

MAIN LINE FAITH

Answering God's call in the world today

"God has no hands but ours" — St. Theresa of Avila

By DAVID ROBINSON

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Mother Cornelia Connelly in Philadelphia. She founded the Sisters of Holy Child Jesus.

Locally, members of the order can be found serving at Rosemont School of the Holy Child and Rosemont College. New Sharon, on Montgomery Avenue — opposite School of the Holy Child — is the retirement home for the sisters, and later next year, it will become the home office for the American Province of the order.

At a recent Mass in the Immaculate Conception Chapel at Rosemont College, two women — Mary Kerner and Aquilla Peterson — took vows to join Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus.

In the formative years of the order (mid-1800s), Mother Connelly looked to young women to fill the ranks, but as Sr. Helen T. McDonald, leader of the sisters and former head of Rosemont School of the Holy Child, noted recently, the order is more comfortable accepting women who have life experience and a mature understanding of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

For 26 years, Mary Kerner worked as an operating room nurse at the University of Pennsylvania. She is now a nurse with Wissahickon Hospice. "Nursing is a career and it only goes so far. It doesn't involve everything," she said. "Being a Sister of the Holy Child involves every part of my life. It's not just a job. It's ministry — it's how I interact with people in every area of my life, in every minute of my life."

Kerner, along with Peterson, began the process of joining the order in 2004 with a temporary profession of vows, living with a community of sisters and ministry work.

Kerner went into home health care, and Peterson served at the Society's mission site in the Dominican Republic.

Peterson was born and raised a devout Catholic. "I often wondered if I would ever have the courage to give my life to Christ," she said. In college, during the tumultuous

years surrounding the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam War, she took a different path. After the loss of her mother to cancer, Peterson became aware that internally and externally, she was at a point of crisis. "It was at this bottom, this dark place that I was able to experience a personal revelation of God and self."

She changed direction, challenged and strengthened herself and earned a master's degree in social work. "Ministering to the mentally ill helped me to experience the presence of God more clearly," she said. "St. Theresa of Avila wrote, 'God has no hands but ours.' My ministry became one of helping others in God's name."

She also began to return to the thoughts of a religious life. As she learned more about the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus through retreats, prayer groups and other activities, her path to candidacy became clearer. "I saw them not only as women who were focused on their work, but as women who were taking their prayer life seriously."

Sister Carmen Torres, the vocation director of the Society's American Province, explained that women interested in joining the order must be mature, have a desire to listen to how God is calling them, have an openness to explore God's call, have conversations with a spiritual director and participate in the Society events.

The worldwide Society has nearly 400 Holy Child Sisters who bring their own unique gifts and serve others in the Americas, Europe and Africa as educators, spiritual leaders, social workers, parish ministers and administrators, legal and health care workers.

"Whoever enters is a gift for us," Sister Carmen said. "The process is designed so that women who are thinking of becoming a Sister of the Holy Child have the opportunity to make sure that this is truly where God is leading them and where they want to be."

At a time when most orders of the Catholic faith are seeing diminished numbers of recruits, the ceremony of vows for Mary Kerner and Aquilla Peterson shows that some are still heeding the call.

"I am here because I want to make life

better for others. I believe I can do that better by being joined with women who are actively seeking solutions to the needs of the world today," Peterson, now known as Sister Aquilla, S.H.C.J., said.

"As a professed sister, I am looking forward to living in community with other women who are passionate about the Society's mission and with whom I share values of service to others," Kerner, now known as Sister Mary, S.H.C.J., said.



Sr. Helen T. McDonald, S.H.C.J., leader of the American Province of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, welcomed all to a Mass in the Immaculate Conception Chapel at Rosemont College. During the Mass, Sr. Mary Kerner, S.H.C.J. and Sr. Aquilla Peterson, S.H.C.J. professed their final vows and became fully professed Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus.



Sr. Geraldine MacCarthy, S.H.C.J. (right), invites (from left) Aquilla Peterson and Mary Kerner to state their intentions during a Mass in the which they professed vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Each responded, "With the help of God's grace, I have come to know in this religious community the struggle and joy of a life dedicated to God and to God's people. I now ask that I may make simple perpetual profession in the Society of the Holy Child Jesus." This Mass marked the beginning of Mary and Aquilla's lives as fully vowed Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus.



As family and friends watched, (from left) Sr. Mary Kerner, S.H.C.J. and Sr. Aquilla Peterson, S.H.C.J. sign their handwritten vows with Sr. Geraldine MacCarthy, S.H.C.J., of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. Father Lucien Longtin (right) presided at the Mass in the Immaculate Conception Chapel at Rosemont College.