

# THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

INLAND SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S NEWSPAPER **PE.com**



For the Sisters of the Precious Blood, part of their mission is working in the community, such as with babies at St. Bernardine.

Recruited by an Inland order, 20-year-old Stephanie Rosas ponders devoting her life to the church amid a shortage of sisters



MARK ZALESKI/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Sister Terry Maher, a chaplain at St. Bernardine Medical Center in San Bernardino, comforts Juanita Saldana as doctors Charles Emond, left, and St. Bernardine emergency room medical director Brian Bearie put a dislocated shoulder back into place after a fall at home.

## A CATHOLIC WOMAN'S JOURNEY

BY DAVID OLSON  
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

As a 20-year-old woman thinking of becoming a Catholic religious sister, Stephanie Rosas is a rarity.

The average U.S. sister — commonly and often incorrectly called a nun — is in her mid-70s. The number of Catholic sisters has plunged from almost 180,000 in 1965 to fewer than 60,000 today.

A few weeks ago, Rosas prayed, talked and bonded with women from the Sisters of the Precious Blood at an all-day Rancho Cucamonga retreat for women considering religious life. The sisters distributed notices to area parishes

and sent out news releases advertising the retreat.

Only four women showed up. The sisters were overjoyed. Sometimes no one comes.

Rosas, of Ontario, is in the early stages of the discernment process, when prospective sisters reflect on whether they want to make the lifelong commitment to religious life.

Rosas and the three other women sat on sofas and chairs around a coffee table with four Sisters of the Precious Blood in the living room of Sister Terry Maher, a chaplain at St. Bernardine. SEE SISTERS/A2

### SISTERS WANTED

NUMBER OF CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS SISTERS:

1965 ..... 179,954  
2009 ..... 59,601

NUMBER OF SISTERS IN THE DIOCESE OF SAN BERNARDINO WHEN DIOCESE WAS FOUNDED:

1978 ..... 220  
TODAY ..... 156

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF CATHOLICS IN DIOCESE:

1978 ..... 235,000  
2009 ..... 1.2 MILLION

NUMBER OF CATHOLIC SISTERS WHO ARE 70 YEARS OR OLDER:

TODAY ..... 64 PERCENT

SOURCES CENTER FOR APPLIED RESEARCH IN THE APOSTOLATE; DIOCESE OF SAN BERNARDINO



# SISTERS

CONTINUED FROM A1

Bernardine Medical Center in San Bernardino. Maher lives alone in an apartment that sits in the middle of a sprawling complex off Interstate 210. As the women chatted and prayed, car doors slammed, basketballs bounced and music played.

Forty-seven of the Precious Blood sisters live in the order's mother house in Dayton, Ohio. But many live alone or with only one, two or three others. Living arrangements are just one characteristic of what makes each order of sisters unique, Sister Carolyn Hoying, vocation director of the Precious Blood congregation, told the four women.

Another is whether sisters work, as do Sisters of the Precious Blood, or whether they have little contact with the outside world. Their jobs are part of how they serve God and other people. One of the sisters at the retreat works with homeless people with AIDS. Another is a high school teacher. Hoying, 66, was a principal at an elementary and middle school before she became vocation director. Their earnings go to the order, which provides each sister enough money for living expenses.

Sisters who are members of contemplative orders are cloistered to some degree and do not work in the non-religious world. They are called nuns. Most sisters are not nuns.

## DOUBTS AND ANSWERS

Rosas sat quietly as she listened to the sisters talk about what led them to devote their lives to God and to serving others.

Inside herself, Rosas felt recognition and relief as she realized that her hesitation, doubts and self-examination are typical for women considering Catholic religious life. The questions she is asking herself are the same ones the sisters considered.

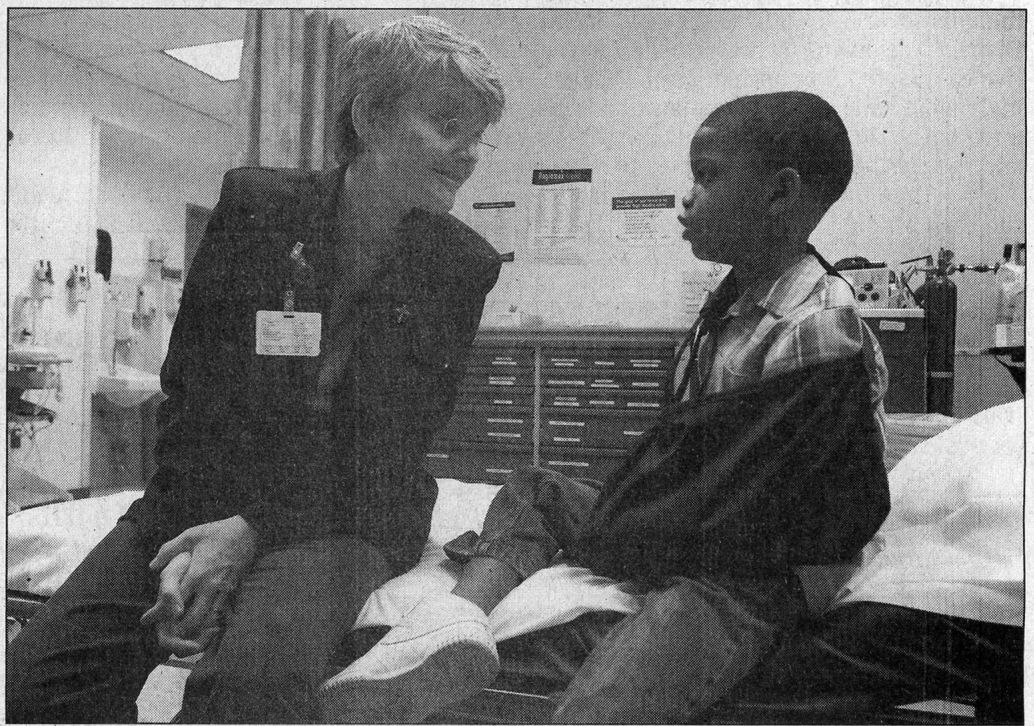
*Am I good enough?*

"I thought, 'Aren't you supposed to be holy or something?'" said Rosas, a St. Christopher medallion dangling over her red sweater. "Don't you have to be close to perfect?"

Maheer, 54, told the women she wondered the same thing when going through discernment.

"I wasn't holy," Maheer said. "I'm still not holy."

Rosas still struggles with the concept of perfection. Today, it's not as much her own expectation — she said she realizes only God is perfect — but that of others. Initially, she told only her



MARK ZALESKI/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Sister Terry Maher visits with Ladarius Tribble, 7, in the emergency room. Maher visits patients 15-20 hours per week. Other sisters teach school or work with AIDS sufferers.

mother and a priest that she was considering becoming a sister. She didn't want people to treat her differently. Then word spread around her family. People started watching what they said around her. What she feared would happen began to occur.

The night before the retreat, she was at a family gathering. Several people swore.

"Shhh," her grandmother said in gentle admonition. "Stephanie's here."

*How can I be a sister when I haven't always been a devoted Catholic?*

Rosas was an altar girl. From an early age, she followed the example of her mother's intense religiosity by praying regularly. She'd weigh decisions by thinking, "What would God want me to do?"

Several years ago, she realized how different she was from her peers. Most girls her age didn't go to church regularly and didn't agonize over morality and ethics.

"I thought, 'Maybe I'm too religious for my age. Maybe I worry too much about what's right or wrong.'"

For two years during high school, Rosas rarely attended Mass. She finally concluded she shouldn't let others' actions influence her. She started going back to church.

Unlike Rosas, Maheer wasn't religious as a child. She attended Mass, but never went beyond that until her early 20s. Her Catholicism was more ancestral and cultural than anything.

But lifelong devotion to the church is not a prerequisite for becoming a sister, Maheer said.

"I never wanted to be a sister, and here I am," Maheer told the women. "I wanted to be an astronaut. When the

## SISTERS OF THE PRECIOUS BLOOD

THE SISTERS of the Precious Blood congregation has 185 members. Six are in the Inland area. Four share a house in Redlands. The other two live in Lake Elsinore and Rancho Cucamonga.

FOR MORE information, go to [preciousbloodsistersdayton.org](http://preciousbloodsistersdayton.org)

thought entered my mind, I was, 'No.' I had only the Hollywood image of sisters, and I didn't like it."

But she couldn't stop thinking about it. She contacted several orders and began having intense conversations with sisters to explore religious life.

"I decided I had to respond to the questions I had," Maheer said. "I didn't want to spend my entire life second-guessing what I did."

*Isn't God supposed to give me a clear sign of what to do?*

Rosas started thinking about becoming a sister three years ago. She still has doubts that religious life is for her. She waits for an indication from God that she has a calling.

Sister Terry Walter, 60, told the women not to worry. Discernment is gradual. There probably won't be any sign from heaven to tell you to become a sister.

"We have different ways we recognize God's message in our lives and in ourselves," Walter said. "It's kind of like the experience with the Resurrection, with the disciples. Jesus kept appearing to them until they believed. It's the same thing with us. He keeps appearing to us until we recognize it. There's nothing we need to get stressed over, because it's a beautiful process."

"If you're at peace," Hoy-

ing said, "you know the decision was right."

## A TRIAL RUN

Rosas said she plans to spend next summer in a convent in Mexico, to find out what it's like to live as a sister. A friend did the same thing during her discernment process. The friend decided not to become a sister. Rosas said she will follow the path God chooses for her.

"I already feel I have a close relationship with God to begin with," said Rosas, who works part time as an office assistant at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church in Ontario. "There's something within me that tells me maybe it could be something more. I don't know how to explain it."

The retreat was Rosas' first. A few weeks before, she attended a vocation day at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton that included discussion groups for women and men considering Catholic religious life.

Jonathan Aytona, president of Family Vocation Ministries, the Rancho Cucamonga-based organization that organized the vocation day, said Rosas left a deep impression on him.

"She feels she's called to something, and she's trying to figure out what," he said. "When I look at her, she exudes a love for God."

The Rev. Augustine Obasi, vicar of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, said Rosas is taking the right steps as she discerns what God's will is for her.

"She allows the spirit of God to lead her, to direct her," Obasi said. "In the call, we are all ordinary people called by God. Only God knows how he calls people."

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