News
Religious Life



Sister Mary Pieta of the Handmaids of the Heart of Jesus teaches seventh graders at Holy Family Academy in St. Louis Park, Minn. in October. (CNS photo/Dave Hrbacek, The Catholic Spirit)

Maura Keller

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Mother Mary Clare Roufs formed the idea for the Handmaids of the Heart of Jesus after receiving what she called "the founding grace" in December 2006.

It came when she heard the late Archbishop Harry J. Flynn of St. Paul and Minneapolis preaching on Mary at St. Paul Seminary.

"He simply started by saying, 'Mary. How beautiful is the name Mary?' And I just thought that God wanted a new community of sisters," recalled Mother Mary Clare.

"This charism was really being born in my heart, and so I asked a few young women to consider living the life with me, and we started in August 2007 with the permission of Archbishop Flynn," she said. "From that day, it has been a time in which the Lord just continues to lead us every step of the way."

Mother Mary Clare founded the community in 2007 with three other women, and now the sisters have a new convent in suburban Minneapolis to call home.

In August of this year, 12 sisters moved into a newly renovated convent at St. Gabriel the Archangel in Hopkins to begin their work in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

"The (archdiocese) has always been home, and it has always been a dream to be here," Mother Mary Clare told The Catholic Spirit, the archdiocesan newspaper. "We love the priests and we love the people. It is really home for a lot of our sisters.

"As diocesan sisters, we want our sisters to be serving in their home dioceses when and where they can."

The Handmaids lived in the archdiocese for three years before Bishop John M. LeVoir of New Ulm, Minnesota, formally invited them to be established in his diocese in December 2009.

"In March 2010, Bishop LeVoir formally established us as a 'public association of the lay faithful' in hopes of us becoming a 'religious community of diocesan right,'" Mother Mary Clare explained.

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To gain that distinction -- "a religious community of diocesan right" -- there are typically at least 40 members in a community and over half of them should be in perpetual vows, she said.

"The church wants to see that you are growing, that you are strong with good membership before that would happen," Mother Mary Clare said. "For most communities, that would be about 20 to 25 years into their life, depending on how they grow.

"We aren't there yet because part of what the church does is she says, 'Give it a try. Let us walk with you and then in time, if it is right, it will be more formally established.'"

In 2018, the Handmaids expanded by establishing a house in Duluth, Minnesota, where four sisters currently reside



Handmaids of the Heart of Jesus in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis are seen in this undated photo. (CNS photo/Dave Hrbacek, The Catholic Spirit)

The Handmaids' New Ulm motherhouse includes 17 sisters, and the 12 at the Hopkins house include five postulates, who are women discerning becoming Handmaids. If after a year they want to continue that discernment process, they will enter the novitiate program in New Ulm.

From the rural farmlands of New Ulm to the lakeside environs of Duluth to the urban life of Hopkins, the Handmaids feel called to live in an imitation of Mary as spiritual mothers in a parish family, engaging the new evangelization as diocesan sisters.

Quite simply, they are spiritual mothers who are complementing the fatherhood of diocesan priests.

"Where you see a priest in a diocesan parish working and serving a parish family, we would work alongside of him, complementing him in our consecrated lives and helping the parish become a family of faith," Mother Mary Clare said.

She called it "a real homecoming" for the sisters to be back in the archdiocese. "It is a fulfillment of God's goodness. And it is where the original charism and grace was received and so what a joy it is for us to finally come home."

The Handmaids' apostolate differs according to the needs of the local church in which they serve.

In Hopkins, they can express their charism in different ways, including at St. Gabriel and, next door, Chesterton Academy, a private Catholic school with grades nine to 12, as well as nearby Holy Family Academy in St. Louis Park, the University of Minnesota's Newman Center, St. Lawrence Parish in Minneapolis and St. John Vianney College Seminary in St. Paul.

Sister Mary Joseph Evans, postulant directress at the Handmaids' house in Hopkins, has been a member of the community for 12 years. She has lived most of those years in New Ulm, before moving to Duluth three years ago, and finally residing in the new house in Hopkins.

"It is such a great joy for our community to have a convent in the archdiocese and to be serving here. Many of our sisters are from the archdiocese and it's part of our diocesan charism to serve at home," said Sister Mary Joseph, who grew up in St. Joseph Parish in West St. Paul.

"To be back serving among the priests and the families and be able to be spiritual mothers is such a great joy and something we've been looking forward to for many years," she said. "It has been a great gift to have our postulants here in Hopkins, and it allows them to get a good experience of the different ways in which we serve and the richness of life here."

She said that by being part of the archdiocese, the Handmaids have many opportunities to their charism and live out their "spiritual maternity" because of its variety of schools and its two seminaries.

"Our hope and our mission is to help people discover the joys of living their Catholic faith and having a personal relationship with Jesus," Mother Mary Claire said. "As we do that together as a family, it will continue to enrich our lives together as we continue to seek him.