



THE DAILY STANDARD

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Friday evening, December 19, 2014

Despite early doubts, retired nun treasures her service

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CARTHAGENA — Becoming a nun wasn't always a sure thing for Precious Blood Sister Martha Bertke.

Bertke, who retired just before Thanksgiving as manager of the apartments for seniors at St. Charles Living Center, said faith was always a central part of her family and her life growing up in Maria Stein. However, becoming a nun wasn't on the radar.

"In grade school years, I guess I thought about it, but I really did not want to be a sister," she said.

The thought occasionally crossed her mind through high school, but she still didn't act on it, she said.

"High school days were fun and I enjoyed them," she said.

After graduating from Marion Local High School, Bertke said she was offered a job at an insurance company, but thoughts of being a sister continued to creep into her mind. She decided to

give it a try.

"Even during some of my years of formation, I was still a little uncertain," she said. "During that time, our rules were very strict. I liked parts of the life, but I didn't always understand why we had to have such strict rules. That was what caused confusion at times or being uncertain."

"But finally I made the decision that this is what I wanted to do with my life," she added. "I wanted to be a sister of the Precious Blood. ... Just one day, all of a sudden, it's kind of like 'yes, this is what I want to do with my life.'"

During her years of formation, Bertke also attended the University of Dayton and received a degree in elementary education. She took her temporary vows in 1963 and her final vows in 1969 at the age of 29.

Bertke began her career as a nun teaching intermediate grades and later as director of religious education at

various Catholic schools and parishes in Ohio, Indiana and Michigan. She served as a teacher for 10 years and director of religious education for 21 years.

Her final post in education was at Sts. Peter and Paul parish in Sandusky where she served as director of religious education for 17 years and her final nine years as pastoral associate.

"So after working 40 years for the church, I decided I needed a break," she said.

She took a sabbatical year in 2004, spending part of the time at Sangre De Cristo Center near Santa Fe, N.M.

"That was an opportunity to be enriched and have more time for spiritual growth and renewal," she said. "It's a program for priests and brothers and sisters who are maybe in transition from one ministry to another or in need of a time to be renewed or refreshed."

Bertke said the getaway offered the

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break she needed and a different view from the life she knew.

"It's an entirely different culture than ... in this area," she said. "We visited not only the culture, but the scenery. And we visited a number of places."

Bertke and her group traveled to the ruins of Native American pueblos, the Grand Canyon and many memorial sites.

At the end of her sabbatical, she was assigned to St. Charles to manage the transition from a retirement community for brothers and priests to the addition of a living center open to the public.

"When I first started, the renovation was not yet complete," she said. "So I had to do the completion of the renovation and then invite folks to think about living here. ... Because it was a new ministry for me, that was kind of a bit of a challenge, and it was new to the people of the area to have people besides priests and brothers living here."

Bertke worked to promote the center for area senior citizens, and in January 2007, St. Charles opened to nonreligious residents.

"In the beginning, it was kind of a new thing for everyone, for the priests to open up their home to others and for

people in the area to think about actually living here — to move from their home or their apartment to live here at St. Charles," she said.

Bertke's career at St. Charles spanned the start and eventual success of the new living center; all apartments are full this year.

Despite her doubts about becoming a nun, Bertke said the day she gave her final profession was the defining moment in her life.

"That was a special day," she said. "Saying yes, saying a whole-hearted yes to a calling from God and being a sister of the Precious Blood is wonderful. I've truly appreciated that so much. I appreciate the opportunity to be enriched by the life of many other women who are also devoted to the Precious Blood of Jesus and who share and are a life-giving presence to many people through our service to others," she said.

Bertke has no plans for retirement. She intends to continue living in Coldwater and likely will volunteer in the future, she said. But for the moment she has only one goal.

"First of all, I just want to slow down," she said. "Then I'll see what comes my way in the future."



Bertke