



Eight Year Journey Ends: New One Begins

By ADVA SALDINGER
For *The Patriot Ledger*

KINGSTON - In a chapel at Sacred Heart High School, Sister Gladys Segovia Leon took her perpetual vows to join the Sisters of Divine Providence, completing a journey she began nearly eight years ago.

Saturday was a special day, she said, made better because her family from Peru could be a part of the celebration. "They are the main happiness of my life right now, and they bring out the best in me," she said.

She is joining an increasing number of women from other countries who are becoming nuns. The number of women in the vocation in the United States dropped from 179,954 in 1965 to 63,699 in 2007, and the average age of religious sisters last year was 69 years old, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

Sister Marjorie Nickel, former principal of Sacred High School, who now assists women becoming nuns, said there have been significant changes since she took her vows 60 years ago. Today women in the U.S. have a greater variety of vocational opportunities, and those who choose to become nuns are making the decision later in life, she said. "There are some from this country but it's not as frequent," Sister Marjorie said.

The Sisters of Divine Providence currently have postulants - women who have taken the first step to become nuns - in Peru, Korea, the Dominican Republic and in some African countries. For example, Sister Gladys, 32, first met a group of nuns from the order as a girl in her native Peru. By the time she was 17 she, too, had decided to become a nun.

In 2000 she left home and came to the United States to prepare for a religious life. After an inquiry period in which she learned about the order, she became a postulant. She then became a novice, and for two years she dedicated herself to the intense study of Scripture, theology and the work of the Sisters of Divine Providence. She then took her temporary vows and spent the next several years studying nursing and further integrating into the community. On Saturday she took her final vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

When Sister Gladys came to the U.S., she did not speak English, but after years of hard work got a nursing degree from Caritas Laboure College in Dorchester and became a registered nurse.

"She is a very compassionate person, and she has worked very hard," said Sister Mary Francis Fletcher, one of Sister Gladys' mentors. "It's been a privilege to share in her journey." Sister Gladys, and those like her, can help reach out to Hispanic Americans and new immigrants, Sister Mary Francis said. According to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 39 percent of Catholics in the U.S. are Hispanic. "Someone whose native language is their own can minister to them here," she said. "It is a special gift that a Spanish speaker can bring to this country in service."

Now that she has taken her perpetual vows, Sister Gladys will apply for nursing jobs to help as many people as she can, she said. "It is my pledge to be part of them, to be with them, to walk beside them," she said.

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