

What Do Sisters Do?

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18–19)

Christians are called to be the “Body of Christ” in the world today. Evils such as racism, poverty, sickness, oppression, genocide, alienation, and homelessness prevent people from fully realizing their human dignity as children of God. The “year of the Lord's favor” still needs to be proclaimed and actualized in today's world. God has charged all Christians with the solemn responsibility to be the hands, the feet, the eyes, and the heart of Christ in a world that is suffering today.

I can paraphrase Edmund Burke's famous words by saying, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.” No one person, not even one religious congregation of sisters, can relieve the suffering of the masses, but as Mother Teresa advised, people *can* love and serve one person at a time. They can also join together with other individuals and groups to eliminate the conditions that cause human misery in the world.

Vowed religious make a public commitment to continue the redemptive work of Jesus. Religious congregations participate in this work and base their decisions on the particular mission of their founders. Mother Teresa's congregation, The Missionaries of Charity, was started for the express purpose of giving direct assistance to the poor. Other congregations have specific missions such as health care, education, and foreign mission work. The ministries of the sisters reflect the purpose of their congregation's existence.

Types of Ministry and Advocacy

Ministry for sisters takes many forms. They serve in all aspects of health care and human services as nurses, doctors, physician's assistants, social workers, counselors, lawyers, psychiatrists, home health care aides, and emergency medical technicians. They are also involved in the spiritual ministries of retreat work, renewal, spiritual direction, and worship planning. Sisters work in these ministries in the inner cities and suburbs of America, in Appalachia, and in the poverty-stricken areas of developing countries.

Sisters have historically been involved in educational ministries ranging from daycare to elementary and secondary education to higher education. Tutoring and offering General Educational Development (GED) classes to prisoners is another example of this ministry. Sisters also minister through their gifts as authors, musicians, and artists.

Ministries of advocacy on behalf of women and children, people who are poor or disabled, and refugees and immigrants are also part of furthering the mission of Christ. Other areas of advocacy include life issues such as abortion and euthanasia and environmental protection of the earth and its resources. These are only some of the areas where sisters have joined with other church and civic leaders and with all people of goodwill to end abuses to human dignity and to foster life for all of creation.

Pope Paul VI challenged all people of goodwill, “If you want peace, work for justice” (Message for the Fifth World Day of Peace, 1972). In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus teaches that we *are* our brothers' and sisters' keepers, regardless of their social status, religion, or cultural heritage.



Aspects of Ministry

Ministry is more than a one-way street. A sister frequently finds her own life broadened and transformed through her work. Sisters do not come with all the answers or as perfect “got-it-all-together” women. They come to ministry as companions, and in this companionship they find themselves ministered to, even as they minister. This mutual flow of grace makes ministry a tangible experience of God’s love and care for all, as in the following story related to me by Sister Marie, who has worked for many years in the inner city.

Several of the sisters who lived in my local community went each Saturday night to downtown Philadelphia to feed homeless people. During the winter we took hot tea, sandwiches, and other food items to distribute.

One homeless man, whom I will call “Steve,” would meet us each week and help carry the bags of food we had prepared. Several months and many conversations later, Steve told us that he had gone to a Catholic school as a young boy. When I asked him which one, he named the school where I had taught when I first began my teaching ministry. As we talked more, I discovered that not only had he gone to this school but I had taught several of his sisters and brothers! In amazement he said to me, “You know my mother!”

As our relationship with Steve developed, we started to invite him to the convent. We asked him to dinner regularly, included him in our prayer, and celebrated his birthday with him, and he shared in many of our celebrations.

Steve eventually joined a rehabilitation program for his addiction. It was a long journey of rehab, then falling back into addiction, and then beginning rehab again. When I became discouraged with his many relapses, the sisters in my community supported and strengthened me to continue to “stand with” Steve as he struggled through his recovery.

Years have now gone by, and Steve is no longer on the streets, no longer an addict. He has a job, his own apartment, and a car. He still calls me several times a week and continues to visit us in the convent. He tells me he thanks God every day for the sisters, but I thank God every day for Steve.

His life remains a source of inspiration to me. When I see him reach out to someone else who is homeless or addicted or when he visits one of our elderly sisters in our retirement home, I am awed and humbled by his goodness. He has become what Henri Nouwen describes as a “wounded healer” to others (*The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*). Through Steve I can “see” Christ so much more clearly and deepen my own faith. Steve helps me appreciate family and good friends—for he has neither—and he points out the gift they are to me.

Yes, I have become more faith filled, more appreciative, more aware of the needs of persons who are homeless and addicted. Truly, I am a better person because of Steve. With infinite wisdom and love, God saw that Steve and I needed each other, and so that evening many years ago on the streets of Philadelphia, our ministry to each other began.

The proverb, “If you give people fish, they eat for a day; if you teach them how to fish, they eat for a lifetime,” reflects the two aspects of ministry: taking care of immediate needs and working to change the systems and conditions that cause human suffering. Both approaches are necessary and often go hand in hand.

There are various ways in which religious congregations “teach people how to fish.” One approach is through literacy projects that instruct people who have inadequate reading skills. Teaching English as



a second language (ESL) to adults is one example. Sisters offer classes to low-income, multi-ethnic, undereducated women and men so that they can find better employment, further their education, and improve the quality of life for themselves and their families. Educational programs in economically depressed rural and urban areas offer basic tutoring, GED classes, health and child care, and parenting classes.

Sisters are also involved in political activism, a key element in fostering social change. This activity includes meeting with local and state politicians and policy makers to advocate better health care for women and children, shelter and rehabilitation programs for homeless people, safety for victims of violent crimes, and programs that address issues such as domestic violence, abuse, child labor, and care for the elderly poor. Some congregations register with the United Nations as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and use their UN status to advocate for human rights around the world.

Members of religious congregations use their influence as educators to attempt to counteract the evils of our society, such as racism, prejudice, violence, and hatred, by introducing people to the richness of other cultures and by teaching tolerance, non-violent conflict resolution, and the paramount need for forgiveness in everyone's life. Commitment to education at all levels and in all strata of society fosters acceptance of others and creates a more tolerant world for future generations.

On a more direct level of service, religious congregations, sometimes in collaboration with government agencies, run shelters for abused women and children that offer support, counseling, legal assistance, and job training. Sisters working with AIDS patients and their families and with those who are disabled or mentally impaired enable them to improve their quality of life.

Sister Janice, who works with persons with disabilities, tells about her ministry:

While I would never say it is easy to live with a disabling chronic condition like rheumatoid arthritis, having this condition has given me the privilege of being able to experience similar circumstances among the people with whom I minister. I have worked for thirteen years with people who are blind, deaf, or both, who are quadriplegic or paraplegic, who have difficulty speaking, and who suffer mental illness or mental retardation. All experience extreme marginalization from a society that has difficulty accepting them as a complete person.

I have seen the determined resilience of the human spirit, for almost all the persons with a disability to whom I have ministered have come to accept and integrate the disability into their life. They refuse to be defined by limits, and they retain hope in life. Their profound message of joy and hope in what could be a despairing situation is a powerful witness to non-disabled people.

Generally, my ministry involves supporting the life of persons with disabilities. This may mean referring someone who needs a wheelchair to the local disability resource center, listening to the pain of a mother who has just learned that her child has cerebral palsy, or using my skills as a spiritual director with a recently paralyzed man who is struggling to find God. Along with this support is the aspect of advocacy in helping to ensure the civil rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act of people with disabilities. My ministry also includes organizing Disability Awareness Days in schools and parishes and speaking to health care professionals and church ministers to raise their awareness about disability.



I recall one particularly moving experience when I learned in a deeper way what it means to be part of the broken Body of Christ. I had helped plan a Mass for people with disabilities, and the priest who was celebrating the Mass was in a wheelchair. When the time arrived for Communion, one by one they came: Simone, a woman who is legally blind; Dan, a wheelchair user; Edna, a paraplegic woman; and a young man with Tourette's syndrome whose outbursts ceased as he received the Eucharist. As I watched this procession, the words of Saint Paul came to mind:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Corinthians 4:8–10)

In this sacred moment I understood more profoundly the brokenness that binds Jesus to people with disabilities and the power that resides in these “earthen vessels.”

To meet other needs of the Body of Christ, some congregations have provided direct assistance to needy persons by working in conjunction with the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to provide affordable, low-income housing for persons who are elderly or poor. Other congregations have converted space to be used for daycare for children of working parents and have renovated their own buildings to be accessible to people with disabilities.

In all of these many ministries, the sister brings her faith and Gospel values to her service of others. This element makes the work of a vowed religious more than just a job, a good deed, or a humanitarian effort. She imbues her ministry with the belief that God dwells in each individual and in all of creation. The sacredness of the human person and of the earth is the source that animates her ministry.

Foreign missions are the focus of ministry for some congregations, such as the Maryknoll Sisters. The category of “foreign missions” also includes the United States of America. Sisters from other countries come to the United States and minister in inner cities, suburbs, and rural areas. The usual focus of foreign missions is on education and health care. This ministry can be extremely challenging as the sisters enter into a new culture with different traditions, practices, and languages than their own. Before going to work in a foreign country, they spend time in classes to learn about the culture, the language, and the customs of the people they will be serving.

Sometimes this ministry can be extremely dangerous. Sisters have been tortured, raped, abused, and killed because of their commitment to the Gospel and their work with the poor. In 1980, three sisters and a laywoman missionary were murdered in El Salvador. In 1989, a sister was kidnapped and tortured in Guatemala before being released by her captors. Although such extreme violence against sisters is not common and congregations do their utmost to protect their sisters, violence does happen. Then the words of Jesus become ever more real: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

In meeting these multiple ministry needs, a sister must sometimes live with members of another congregation. For example, a Dominican sister may reside with Franciscan sisters in what is known as inter-congregational living. At other times a ministry need is so great that a sister must live alone in order to meet it. Fostering healthy relationships with other members of the church, with neighbors, and with colleagues in her ministry and keeping in communication with other sisters sustain and offer



companionship and “community” for a sister living alone. Some congregations, however, do not allow their members to live with sisters of other congregations or to live alone.

There is a lighter side to ministry. Often through the friendships she makes in her ministry, a sister receives invitations to join with family members in celebrating weddings, birthdays, and anniversaries or in attending a picnic or a dinner. These occasions add a measure of pleasure and fun to the more serious aspects of ministry.

Humorous events happen in ministry, too, as the following story shows.

Teaching in Catholic schools today, sisters meet many children who are not Catholic and therefore are unfamiliar with the lifestyle of a sister. Frequently, they are the ones who show us God’s humor and allow us to laugh at ourselves. One little girl, who had left our school to attend a boarding school, came back to visit. She was telling me about her third-grade schedule, her classes, and how students were awakened each morning. I told her I remembered that when I was a little girl, my father woke me up every morning by singing. She asked in an awed voice, “Sister Marie, was your father a nun, too?”

Countless experiences like this one bring laughter and simple joy to ministry.

The work of sisters, brothers, and priests alongside dedicated laymen and laywomen, young and old, has had untold impact in creating the world that Jesus envisioned, where no one is in need, peace reigns, and the Good News can be heard. This mission of Jesus continues today, and he still speaks these words of encouragement: “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

The vow of obedience (promising to listen to God’s voice), the vow of poverty (freeing sisters to respond to that voice and go where they are needed), and the vow of chastity (promising to love all without distinction) create the soil in which all ministry is planted, grows, and bears fruit.

To be the “Body of Christ” in the world today is the call of every Christian. The following prayer adapted from the writings of Saint Teresa of Ávila says it best:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;

no hands but yours; no feet but yours.

It is your eyes through which Christ’s compassion looks out to the world;

your feet with which he must walk about doing good;

your hands with which he blesses humanity;

your voice with which his forgiveness is spoken;

your heart with which he now loves.

(This article is excerpted from *Sisters: An Inside Look*, by Kathleen Rooney, SSJ [Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2001]. Copyright © 2001 by Saint Mary’s Press.)

