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HOUSES OF WORSHIP

Life and Faith in Hell's Kitchen

An alternative in a city where 41% of pregnancies end in abortion.

By William McGowan

July 29, 2011

'Safe, legal and rare" has long been the pro-choice mantra, but these days it applies less and less to the reality of abortion. In New York City, officials reported this year that 41% of pregnancies end in abortion—double the national rate. In the black community, the figure is 60%.

Numbers like these motivate the Sisters of Life, a small order of nuns celebrating its 20th anniversary this summer. The sisters take traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, but they also take a fourth vow "to protect and enhance the sacredness of human life." According to Archbishop Timothy Dolan, once the sisters connect with unwed pregnant women in need, "the battle is half over."

The order was the vision of the late John Cardinal O'Connor, whose Nov. 2, 1989, weekly column in the newspaper Catholic New York was titled "Help Wanted: Sisters of Life."

One respondent was Agnes Mary Donovan, a professor of developmental psychology at Columbia University Teachers College. She became one of the order's founders in 1991 and Mother Superior two years later.

There are now 70 members, with an average age of 37. Like Mother Agnes, the women who have joined are educated and worldly. They include a Yale Russian major who aspired to join the CIA, a former nurse who worked in the Middle East, and a former computer-manufacturing executive.

The sisters help those suffering from the trauma of a past abortion and those who want to put their children up for adoption. But their most important work is their "Visitation Mission," a spiritual call center where sisters have contact with about 700 women a year.

According to the coordinator of the Visitation Mission, Sister Magdalene, some of the women seeking counsel have "all the means in the world" but feel that their social and professional lives, as well as their marriage prospects, would be over unless they abort. "But pregnancy is a wake-up call," she explains. "It tends to stop them from doing what they might

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imagine they'd do without a second thought. We believe it's a moment of grace."

Half of those counseled by the Visitation Mission remain at home. Others are placed in private homes or in maternity facilities run by other religious orders. And then there are the women who move in with the nuns, in the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen.

There the women can stay as long as six months prior to giving birth and up to a year afterward, some holding down jobs, others studying. Meanwhile the sisters go about their lives of prayer, contemplation and occasional rollerblading. The nuns "rely on providence"—i.e., donations—for food, baby clothing and strollers. They excel at recruiting "Josephs" for heavier household chores. "Our motto is that no man leaves without doing us a favor," says Sister Rita Marie, the local convent superior.

The rooms are spartan and lights go out at 9 p.m. Following Cardinal O'Connor's vision, the nuns take a healing approach. They don't keep records of who is Catholic and who isn't, they don't try to convert anyone or arrange a baptism unless asked, and they don't even require that the women pray.

Since the first guest arrived in 1998, 150 babies have been born at the convent. The sisters take heart in "the beauty of a mother coming to the understanding of the dignity of her calling and how that gives life back to her," Sister Rita Marie explains.

Guests have included the homeless, pregnant and undocumented Tanzanian who showed up sobbing on the lawn of the sisters' retreat center in Stamford, Conn., and later likened the care at Sacred Heart to "angels planting a root and watering it every day." Then there was the Trinidadian nanny, six months pregnant with twins, whose boyfriend was trying to induce a miscarriage by kicking her down the stairs. There was the Polish immigrant who studied for the MCAT exam while living at the convent, as well as the former network journalist whose boyfriend split when she got a Down Syndrome diagnosis, and whose friends could not believe she'd throw herself so far "off-track" to have the child.

Another alumna had just finished a graduate program in England, gotten pregnant, been dumped by her law-student boyfriend and returned to the U.S. "in a horrible state of depression." For an educated woman with professional ambitions, she said "an abortion seems like the most practical thing in the world. But once you do get pregnant, it's not so easy."

She had a daughter, got a magazine job and a subsidized apartment. The boyfriend then returned and became a lawyer here. The couple married and had two more daughters. She is now managing editor of one of fashion's top magazines and sends her children to private school on the Upper East Side. "Life can turn on a dime," she tells colleagues she trusts with her story.

Mr. McGowan is the author of "Gray Lady Down: What the Decline and Fall of the New York Times Means for America" (Encounter, 2010).

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