

April 26, 2009

The vibrancy of the Catholic faith in the United States owes very much to women religious. In the 1800s, bishops recruited religious from Europe to educate children of pioneer families and to care for the sick and poor. In 1840, at the request of the Bishop Vincennes, St. Theodora Guerin led a group of five Sisters of Providence to Indiana to establish a motherhouse and novitiate, to establish Catholic schools, and to care for the poor.

Although St. Theodora Guerin and her founding sisters were often ridiculed and disdained by the local population in Indiana, she had much success in promoting vocations. Within three years, her community had 24 novices. By her death on May 14, 1856, St. Theodora had founded 10 Catholic schools throughout our state.

When many of us attended Catholic schools, each classroom was taught by a dedicated nun. Until the late 1960s, vocations to the priesthood and religious life were flourishing. Out of my eighth grade room, three of us entered the seminary and two went to the convent.

The general trends in U.S. culture over the past several decades have affected Catholics as well as others. While Catholics are the most highly educated single group in the United States, they have also been affected by the breakdown in family life, materialism, individualism, and secularism. At one time, Catholics would not think of missing Sunday Mass without serious reason. Now the downward trend in faithful participation at weekly Sunday Mass is alarming.

Vocations to the priesthood and religious life have been affected by cultural shifts. In 1970, there were 160,900 women religious in the United States. In 2008, there are 63,032 women religious, many of whom are aged and in need of

retirement care. Earlier this year, the Vatican announced an Apostolic Visitation of the 400 Catholic institutes for women religious in the United States to encourage and strengthen their good work in areas of education, health care, and a variety of pastoral and social services, as well as to discover why the numbers of their members have decreased.

We currently have 82 women religious in our diocese, but only 4 teaching in our 25 Catholic schools.

On Tuesday, I will gather with the women religious in our diocese at Ss. Peter and Paul Parish to celebrate Mass thanking God for their vocation and thanking them for their generosity in responding to God's call to religious life. Together, we will give praise to the Lord for those religious in our diocese who are celebrating special Jubilees of Profession this year.

Our local Church is richly blessed by the prayers, witness, and ministry of our religious sisters. May God reward these dedicated women and inspire others to join their truly blessed life.