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Actress Michelle Berg as Sister Celeste stands in front of the iconic Mickey's Diner restaurant July 8 in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota, as she talks about the history of the city to those taking one of her "True Confessions Gangster" tours. (CNS/The Catholic Spirit/Dave Hrbacek)

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Michelle Myers Berg turns heads as she walks downtown St. Paul streets.

But it's not her, per se, that passersby see — it's Mother Celestine Howard, a Victorian-era Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

Berg acts the part of "Sister Celeste" in a full veil and habit, a rosary at her waist and a cross pinned just below her wimple. Thick-soled black Oxfords do double duty: They help her look the part of a nun while aiding the miles she logs as a walking tour guide in Minnesota's capital city.

A longtime actor and former guide for Wabasha Street Caves tours, Berg recently began collaborating with the Celeste of St. Paul Hotel + Bar to offer two 75-minute tours, "St. Peter, St. Paul" and "True Confessions Gangster Tour."

Both of her "Celestial Tours" are stuffed with stories of iconic sites and colorful characters that shaped the city, including mobsters, performers, architects and archbishops.

Notable sites include St. Louis, King of France; the site of the notorious Green Lantern saloon, considered the center of the city's underworld; and the historic Hamm building, built on the site of a former Cathedral of St. Paul — before Archbishop John Ireland commissioned a grander structure on St. Anthony (now Cathedral) Hill.

Berg, 59, is serious about history, and she has done her research on all of it, including her muse.

Mother Celestine was born Ellen Howard, a cousin to Ireland and best friends with his sister, also named Ellen. Ellen Howard was orphaned by the potato famine, and she and her siblings immigrated with the Ireland family to the United States together from County Kilkenny, Ireland, arriving by steamboat in St. Paul in 1852.

The two Ellens joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet at age 16. Ellen Ireland became Sister — and later, Mother — Seraphine and would lead her religious community through an aggressive period of growth and institution founding.

Ellen Howard became Sister Celestine — and also later, Mother — as superior of St. Agatha's Convent, which developed into a well-respected music and art conservatory. The former conservatory building is now the Celeste of St. Paul Hotel + Bar.



Actress Michelle Berg as Sister Celeste talks about the history of St. Paul, Minnesota, during a July 8 "True Confessions Gangster Tour." (CNS/The Catholic Spirit/Dave Hrbacek)

In a previous job, Berg had given tours as Mother Seraphine, and Sister Celeste was a similar role. She was preparing to launch her tours when the Celeste opened in November 2019, but the pandemic curtailed her plans until April of this year.

When she meets tour members in the hotel bar, the convent's former parlor, she — as Sister Celeste — jokes in an Irish brogue that it's "a work-from-home situation." Her tour is sprinkled with well-timed one-liners, but never at the expense of the Catholic Church or the religious sisters who served it.

"Wow, they were movers and shakers," Berg said of the city's earliest religious sisters. "They were such a civilizing effect on this society, and they don't have streets named after them because part of their missional statement was, 'We're the hands and feet of Christ; we're not the face or the body. It doesn't matter if nobody sees us. The Lord sees us.' "

Following a recent "St. Peter, St. Paul" tour, she spoke while in costume with The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

She said for her, the tours are more than just a gig. They're a way to challenge herself as an actor, share her deep love of her hometown and spread charity.

While she's in costume and leading a tour, some people, especially the area's homeless, take her for a real nun, she said, and so she tells them she'll pray for them. As a Christian, that's her earnest promise.

Berg was raised Catholic in St. Paul, attended what was then Immaculate Heart of Mary Church and was a student in the parish school.

She was taught by sisters and even thought briefly about becoming one, she said. She laughed while recounting a story from her freshman year at the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota, about meeting one of her mother's former instructors, a Benedictine sister.

"I probably had a serious 'new wave' haircut back in the day, when everyone was still wearing the disco locks and the disco pants, and [I had] this edgy haircut. I said to her, 'You know, I've thought about becoming a nun,' and she looked at me and said, 'Oh, no. No, no, no. No.' "

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Berg ended up transferring to the University of Minnesota, but she still keeps in touch with the sister, she said. "I think part of my [Sister Celeste] character is based on her" as well as Berg's Irish aunts and grandmother, she said.

Berg's family has influenced her roles before, especially in the monologue show "Blue Collar Diaries," which she wrote about growing up in working-class St. Paul.

Actors have the privilege of walking in other people's shoes, she said, and she feels changed by her experience playing Mother Celestine, especially as she considers the role she and other sisters had in helping people in need and what it meant to dedicate their work and education to serving others.

She hopes her tours shed light on how challenging those lives were, "to help them see what it would be like to leave St. Joe's Academy at the crack of dawn with a dinner pail and to be walking downtown teaching all day" in wintertime, in the era before streetcars.

They were there in the muddle of fledgling St. Paul and, later, still ministering amid the corruption that plagued its gangster era.

"They were really intelligent, accomplished women who were changing their communities a tablespoon at a time. And I respect that," she said.