Columns
Ministry
Religious Life



Sr. Mary Grace Barile, center, and Sr. Mary Terence Wall, right, participate in an American Heart Association Heart Walk presented by St. Mary's Medical Center Regional Heart Institute, Huntington, West Virginia. (Photo provided by Kathleen Limber, HM, (Sisters of the Humility of Mary)



by Ellen Dunn

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Editor's note: *GSR is celebrating the Feb. 2 World Day for Consecrated Life — a day of prayer for men and women in consecrated life — with a week of columns that illustrate some of the varied and unique ministries and contributions that consecrated women bring to the Catholic Church and society around the world.*

Writing a story about the religious of "wild and wonderful West Virginia" is more challenging than ever in our current environment — scandal, corruption and broken trust. Our bishop of 13 years was removed a year ago because of accusations of irresponsible financial activities and sexual harassment of adults. Overall bad behavior only recently uncovered.

None of this reality allows us to paint a rosy and perfect picture of women religious. But it must be noted that the sisters have remained at their various ministries well past retirement age. Many volunteer and give assistance in a variety of ways wherever they find themselves. It is a shattering experience to discover such news about our bishop who stood in the place of chief shepherd and leader.

However, no one caved in and left their post or abandoned their works of service among the people. They continue to be faithful and fully present. They remain quiet leaders in present ministries. Fidelity is a key aspect in rebuilding trust among God's people struggling to hold on to their faith in the church and in all things religious.

Since I never cave in to superstition, I am moving into my 13th year as the delegate for religious for my diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia. Every year has had its own unique issues and challenges, and I find myself able to look ahead once more to the faith and witness of the religious women and men in our spacious mountain state.

Good News! One recent afternoon, I learned that Sister Rita will be returning to the diocese after serving in leadership for her religious community. Hers is the Gospel ministry of companioning women and men in their individual spiritual journeys. Sister Rita already has a clientele in the southwestern counties of West Virginia, from previous years of service. Spiritual hunger is greater than ever today, and through spiritual direction, people are invited to grow deeper in the faith and closer to God in their daily lives.

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An email from Kate updates me about a project we are collaborating on. A group of alumna are planning to recognize and honor the Sisters Auxiliaries of the Apostolate who educated them in Monongah, West Virginia, where they attended Sts. Peter and Paul Elementary School. This group of former students are working with the diocese to erect a shrine at the site of their former school — now Holy Spirit Church. A mosaic of Sts. Peter and Paul that was enshrined over the school entrance has been restored and is soon to be mounted, blessed and celebrated by the parish community, led by the alumna themselves. The Sisters Auxiliaries Community was suppressed in 1998, and this effort is to honor their long-time presence and ministry in the diocese.



Sr. Kathleen Limber transports a dialysis patient with the Bluefield West Virginia Rescue Squad of Mercer County. (Courtesy of by Kathleen Limber, Sisters of the Humility of Mary)

As I communicate with the religious in the vast geography of West Virginia, I catch up with Sister Kathy in the southern counties of the state. Sister Kathy is very involved in services directly affecting the opioid crisis in our state. An emergency medical service educator at Southwest Community College and with the Bluefield West Virginia Rescue Squad, she is teaching future emergency medical technicians and paramedics. Sister Kathy has been very close to the people and their needs during her many years of healing ministry in the mountain state. Today's demands are much greater for all who work in emergency medicine.

In recent months, we hailed Sister Francis who retired from her 34-year chaplaincy at the Charleston Area Medical Center in West Virginia's capital city. A Franciscan, Sister Fran was involved in pastoral care with the patients and their families. Now, in initial retirement, she still reaches out in a volunteer capacity at another facility that welcomes and assists the underserved with their medical needs. Her "missionary spirit" keeps her close to those imprisoned by their economic situation.



Sr. Stella Cronauer meets with parents for baptismal preparation. (Courtesy of Sr. Stella Cronauer, Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph)

As I passed through the outpatient area of our local Catholic hospital recently, I saw Sister Dee at the information desk assisting incoming people seeking their way to their various doctors or labs. After serving as principal of an elementary school downstate for many years, and now in her 80s, Sister Dee still has energy to volunteer at outpatient services on a regular basis. It's her way of being Gospel for all she meets and accompanies to the various hospital departments. All of these brief encounters are the kind that Pope Francis encourages in our busy lives — an

opportunity to meet and welcome the Christ in others daily.

A few months ago, I had the chance to stop by a continuous care facility to visit Sister Malya who is in long-term recovery from serious illness. Although she had just completed her physical therapy session, she was gracious in taking time to share her struggles and disappointments with me as she lives her limited days. I experienced her ministry to me on that occasion, because I was the outsider in the situation. I can only fulfill my ministry as "delegate for religious" when my sisters and brothers choose to let me in.

One of the things that I have learned on this journey with my companion religious is the number of times we have changed things, restructured committees, and made alternative approaches to situations that had always been a certain way. It's felt to me like a "period of deconstruction" causing us to rethink some former activities and events. It was my realization that many could no longer travel the diocese with ease or plan days off for "in-service" or spiritual life presentations. What was successful one year was no longer possible the next year. In reality, the expectations and involvements with our individual congregations are sufficient challenges and need continual support. It is this connection to our founding congregations that sustains us. And our shared ministry in this missionary diocese bonds us to faithful sisterhood in the here and now.



Sr. Maria Sheri Rukwishuro celebrates the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe with children. (Courtesy of Sr. Maria Sheri Rukwishuro, Sisters of the Infant Jesus)

As congregations found it necessary to let go of their hospital ministries, there has been a remarkable generosity in the sharing of the funds that resulted from the sales. The Congregation of St. Joseph sold hospitals and created ways to keep funds in the same geographic areas to provide other services to the people they had served in health care. The Pallottine Sisters likewise offered a large grant of their funds to serve the people through Catholic Charities West Virginia. The vision and commitment of these congregations speak for themselves — Mission is more important than maintenance or wealth for themselves.

My former "boss" used to ask me often why the sisters from so many congregations would stay in place well into their retirement years instead of returning to their respective motherhouses. And I would routinely tell him that they were in love with

the mountains and the valleys and the faithful people who inhabit them. The religious, I believe, are the "glue" holding this church of West Virginia together to this day.

[Ellen Dunn is a Dominican Sister of Peace. With degrees in modern languages, religious education and theology, she has been an adjunct faculty member in theology at Ohio Dominican College and Wheeling Jesuit University and has served as a parochial leader and as a member of the leadership team for her congregation. She is a founding member of Spirituality Network.]

This story appears in the **World Day for Consecrated Life** feature series. View the full series.