News
Q&As



Religious of the Assumption Sr. Nuala Cotter retired in 2012 from a career teaching college students to become provincial superior of her congregation's U.S. province. Since 2018 she has served as provincial treasurer. (Courtesy of Nuala Cotter)



by Ana Durrani

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

February 15, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

If you ask Religious of the Assumption Sr. Nuala Cotter about her journey to sisterhood, she will tell you that it was a "long and winding road." It began in Tuckahoe, New York, where she was born in 1955 to a teacher father and librarian mother. She never considered religious life while growing up in Tuckahoe. But, her life's road was soon to take her down the spiritual route.

A penchant for learning and a quest for knowledge have been central to Cotter's life. She has a bachelor's degree in English from the College of New Rochelle and a master's in English and a doctorate in Renaissance and medieval literature from the University of Pennsylvania.

"The worlds of Chaucer and Shakespeare are both wonderfully foreign and surprisingly familiar. I love that mix," Cotter said.

As for religious life, it wasn't until 1984, when she was finishing her dissertation at Penn, that she met up with the Assumption sisters in West Philadelphia. She prayed with them for about five years.

"I felt very drawn to the way they prayed the psalms of the Liturgy of the Hours. I began to wonder if their life and mine could meet somewhere deeper," Cotter said.

As luck would have it, she had the opportunity to visit some of their houses in East Africa in the summer of 1988 and reconnected with the sisters who had been in Philly. She also got to experience life in Kenya and Tanzania.

"One epic solo bus trip through the African bush at night certainly gave me something to think about! It's good to be displaced from time to time, and that's what happened to me during that summer," Cotter said. "Not long after, I asked if I could enter the Assumption."

She entered the Religious of the Assumption in 1989. After completing her novitiate in Worcester, Massachusetts, she made her first vows and went to live in Belgium, where she studied at L'Institut d’Études Théologiques while living in an Assumption community in Brussels. She also picked up French fluency.

"My education formed in me an ability to read, to listen, to speak. Those are good qualities if you want to be a teacher — or any kind of adult human being, perhaps," Cotter said.

Cotter returned to the U.S. three years later, eager to share it all. She made her final vows as an Assumption sister in October 1998 and spent three summers in Vermont earning a master's in theology from St. Michael's College in 1999.

Seeking education has been a passion in Cotter's life, as has her role as an educator. For 20 years, she taught in the English and theology departments at Assumption University, a private Catholic university in Worcester. She describes her experience as "generally very happy, often quite funny and occasionally touching."

"To be a sister on a Catholic campus can be dismissed as, 'Oh, God, I've got a nun for a professor.' But it can also provide opportunities for conversation and friendship," Cotter said.

After many rewarding years as a professor, she retired in 2012 to become superior of the U.S. Province of the Assumption. Since 2018 she has served as treasurer for the province.

"Time off for good behavior saw me running our ESL program for adults at St. Peter's Church in Worcester and our after-school mentoring program for children," Cotter said.

Advertisement

Global Sisters Report caught up with Cotter, who spoke about her lengthy career in higher education, her faith and where she's headed next.

***GSR*: How did you become involved with Assumption University? What was your role? What did you teach?**

Cotter: I first came to Assumption in August 1989. I was just entering the Religious of the Assumption, the "cousins," if you will, of the Assumptionists, the sponsors of the university. They were interested in us collaborating with them and encouraged me to teach there. I did part time until I left for Belgium. I returned in 1995, and in 2002, I received tenure in English and theology.

Did you enjoy being a professor?

I loved the students, and I enjoyed teaching very much. Like most teachers, I felt happy when I could see light bulbs going off over student heads. Sometimes, of

course, we butted heads — that wasn't so much fun. But on the whole, we wound up reconciled and moving forward.

For me, it was never only about information being consumed and remembered, although I tended to be very hard-core about content, as in, knowing it. My exams always tested whether you could explain what you had read — whether that was a speech from Othello or a verse in Genesis.

I was more interested in encouraging the young people in my care to grow as human beings who belonged to a community of learners. Nowadays, the university would call that "the company of friends." It's a nice expression.

What role has your faith played in your life?

My faith is an abiding trust in Jesus Christ — his love for me and this beautiful but wounded world of ours. He called me long ago, and I've been trying to listen and respond ever since. I make mistakes — a hot Irish temper will do that for you. But I trust that he continues to call me, to have faith in me. The people he has put into my life, from my family to the many friends who've loved and helped me, to the sisters who've lived with and put up with me for almost 35 years, are all gifts and sources of grace for me.

Do you have a favorite passage from the Bible, and if so, why?

When an Assumption sister is about to make her final profession of vows, to bind herself for life to Jesus in the Assumption, she asks for a "word," a Scripture text that speaks to her desire for her life with Christ. I asked for "*rabbouni*," the word engraved in my profession ring.

In John 20, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb of Jesus and finds it empty. She's standing there, weeping, when she sees someone she takes to be the gardener. She asks him where the body of Jesus has been taken. He turns and says her name instead: Mary. And suddenly she knows, and cries out with all the love, longing and joy in her: *Rabbouni!*

The narrator tells us that this word means teacher, but each time I pray on this text, I think it must have meant and does mean so much more, something that cannot be explained. On the days I find myself praying, "*rabbouni*," I want to give myself over to all that's packed into that one word. And then I am silent.

What do you do as the provincial treasurer of the U.S. Province of the Assumption?

When I was a kid, there was a performer who would show up regularly on The Ed Sullivan Show. He used to balance plates on poles by setting the poles spinning. He'd run up and down the line of poles, spinning them so that the plates would keep going and nothing would crash onto the floor. I know — it was a more innocent time on TV, for sure. But I find that it's not a bad metaphor for what my job asks from me: Keep the plates in the air and keep them spinning.

I take care of the sisters, especially their health and safety, make sure that our bills are paid, and see what else we can do with our resources. One of my favorite parts of my work is planning for giving and then doing it. Even though we're not many, we're able to help others in this way as well as in our ministries. It's a joy to be the point person for that.

I would add a bit of advice for anyone about to become a provincial treasurer: Make sure
that you have a wonderful, knowledgeable and trustworthy person to help you. Our business manager is the best, no question about it. I was an English major, and without her, our plates would have crashed long ago.

Do you have plans to take on a different role or add more to your life's work?

Like all religious women and men, I try to answer the calls I get as best I can. For the moment, this is it. I don't know what comes next. I'll be listening.