

Year of Consecrated Life

Grateful for the past. Hopeful for the future. Joyful for today.

November 30, 2014 - February 2, 2016

Sr. Catherine Sheehan, Provincial of the Daughters of Wisdom, US Province was recently interviewed on radio by Frère Buteau and Bishop Guy Sansaricq in recognition of the Year of Consecrated life. In this interview she reflects on her decision to enter religious life and expresses the spirituality and heart of the mission of the Daughters of Wisdom. The following is some excerpts from that interview.



Tell us about yourself and the reasons that motivated you to be a Daughter of Wisdom:

I entered the Daughters of Wisdom in January 1979 when I was 22 years old. I graduated from college – St. John’s University the previous May (1978). I was familiar with women religious from having gone to Catholic elementary and high schools. Especially in high school, there was the opportunity to interact more with the Sisters. My impression was that most of them were happy.

The summer of my junior year in high school I volunteered in a program with the Diocese of Brooklyn. It was called Project Fun. It was a summer camp program for children dealing with physical and mental challenges. I worked with the campers who were 18 years old and over that were developmentally delayed. The leader of the group was a Daughter of Wisdom. Over the next few years, we became friends and when I was in college, I participated in vocation weekends with the Daughters of Wisdom. I was impressed with the way they interacted with us (young women discerning a vocation) and found them open and friendly. This was enough for me to continue to pursue becoming a Daughter of Wisdom.

The more I lived into my call it became clearer to me that being a member of an international congregation was special.

Tell us about the spirituality of the Daughters of Wisdom:

The Daughters of Wisdom were founded in France in 1703 by St. Louis Marie de Montfort and Blessed Marie Louise Trichet. Montfort was very committed to the poor - often seeking out “the poorest of the poor.” His spirituality was grounded in Jesus Incarnate Wisdom – Wisdom made flesh in Jesus – God who created all, loves all and redeems all. Montfort went out on country roads, to parishes and “poorhouses” to bring the message of the gospel calling for renewal in people’s hearts.

In 1701, Blessed Marie Louise Trichet met Louis de Montfort, and this was a turning point in her life. In a culture where the poor went unattended, Marie Louise was inspired to choose to live among the poor and dedicate her life to their concerns as a woman religious. From the experience of God as divine Wisdom came a deep desire in both Louis de Montfort and Marie Louise Trichet to fashion a way of living that would serve others and make divine Wisdom known and loved.

This was the initial inspiration for the Daughters of Wisdom. Following in the footsteps of Louis de Montfort and Marie Louise Trichet, we Daughters of Wisdom have ministered in the fields of education, health care, and social and pastoral outreach, with a special concern for those who are neglected by society.

In 1904, the Daughters of Wisdom were forced by the secularization laws of France to seek ministries elsewhere. The first Daughters of Wisdom arrived in the United States in northern Maine in 1904 and in Ozone Park - Queens. We presently serve throughout the United States and in areas of North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania. We number over 1,300 members.

Explain your ministry as Provincial Leader of the Daughter of Wisdom:

This role is still quite new for me – I began my term as Provincial Leader in November. Previously I had served as Member of the Leadership Team during three different administrations.

Our Rule of Life describes the role of Provincial Leader as one that promotes communion among the Sisters and encourages everyone's participation in the life of the Province and of the Congregation.

Our mission statement as a Province is that ...

We are called in community to seek and to contemplate Divine Wisdom, present in a world that hungers for meaning, justice and compassion. We seek to bring the message of Jesus, Incarnate Wisdom, to people experiencing injustice, violence, poverty and oppression, especially women and children.

We do this in a variety of ways according to the gifts and abilities of the individuals.

Other aspects of the role are attending to the implementation of the decisions and orientations of the Chapters. This is all done in collaboration with the three Provincial Councilors (as a Leadership Team).

One of the Orientations of our General Chapter is ... that the congregation lives interculturally at the heart of its structures and our way of functioning. The goal is for each Sister to have a sense of the international and of being a Daughter of Wisdom beyond the boundaries of her own

country. We desire to widen our tent so as to create intercultural communities. In light of this, we will be beginning an intercultural community in the Diocese of Rockville Centre within the next few months.

What are the problems and the challenges of the Congregation of Daughters of Wisdom?

As is the case for many congregations of religious women today, we are called to deal with the challenges that come with an aging population while at the same time staying open to encouraging and accepting new younger members.

As Daughters of Wisdom we are all part of the mission ... by our religious commitment. Our Rule of Life calls us ... whatever our commitment or the condition of our life, we make the passion of Montfort our own today ... "I will love God hidden in my neighbor." Each of us, no matter our age or state of health, is fully part of the Congregation's mission.

We need to be realistic about what we are capable of doing. We need to claim our aging reality and still support those who are in active ministry – some of which is volunteering. We also need to embrace how we witness through how we live and love not just by what we do (in a ministry sense). We can leverage our influence by networking and collaboration.

We need to support the care of our Sisters (which means continuing to be financially solvent) while still being generous with our time, talent and treasure.

In 2013, Pope Francis declared that a Year of Consecrated Life (YOCL) be celebrated throughout the world. YOCL began on the First Sunday of Advent, November 30, 2014. It will close on the World Day of Consecrated Life, February 2, 2016. What do you think should be done by the church to encourage young people to embrace religious life?

I think it is important to invite young people to explore the possibility of religious life – inviting is important more so today than years ago. I knew religious from my very early days – in school and in my parish. Many young people don't have that experience today. My own niece and nephew would not know religious if it were not for me (their aunt and godmother).

Religious life is a call – a desire to live a spiritual life, to be part of a community and to do something great for God.

I believe in the future of religious life – it most likely will not be like in was in the 1950s with congregations bursting at the seams with young sisters.

Sandra Schneiders – writes regarding the "shortage" of vocations to Religious Life, "No Congregation 'needs' more members than are actually called to it by God....The purpose of the life is not to perpetuate particular Congregations nor to staff Church institutions; it is to live

intensely the witness to the Gospel to which the Congregation is called and for as long as it is called."

During last year's LCWR assembly, Nancy Schreck said in the context of leading in difficult times – we are not the only ones to claim a time as difficult. She went on to say for example – it could not have been easy during the "Black" Death, the Depression (in the history of the Daughters of Wisdom, the French Revolution). Nancy reminded us that we are standing on the shoulders of great women and must be about doing what is ours to do now so there will be a possibility of a future for religious life for those who come after us.

Please tell us your vivid experience as former Director of the AmeriCares Free Clinic of Bridgeport.

AmeriCares is an emergency response and global health organization committed to saving lives and building healthier futures for people in crisis in the United States and around the world.

There are four free clinics in CT – bringing together skilled volunteers and donated services from area health care providers, including hospitals and diagnostic laboratories to serve neighbors in need.

The clinics are a lifeline for the working poor who are making a sincere effort to help themselves and their families, but cannot afford medical care. Patients receive comprehensive health services including medications, lab work and diagnostic testing all at no cost. Without our clinics, many patients would forgo or delay care until they have a medical emergency.

I first joined AmeriCares in 1994 (after completed my M.P.H. at Columbia University). The clinics were just beginning at that time. There was only one clinic then – in Norwalk. The (nurse) director of the clinic was also working on developing another clinic in Danbury. So they needed to hire a full-time director for the Norwalk Clinic – that was me. I worked there for about 3 years and then left to be the Director of Community Health for the City of Bristol, CT. After 6 years there, I returned to AmeriCares where I first worked at the main office as the Assistant Director of the program. During a time of financial crisis and cut backs at the organization, the position I had was eliminated. So that is when I assumed the position of Clinic Director at the Bridgeport Clinic which is where I stayed until being selected the Provincial Leader.