



The Witness of Woman

This column is a longer version of a letter I wrote in November of last year to a number of superiors of women's religious orders in the United States. (The sisters' names have been altered.)

"As you know, Sister Magdalene, I asked Sister Maria Teresa about the possibility of obtaining sisters of your order to teach in our Catholic grade school in Bend. Her reply did not surprise me in the least. Because the Lord has blessed your order with many vocations to religious life, requests from bishops like me make their way to your 'in' box every day of the year. It's impossible to turn out sisters fast enough to meet the ever-growing need for their witness and work. Therefore, since the wait for a 'yes' will very likely be long, Sister advised me get in line now and be prepared to wait."

"That's what I hope to do with this letter, Sister Magdalena: secure a place in line with my brother bishops. Specifically, I write to endorse the enclosed petition of Father Jose Thomas Mudakodiyil, pastor of the largest parish in our small diocese, and one of only four parishes to have a Catholic school. He explains his needs and hopes well."

"Let me add a word about hopes of my own. I was raised here in Central Oregon, and in the '50s and '60s it was not uncommon to see religious sisters in habit serving the small parishes of the Diocese of Baker. In the past fifty years, though, their numbers have drastically decreased. Only two parishes (Bend and Ontario) currently have more than one sister in service. The Sisters of Mary of Kakamega who work

there come from Kenya, and they are a blessing of God for us. Moved by their example of joyous dedication, I have hoped and prayed that we might attract religious sisters from within the U.S. to add to their number."

"For if we are to gain a hearing for the Gospel here in secular Oregon, we need the irreplaceable witness of women who have left everything to follow Christ and have consecrated their lives to the service of His Church."

"I speak from deep personal experience. All my life long, religious sisters—teachers, friends, co-workers—have played a formative part in leading me to know and love the Son of Mary. Everywhere I've been, women consecrated to Christ have helped me find and follow the path God laid down for my life. Having been so decisively influenced by their care and good example, I have hoped since I became bishop to make it possible for our young people (and their parents and grandparents) to feel the powerful attractive force of women living out the vocation to religious life in our midst."

"It is in this spirit that I forward Father Mudakodiyil's letter to you, Sister Magdalena. I realize that the odds are not in our favor at the moment, but in a moment God's Providence can change the odds completely."

Four months later the moment of Providence struck. In March of this year, with the approval of their mother house in Rome, the Salesian Sisters in San Antonio, Texas, offered to send three sisters to St. Francis Parish this August. Their offer was speedily accepted.