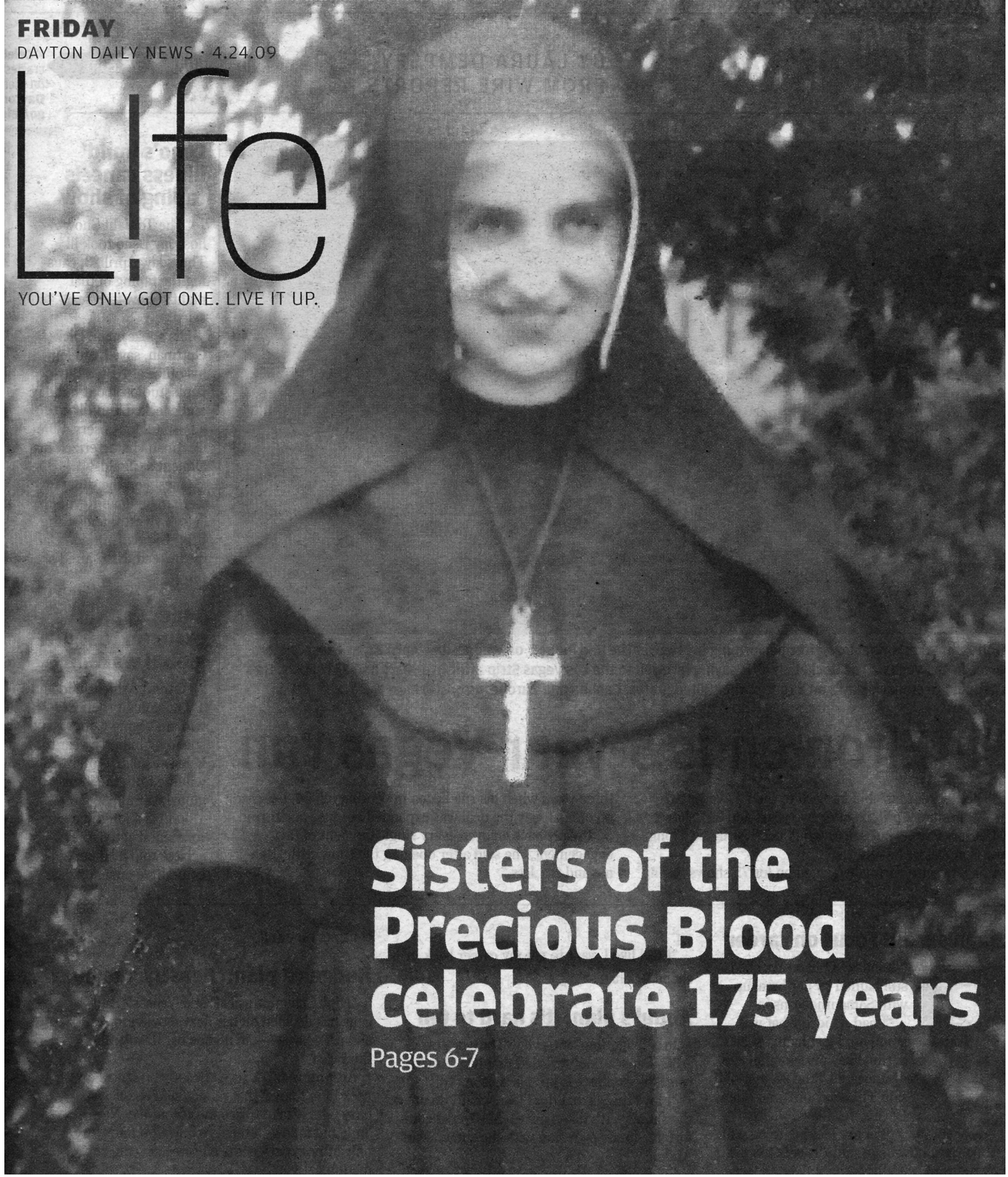


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Life

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Sisters of the Precious Blood celebrate 175 years

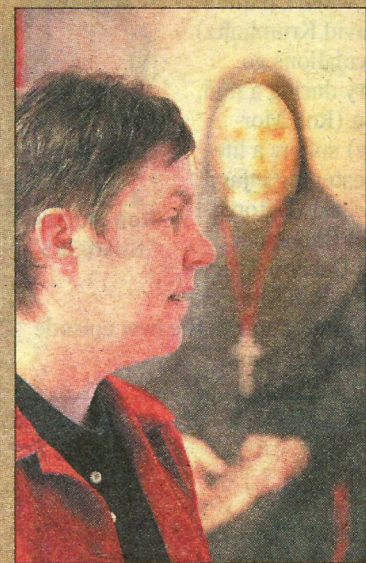
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THEIR STORIES

Sister Donna Liette

When someone in the Miami Valley is murdered, Sister Donna Liette, 69, leads a homicide vigil at the scene of the tragedy. "We're not there to judge the perpetrator or the victim," she explains. "We're simply there to pray and to try and make that ground sacred again."

She's found her true ministry at Mercy Manor, the transitional home for women coming out of prison. Her goal, she says, is "to be with these women who are so broken and to be able to give them hope."



Sister Marla Gipson

In the 1960s, more than 800 women served as Sisters of the Precious Blood. Today there are 82 active sisters and about 50 living at the Trotwood motherhouse. Sister Marla Gipson, 48, professed final vows in August 2008, becoming the first woman in nine years to join the congregation.

A convert to Catholicism, she felt called to join the church and later, to become a religious as a way to "live out this God quest." The process of becoming a nun takes 10 years.

"The goal for me is the path of holiness, it's about becoming whole," she says. "It's to grow in my relationship to God, and you have to do that with God's people, you don't do that in isolation."

Sister Mary Lou

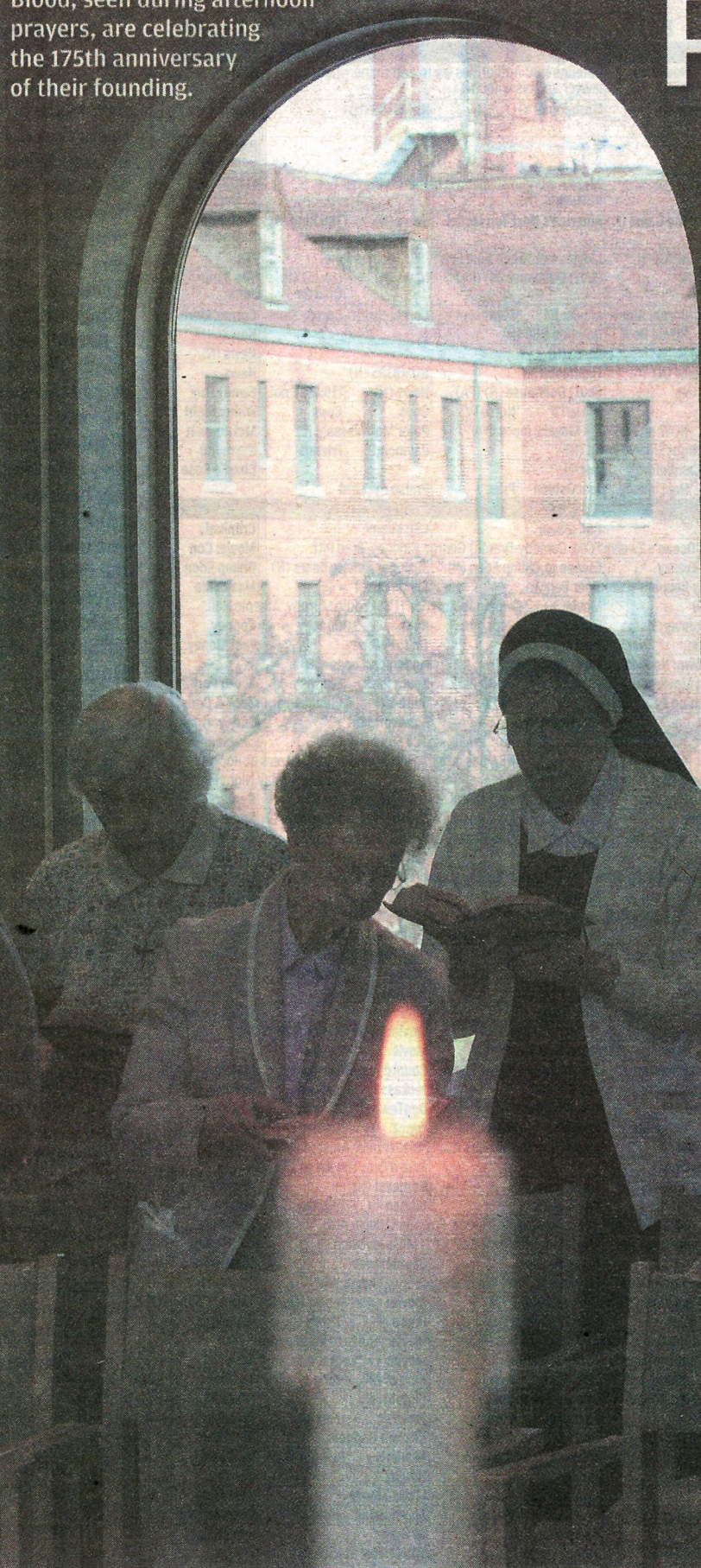
Sister Mary Lou, 85, spent 22 years in a cloistered community dedicated to contemplation, meditation and prayer. "I loved the quiet and the solitude," she says.

Sister Della Mae Meyer

Sister Della Mae Meyer, 72, has found her calling in her work with the homeless at St. Vincent De Paul Hotel.

"They give to me as much as I give to them," she says. Sister Della Mae has received another special gift: In 2005, Sister Gerri McGeorge saved her life by giving her a kidney.

Sisters of the Precious Blood, seen during afternoon prayers, are celebrating the 175th anniversary of their founding.



Precious Blood Sisters mark 175th anniversary

Despite seismic shifts in the world and the church, a 'reconciling presence' remains

By Meredith Moss
Staff Writer

TROTWOOD—Her black-and-white nun's habit has been replaced by a bright red sweater and slacks, and she expertly juggles her hard hat as she makes her way through the Twin Towers construction site.

"I grew up in that house across the street that's being torn down next week," says Sister Rose Helene Wildenhaus, who's obviously proud to be supervising the major renovations taking place in her old East Dayton neighborhood.

These aren't the only dramatic renovations Sister Rose, 73, has experienced in her lifetime. As a Sister of the Precious Blood, she's also adapted to the tumultuous changes resulting from Vatican II in the mid '60s.

The congregation of religious women, headquartered in Dayton, is marking its 175th anniversary year and will host an open house at Salem Heights, the motherhouse community, on Sunday, April 26. Visitors can tour the convent, interact with the Sisters and join them in their chapel for a concert and prayer service. The order was founded by Mother Maria Anna Brunner in Switzerland in 1834.

What has remained constant through the years are the vows of "obedience, poverty and chastity," and the community's commitment to its mission statement: "In all our ministries, we strive to be a life-giving, reconciling presence in our fractured world."

Sisters have served throughout the United States and internationally in ministries that range from



Sister Rose Helene Wildenhaus, vice president of the St. Mary Development Corp., supervises the Lyons Place construction site, a 67-unit senior housing facility in east Dayton. Staff photos by Chris Stewart

teaching and health care to pastoral ministry.

Sister Rose, one of 186 living Sisters of the Precious Blood, says she loved the nuns who taught her as a child, and was inspired to join them by age 15. She took her final vows at 21, at a time when a nun's life was much more restrictive.

When her parents celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary in 1959, for example, nuns were forbidden to return to their family homes.

"I wasn't allowed to go in the house, so we had the party right there in the yard," says Sister Rose, pointing to the now-rundown frame house that once sheltered her family

How to go

What: Open House honoring the 175th anniversary of the Sisters of the Precious Blood. Guided tours, prayer service, refreshments and sacred music.

When: Sunday, April 26, 2 to 4 p.m. for tours, 4 to 5:15 p.m. for music and prayer service.

Where: 4960 Salem Ave., at Denlinger Road. Enter on Denlinger (second driveway on the left past the stoplight after crossing Salem Ave.)

For information: Contact Beverly Bodnar at (937) 278-0871 or visit www.preciousbloodsisters.org

View video and photos of the sisters at DaytonDailyNews.com/life

of nine.

As a young nun, a year of silence helped her get closer to God, she says.

She learned to

sew and iron her own serge and cotton habits and to ask permission to make a phone call.

"You couldn't just up and go to the drug store without asking, and only some of us were allowed to drive," she recalls. "We'd get a little white envelope on our plate with a slip inside called an obedience. It would say: 'You will be a fourth-grade teacher in Phoenix. Days later we'd be packed and on our way.'"

Vatican II, she says, was very important for religious women.

"We gave up our habits and were allowed to wear street clothes. That was important for those of us who worked in the inner city," she says, explaining that the uniforms could be intimidating to others and also make it difficult to maneuver. "And

we were allowed the freedom to pick and choose our prayers and our service."

For Sister Rose, who also helped start St. Leonard senior living community, that service means the satisfaction of rehabilitating inner city neighborhoods and providing safe and comfortable housing for seniors and the poor. For the past 20 years, she has been co-founder and vice president of St. Mary's Development Corporation.

She and her Sisters are freer in other ways as well: They can choose their own place of residence and aren't required to live at the convent; and they're welcome to spend time with their families of origin and to join them for family vacations. Many have returned to their birth names, rather than the names they were given when they became novices.

But wherever she is, Sister Rose prays daily and never forgets her calling.

"If I can't stop and help someone, I'm not doing what God has given me to do."

THEIR STORIES

Sister Dorothy Kammerer

Sister Dorothy Kammerer, 90, is best known to the Miami Valley for her work with the poor and as the founder of the House of Bread. "They were the most gentle people I have ever met," she says of the food kitchen's clients. Sister Dorothy became an "instant grandmother" when she convinced her community to sponsor a Vietnamese refugee family in 1980. "Now those children are bringing their grandchildren to see me," she says.



Sisters Virginia Hebbeler (left) and Canice Werner, walk outside the Sisters of the Precious Blood convent in Trotwood.

Sister Canice Werner

Ninety-two-year-old Sister Canice Werner came to Precious Blood as a young orphan and later became the first nun to teach in the Dayton Public Schools. Through the years she was also missioned to a four-room rural schoolhouse and to an inner city school in Cleveland.

"I had led a regimented life at St. Joseph's Orphanage, so it wasn't so much of a shock for me," she says of her introduction to convent life. She says she'll never forget the moment when she took her final vows and the bishop placed a wedding ring on her finger, a symbol of lifelong fidelity to Christ and the Church.

"It has initials on it that say IHS," says Sister Canice, referring to the first three Greek letters of Jesus' name.

"All that's left after 77 years is the 'H.' The 'I' and 'S' are gone. The 'H' says 'His,' now and forever."

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