

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 19: PROFESSION CROSS OF SISTER JUDY RYAN, SNJM

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Blessed Marie-Rose Durocher established the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary in Montreal in 1843 with a mission to provide education for the poor. The community had close ties with Bishop Ignace Bourget of Montreal, whose missionary zeal had already sent two Blanchets to lead the Church in the Pacific Northwest. It was not long before the Sisters came west, too. The Holy Names Sisters arrived in Seattle in 1883.

Growing up on Queen Anne, Judy Ryan, along with her twin sister Janet and her brother Michael, was taught by Holy Names Sisters at St. Anne's School. She and her sister were also taught by the Sisters of the Holy Names at Holy Names Academy. "The whole way of life was very mysterious," Sister Judy recalls. "You didn't know what they looked like without the habit, didn't know their name, didn't know their story." The Ryans came to love the Sisters, especially favorite teachers who were "so much fun to be with, and marvelous human beings." The twins were very much at home at the convent, where they felt privileged to dust the Chapel after school. It came as no surprise to her family when, during her first year at Seattle University, Judy decided to enter the Holy Names novitiate.

Entering religious life was entering a different world. Novices were given a new name: Judy was given the name "Janet Maureen" to honor her sister Janet. It was a highly regimented life. The Sisters followed an horarium, like a monastic community, including rising early for an hour of meditation before Mass--an hour it could be quite difficult for busy young teachers to stay awake for! The Sisters learned to ask permission for everything--even for simple things like doing laundry or replacing worn out linens. Except on special days, meals were taken in silence, or while listening to spiritual reading. In the evening, there was the chapter of faults, as each Sister was called upon to acknowledge not only her own faults and failings, but those of others in the community as well. Sister Judy recalls walking past the chapel early in the novitiate, and seeing a sister praying with her arms outstretched—to learn later on that she was not having a vision, just doing penance after the chapter of faults!

After first vows, Sisters received the habit, with its distinctive bandeau across the forehead (which in later days sisters were known to reinforce with plastic cut from bleach bottles!) and the "blinders," as they were called, made from gauze. The blinders were actually quite transparent, giving the



Left: Profession Cross of Sister Judy Ryan, SNJM. Right: Sister Judy (Janet Maureen) teaching at Holy Names Academy in the 1960s. *Courtesy of Sister Judy Ryan, SNJM.*



Sisters a reputation for having eyes in the back of their heads--a very helpful trait in the classroom! Around their necks they wore the distinctive cross of the community. The cross is similar to the cross worn by Oblate priests, with whom the Holy Names community had close ties at its founding.

The habit was a wonderful link with the tradition, but it could also be a barrier. "When you were in the habit," Sister Judy recalls, "people who had been educated by sisters would be so excited to see you. But most people didn't even want to look at you. We seemed to have no meaning for people who

did not have that Catholic memory."

Sister Judy entered the community at a time when religious life was undergoing a quiet transformation. The Sister Formation Movement was already underway, with its growing emphasis on higher education--and greater professionalism--for Sisters, especially those teaching and administering schools. And then, in 1962, the Second Vatican Council began.

The Council took a fresh look at religious life through the two lenses of *ressourcement*, going back to the sources, and renewal in light of the needs of the modern world. For the Holy Names Sisters, it was exciting but also profoundly challenging. Some embraced change; others resisted it. For everyone, the Council called for mature, adult living, and Sisters had to internalize vows that had primarily been observed externally. Obedience was rediscovered as listening to what God is saying and making responsible decisions. Prayer became a call to a life lived in personal intimacy with God—something that was quite new for many Sisters.

In the years following the Council, the Sisters of the Holy Names began to expand their ministry beyond classroom teaching. They became some of first non-priest parish leaders: at St. James Cathedral, they were the first Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion and began the Cathedral's ESL program.

Today, Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary continue to thrive in many places throughout the world. Sister Judy says, "We are always discerning how we are being called to community. It is hard to know what our future is meant to be. It has to be simply living what God is calling us to in a very fundamental trust, confidence, and hope. All is in God's hands, not ours. It is not ours to decide."

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*
Learn more about the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary in a short presentation after the 10:00am Mass today in the Rectory Parlors. See the bulletin for details!