

# Seeking Catholic identity

*Chicago religious communities reflect trends in national study that show increase in vocations to 'traditional' congregations*

By Michelle Martin  
ASSISTANT EDITOR

When Andrea Sims, 26, enters the Little Sisters of the Poor this fall, it will be a little more than five years since the Princeton, Ill., resident began exploring the idea that God was calling her to religious life.

She remembers first feeling that she might have a religious vocation on the Fourth of July in 2004. "It was Independence Day, and at the time, I was feeling like I would be surrendering my independence," said Sims.

It wasn't particularly pleasant for Sims, who had grown up believing that she would be called to be a wife and mother.

"It was almost painful to give that up," she said. "It took a few months to embrace the calling and understand the beauty of it."

But as she explored the idea with the help of a spiritual director at Benedictine University in Lisle, and took time to learn about religious life in general and various congregations, she came to a new understanding.

"I'm not giving up my independence," said Sims, who will spend her nine-month postulancy in Washington, D.C. "In a way, I'm gaining the independence to give my whole life to the Lord."

Since that summer day, Sims has graduated from Benedictine University with a degree in nutrition and spent months working as a cook and as a nursing assistant in the Chicago and Palatine homes run by the Little Sisters, who she first met on a 2005 "nun run" in which she visited four convents in 24 hours.

## Matching trend

In many ways, Sims' vocation journey matches what the Hyde Park-based National Religious Vocations Conference found in a major study of religious vocations that was released Aug. 11.

That study found that the majority of religious congregations

in the United States have at least one person in formation, although many do not have more than one or two. However, about a fifth of the congregations have more than five people in formation. Such congregations tend to be on the more traditional end of the spectrum, more likely to have their members wear habits and have a regular schedule of common prayer and spirituality focused on the Eucharist.

The study, conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, surveyed religious congregations about people in formation and new members, surveyed people in formation and who had joined religious orders since 1993 and included several focus groups.

Holy Cross Brother Paul Bednarczyk, the executive director of the NRVC, said the study did not show whether there has been a recent boost in religious vocations, although he believes the numbers started going up in about 2003, based on anecdotal evidence.

However, it does provide a benchmark for future studies of religious vocations. "This tells us where we are early in the 21st century," Brother Paul said. "Often, we compare the numbers to where we were in the 1950s and '60s, when the numbers were quite large. But really, that was an anomaly. That was not the norm."

Major Superiors of Women Religious are. Those that belong to the CMSWR are generally perceived as being more traditional. Congregations belonging to the CMSWR also were far more likely to have five or more people in formation. However, the LCWR still represents a much larger

group of women religious in the United States.

Indeed, two-thirds of the newer members, men and women, belong to communities that either require a religious habit or give their members the option of wearing a habit, a practice that many communities dropped after the Second Vatican Council. Before that time, he said, many religious habits were seen as "otherworldly" and designed to prevent religious men and women from engaging fully in the world around them.

Now, habits have grown somewhat simpler, and younger religious are embracing them as a manifestation of Catholic identity.

That is certainly the case for Sims, who was initially reluctant to wear a habit, as is the practice among Little Sisters of the Poor.

As she got to know them and reflected on the issue, however, she discovered a desire for the habit.

"It is an outward sign of an inward conversion," said Sims. "It's a way to show humility and obedience."



New Dominican postulants Karen Kysely and Sarah Freeland, sing an Irish song to residents Kathleen Griffin and Genevieve Vatter at Rosary Hill Convalescent Home in Justice on Aug. 21. A recent study of religious vocations showed that two thirds of new members belong to communities that wear habits.

Catholic New World photos/Karen Callaway

congregations when they were under the age of 30. "That is confirming that this is a fulfilling life for them," he said.

However, the survey did find a divide among women's religious institutes. More than half of new members of institutes belonging to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious are over 40, while fewer than 15 percent of institutes belonging to the Council of

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Andrea Sims of Princeton, Ill., plans to enter the Little Sisters of the Poor this October.

# New Franciscan community starting

*Site of tragic fire in Humboldt Park to be home to order*

By Michelle Martin  
ASSISTANT EDITOR

For Alicia Torres, the call to enter religious life first struck her as a college student. The 2007 graduate of Loyola University Chicago began a process of discernment, looking into and visiting various houses of religious women.

Some of them were appealing — her time with the Sisters of Life in New York convinced her that she was being called to be a religious sister — but nothing felt like it was just the right fit.

"My heart would always be drawing me to Chicago," Torres said, adding that new religious congregations often are rooted to a specific place, which she believes is God's design. "He inspires people to fill a specific need in the church at a specific time and place."

Eric Futterer, 34, has been engaged in some kind of youth ministry almost continually since he graduated from college, most recently at his alma mater, Joliet Catholic Academy. He has long been attracted to Franciscan spirituality, and had looked into joining the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, but felt God wanted him to stay in the Chicago area.

Torres and Futterer will join Kate O'Leary as the first three people to move into the Mission of Our Lady of the Angels in Chicago's West Humboldt Park neighborhood (where 50 years ago 92 children and 3 BVM sisters died in a tragic school fire) to continue an exploration of whether or not they have been called to be among the first members of

new congregations of religious life — one for men, one for women — that would be based in Chicago and have a mission of devotion to the Eucharist and service and education in poor communities.

They are among a small group of people who began meeting with Father Bob Lombardo, a Franciscan Friar of the Renewal, to discuss the creation of new religious congregations.

Lombardo established the mission in 2005 at the request of Cardinal George, and is acting as an advisor to the young people who want to start their own congregations. He is helping them find their way as they figure out what God wants of them and communicating with Cardinal George, who must approve each step along the way, and the Archdiocese of Chicago's Vicar for Religious, Sister Joan McGlinchey, a Missionary Sister of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Mother Cabrini's Sisters).

## Eucharist-centered

So far, the small group has agreed to some of the basic characteristics of what such congregations would be like: Franciscan, Eucharist-centered religious communities organized around prayer, with daily Mass, Liturgy of the Hours and eucharistic adoration, annual retreats and weekly days of recollection. Members would be consecrated religious, embracing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience.

The communities would make their homes in neighborhoods noted for their poverty, so as to offer greater opportunity to serve the poor. Such service could take the form of food pantries and clothing rooms or running after-school programs. In addition, the communities would evangelize by offering days of recollection, parish missions, eucharistic adoration and retreats. Members also

would teach, starting with religious education in poor parishes, working toward religion classes in poor Catholic schools and eventually administering Catholic schools in poor neighborhoods.

## Desire for community

One of the main reasons Futterer feels he is called to religious life is his desire to live in a community of people all dedicating their lives to serve God and other people.

"It's hard to do alone," Futterer said. "We can't live our faith alone. Being in something like this, your prayer life is a lot more structured. Really coming together to serve God and the community, that comes from your prayer life."

The beauty of the mission is that all of its work is joined to — and comes from — its prayer life. All activities, such as the mission's monthly food giveaways from the Chicago Food Depository, begin with a prayer, he said.

Chicago has no shortage of young adults willing to volunteer to help other people, Torres said. But if they are not grounded in faith, their efforts can seem futile after a while.

"We're so busy doing that we don't come back to being with Christ," she said. "Then people get burned out."

Torres has prayed and prayed over her vocation, trying to figure out what she is called to be. As she came closer to choosing to be part of what she hopes will be a new community, she said, "St. Francis kept showing up everywhere."

"The Lord calls you to do something," she said. "But it's something really weird, and people don't understand. This is not about all the things you can't do. This is about giving a gift of yourself to the Lord, and the Lord giving a gift of himself to you."

## Notable revelations

The following are quick facts from the NRVC/CARA study on the state of religious vocations in the United States. To view the complete study visit [www.nrvc.net](http://www.nrvc.net).

■ Nearly 70 percent of religious congregations have new members in formation, and nearly 20 percent have five or more new members in formation.

■ The average age of men who entered religious life since 1993 was 30; the average for women was 32.

■ Nearly 20 percent of newer religious men and women were born outside the United States. Latinos make up 21 percent of newer religious, Asians and Pacific islanders make up 14 percent and Africans and African Americans make up 6 percent.

■ Religious communities are aging. Three-fourths of finally professed men religious are 60 or older, as are more than nine in 10 women religious.

■ Nine in 10 new members were raised Catholic, and 73 percent attended Catholic schools for some part of their education. One in seven — 14 percent — of those born since 1982 were home schooled for at least a portion of their education.

■ Seventy percent of new members had at least a bachelor's degree when they entered religious life, and 90 percent were employed, usually full-time. About 70 percent were engaged in some kind of ministry work, either on a paid or volunteer basis.



Aspirants to a new Franciscan community Alicia Torres, Kate O'Leary, and Eric Futterer join Franciscan Friar of the Renewal Father Bob Lombardo at Our Lady of the Angels Mission in Humboldt Park on Aug. 18.

Catholic New World/Karen Callaway