

Religious Life



Postulants arrive at the convent and are greeted by their "angels," Albany, 1964

Divergent paths led generations of young women to the Sisters of the Holy Names. From their earliest schooldays, some had come to know the sisters as devoted educators and longed to follow in their footsteps. Others were inexorably drawn to a life of service to God, unable to imagine any other calling. Some attended college, embarked on careers, and envisioned themselves as future wives and mothers until the magnetism of a religious vocation drew them in. Some came from large cities; others arrived from remote farms and ranches. It was not uncommon for several girls from the same family to enter the community. For many, the life of a choir sister awaited, while a few dedicated themselves to the advancement of the community as auxiliary sisters.

Every minute of the day was scheduled for you. We rose at 5:10 every day until the weekend when we slept in until 6:00. We pushed all the time. Sometimes you were just so tired. — S. Jane Ellen Burns

Holy Names sisters, like those in many other religious communities, followed a daily routine that remained virtually unchanged from the time the congregation was founded until the great changes brought about in the 1960s by Vatican II. The Horarium established a daily routine of common prayer, private meditation, work, and recreation. Bells governed every facet of life, establishing a synchronized routine within the community. Sisters rose before dawn and were still hard-pressed to accomplish their many responsibilities before the end of their sixteen-hour day. Much of the day was passed in silence, which, according to the *Constitutions*, must be practiced "not only in word but also in act." Yet in spite of long days, the emphasis on perfection, and a significant slate of responsibilities, sisters discovered great joy and personal fulfillment in religious life.

So I decided to write to Mother Provincial because I didn't understand "choir." I thought it meant a sister who sang. So I sat down and wrote this letter to Mother Provincial. I said, "Since I can't sing, I won't have to pay the choir fee." — S. Rae Skinner

For many Holy Names sisters, the novitiate proved a defining experience. The clothing ceremony and assignment of a religious name underscored the seriousness of committing to a life of service. Enduring friendships were established in the early days of religious life as young women collectively navigated uncharted waters. Such friendships proved especially beneficial in the adjustment to unfamiliar routines and practices. While some easily adapted to convent life, others found the experience difficult. The separation from family and friends proved distressing for many sisters. Others chafed at the long hours of silence. The possibility of being asked to leave the congregation prior to taking final vows was a serious concern. Yet most came to view the novitiate as an opportunity for real growth in their spiritual lives. Perhaps more than any other time, the novitiate underscored the importance of drawing upon the collective strengths and gifts of the community in times of challenge.

One day I went to the Mistress of Novices and said, "Well, I guess I better go home." And she said, "Dear Child, why are you saying this?" And I said, "If I have to be like Sister —, the perfect novice, I cannot live like that." She put her arms around me and said, "If they were all like that I'd be crazy!" — S. Mary Felicitas Supple



Postulants Theresa Riseling and Mary Peltz at the Academy of the Holy Names, Silver Spring, Maryland, prior to leaving for their novitiate in Montreal, 1946

Sisters took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The profession of final vows, usually after seven years, was a milestone in religious life. Unlike first vows, the commitment was no longer of a temporary nature.



Sisters Helen Andrea Andrews, Zenon D'Alstous and Rose Ida Turgeon work in the kitchen at the Academy of the Holy Names, Rome, New York, c.1960



An Albany sister pauses for a contemplative moment. c.1955

Professed sisters embarked on a lifetime commitment to their vows, the congregation, and one another. For some, the day of final vows seemed to mark the end of a long journey. In reality, many sisters came to the realization that living the vows was a day-by-day process. As they progressed in religious life, they often challenged themselves to find new ways to live their vows. Although demanding, religious life was a joyous calling that presented each individual with many gifts.

While Holy Names sisters are best known for their long tradition of excellence in the teaching field, other sisters played an equally

important role behind the scenes. Teaching was the domain of women known as “choir” sisters while “auxiliary” or “lay” sisters assumed much of the household management. This division of labor in religious communities could be traced back to early European times and remained a common practice into the twentieth century. The *Constitutions* specifically charged these sisters with “various duties such as manual labor, cooking, laundering, and the cleanliness of the house.” Mother Marie-Rose treated the auxiliary sisters with great respect and often shared in their work.

The lay sisters' prayers were different from ours. But I considered them a very holy bunch. I appreciated those who have lived it. I think they have taught me much.
— S. Bea Weisner

The importance of community was demonstrated in every stage of religious life, from the first days of a sister's postulancy to her death. Even in their final years, Holy Names sisters continued to work to achieve the goals of the congregation. When they were no longer able to continue working, older sisters served as



Professed sisters at St. Joseph's convent in Seattle. 1943



First vows ceremony in the chapel. College of the Holy Names. Oakland. 1948

mentors for the younger members of the community. They devoted their time to prayer and sometimes tutored children who needed additional instruction. In turn, younger sisters worked to provide financial support for the retired members of the community and oversaw the physical care of the oldest sisters. The physical strength of youth proved a perfect complement to the wisdom of advanced years. Throughout their history, the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary have heeded the timeless advice Bishop Ignatius Bourget gave to Mother Marie-Rose in the earliest days of the congregation: “In union is your strength. May it be the soul of your little community.”

You had to bond together in the novitiate because everything was so strange. We had to talk it out and help each other if we were going to get through this.

— S. Kathleen Stupfel



During her novitiate Sister Mary Bernice Mills receives visitors in the parlor of the Motherhouse, Montreal, 1953

I loved the holy habit. It was just beautiful. Every time I put it on I would think, “Gee, this is God's will, and it is special.” I really liked it even when it was hotter than heck in summer and you were sitting in a little music room and it's one hundred outside.

— S. Annaloris Ward



Oregon novices gather to recite The Office. c.1941



Sister Jean Adele Byrne prays in the chapel at the Novitiate and College of the Holy Names, Albany. c.1963