a place to discern their calling as nuns

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Paige LaCour, second from right, hugs Archbishop Gregory Aymond during the opening of the Magnificat House of Discernment for Women in New Orleans on Wednesday. It was a conversation the archbishop had with LaCour that began the idea for the Magnificat House of Discernment for Women. (RNS/The Times-Picayune/Rusty Costanza)

In what is being described as the first of its kind in the U.S., the Archdiocese of New Orleans has transformed a vacant church rectory into a group house where single women will live together while deciding whether to undertake lives as nuns.

The center, dedicated Wednesday, occupies the second and third floors of the St. Rita rectory. Within a few days, two women, then perhaps three more, will move into the spotless rectory, their collective lives to be superintended by two veteran nuns who will show the younger women the dynamics of shared community life.

"How we live in community. How to communicate. How to share," said Sr. Carmen Bertrand, a member of the Sisters of the Holy Family for 48 years.

Beyond orienting them to the rhythms of community life, Bertrand and her colleague, Sr. Diane Roche, a

Religious of the Sacred Heart, will teach the tenants various modes of prayer, organize occasional retreats and bring in representatives of other religious orders to present themselves and their ways of life.

The subjects of their attention will be women like Paige LaCour, 22, of Gretna, La., a recent graduate of Our Lady of Holy Cross College who's headed for graduate studies at Notre Dame Seminary, or other women working full-time jobs while considering whether they have a call to religious life, Bertrand said.

Another confirmed tenant is a lawyer-turned-teacher, Bertrand said.

Beyond that, email inquiries are beginning to appear as word of the house begins to circulate, she said.

The Magnificat House of Discernment for Women -- named for Mary's prayer of praise in the Gospel of Luke -- can hold six or eight women for stays that probably will last about six months, depending on individual circumstance, she said.

New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond said a few religious orders have similar houses of discernment for their own organizations, but apparently no other diocese has one cooperatively managed by all the local orders of religious women.

Around the country, there have been tensions between local bishops and communities of women religious. The Vatican has criticized the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the umbrella organization for most of the country's nuns, saying that an investigation found that the group had "serious doctrinal problems."



In New Orleans, however, there has been little or no sign of friction.

Aymond has been publicly supportive of the work of approximately 50 communities of women religious. In brief dedication remarks Wednesday, he explicitly praised their work.

"We are very, very blessed by the presence of the ministry, the prayerfulness, the apostolate of so many different religious communities," he said.

Aymond has a reputation in national circles as a successful generator of vocations.

He told those at the open house Wednesday that the idea was born out of a conversation with LaCour last year, when he visited a North Carolina camp where she was a counselor.

Aymond said LaCour asked him whether there was a kind of halfway house where a woman considering a vocation could live while giving the matter thought and prayer.

Aymond said he realized that though the archdiocese had such a residence for men considering the priesthood, there was nothing for women.

He said he brought the idea back to Sr. Sylvia Thibodeaux, a member of the Sisters of the Holy Family who heads the archdiocese's Department of Religious. She and colleagues from other orders helped make the new house happen.

Following unusually rich harvests of religious vocations in the 1940s and 1950s, women's vocations to religious life collapsed in the 1960s. There are now about 56,000 nuns, compared with about 180,000 in 1965.

About 1,200 women are in various states of preparation for taking final vows as Catholic nuns, according to a recent study sponsored by the National Religious Vocation Conference and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

Sr. Angele Sadlier, an educator and Carmelite nun of 62 years, was among those in the open house crowd looking over the new house for the first time. Was she worried that another religious order might outdo her Carmelites in winning the tenants' attention?

"Years ago we were very much in competition," she said. "But we work so much together now in the last few decades. I think we'll try to help them understand who we are. And we'll want them to come meet us on our ground. And trust the wisdom of God."

[Bruce Nolan writes for *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans.]

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