Voices of Sisters
Religious Life



A portrait of the Stenger family is featured in a history of Glennonville, Mo., compiled by Darrall Hirtz. Of 16 children, six sisters joined the same religious community and one brother became a Redemptorist priest. (Courtesy of Rose Weidenbenner)



by Sr. Rose Weidenbenner

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September 16, 2024

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I don't often find myself reflecting on the hidden threads running through our lives, connecting us to those who came before us and those who will come after. Yet, in recent months, as we celebrated the Day of Consecrated Life, Catholic Sisters Week and Vocations Week, I felt a pull to consider my own roots. How did my journey as a consecrated woman begin, and whose sacrifices, prayers and quiet strength paved the way for me?

During a recent retreat, where we were asked to think about whose shoulders we stand, I immediately thought of the 38 religious women who sprang from the humble soil of St. Teresa's Parish in Glennonville and Sacred Heart Parish in Wilhelmina. These small, tightly knit communities in southeast Missouri have nurtured vocations for generations, and their legacy lives on in the lives of these women who have served God's people.

My Grandma, (Frances ne Stenger) Weidenbenner, always had a listening ear and prayerful heart. She heard from me, at a very young age, that I wanted to be a sister. She had two sisters, one sister-in-law, one daughter and nine nieces, and me, her granddaughter, who were all religious sisters. I know she prayed for all of us in our lives as religious.

Joyce Rouse's song, "Standing on the Shoulders," speaks to this very idea. The verses capture the heritage passed down through the families of these two parishes. The second verse resonates most deeply with me, reminding me of those who founded these towns and reminding me that I stand here today because of their faith and dedication.

> We are standing on the shoulders of the ones who came before us,
> They are saints and they are humans, they are angels, they are friends.
> We can see beyond the struggles and the troubles and the challenge,
> when we know that by our efforts things will be better in the end.

One might be tempted to think St. Teresa's Parish has prayed the prayer for vocations since its founding in 1905. Thirty-eight women from St. Teresa's and Sacred Heart became sisters in nine religious communities. To date, they have collectively served God for more than 1,912 years all over the world and nearby. They are:

- Franciscan Sr. Clara Ann Blume, 49 years
- Franciscan Sr. Helen (Leonette) Blume,19 years
- Franciscan Sr. Mary Claudine Corrigan, 20 years
- Ursuline Sr. Irene (Mary Charles) Eberhard, 31 years
- Ursuline Sr. Sharon Fieser, 5 years
- Dominican Sr. Clara Ann Fluech, 60 years
- Franciscan Sr. Mary Martha Friedman, 71 years
- Ursuline Sr. Michael Marie Friedman, 57 years
- Franciscan Sr. de Chantal Huber, 67 years
- Adorers of the Blood of Christ Sr. Nickoletta Kerperien, 55 years
- Adorers of the Blood of Christ Sr. Odella Kettman, 51 years
- Ursuline Sr. Jamesetta Knott, 63 years
- Ursuline Sr. Mary Mercedes Knott, 68 years
- Ursuline Sr. Mary Catherine Kuper, 58 years
- St. Joseph Sr. Josepha Marie Nellesen, 55 years
- Ursuline Sr. Cecilia Joseph (CJ) Olinger, 65 years
- Ursuline Sr. Diane Marie Payne, 56 years
- School Sisters of Notre Dame Sr. Augusteen Marie Peters, 69 years
- School Sisters of Notre Dame Sr. Mary Rebecca Peters, 55 years
- Franciscan Sr. Ursula Siebert, 58 years
- Ursuline Sr. Amelia Stenger, 56 years
- Franciscan Sisters of Mary Sr. Ann Miriam Stenger, 75 years
- Franciscan Sisters of Mary Sr. Charles Marie Stenger, 17 years
- Franciscan Sisters of Mary Sr. Joanelle (Margaret) Stenger, 15 years
- Franciscan Sisters of Mary Sr. Jovita Marie Stenger, 65 years
- Franciscan Sisters of Mary Sr. Mariella Stenger, 64 years
- Franciscan Sisters of Mary Sr. Mary Agnes (Patricia) Stenger, 34 years
- Franciscan Sisters of Mary Sr. Mary Clement (Antoinette) Stenger, 69 years
- Franciscan Sisters of Mary Sr. Mary Placida Stenger, 51 years
- Franciscan Sisters of Mary Sr. Wilfried Marie Stenger-Stratman, 41 years
- Ursuline Sr. Arnida Teder, 7 years
- Franciscan Sr. Giles Teder, 60 years
- Franciscan Sr. James Teder, 70 years
- Franciscan Sr. Janice Teder, 49 years
- Holy Spirit Missionary Sr. Estelle (Rose) Weidenbenner, 58 years
- Ursuline Sr. Mary Celine Weidenbenner, 61 years
- Mercy Sr. Rose Marie Weidenbenner, 43 years

- Ursuline Sr. Rebecca White, 45 years

The founders of these two communities were immigrants —first from Europe (some of the ancestors of Glennonville came from Germany and the Netherlands) and later from other parts of the United States. From these immigrant communities came women who chose to join religious life, willing to leave home and be with other peoples, some who were/are also immigrants.



St. Teresa's Parish in Glennonville, Missouri, pictured here, included the Sacred Heart community after it closed in 1979 or 1980. Some 38 religious sisters from the two parishes have collectively served more than 1,912 years in ministries nearby and all over the world. (Courtesy of Rose Weidenbenner)

I am the second to the last on that list alphabetically. And like these sisters before me, I minister with people where they call home. For over 10 years I lived and ministered in South Texas — years with the immigrant women of ARISE Adelante, providing personal development, education, civic engagement, citizenship preparation, spirituality, health support and alternative medicine.

These sisters were and are teachers, nurses, social workers, pastoral ministers and hospital administrators; we have served both here in the United States and all over

the world. Each of us meets those with whom she ministers with compassion, love, justice and peace. We belong to each other, not just here at home, but everywhere we minister.

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Growing up in Glennonville, I experienced a deep sense of belonging. Anyone in need does not remain so for long. We help each other. As a Sister of Mercy, who takes a vow of service, I learned about service at home and in the community. Reflecting on my final vows, I've deepened my understanding of belonging and commitment: "In baptism, You offered me the gift of life, love and belonging and then You called me to deepen that commitment in communion with the Sisters of Mercy."

Pope Francis describes vocations as blossoming "in the good soil of faithful people," a fitting description of the farming communities of St. Teresa's and Sacred Heart parishes.

The final lines of Rouse's song resonate with my ongoing call:

> I will stand a little taller, I will work a little longer,
> And my shoulders will be there to hold the ones who follow me.

I am profoundly grateful for the legacy of the sisters of St. Teresa's and Sacred Heart. These sisters, some family members, all faith-family members, have witnessed to me — and to all of us — how God's love and call leads us to be of service in many places. I am blessed by their courage and their example in God's church. Their courage and dedication have shaped my path, and I stand on their shoulders with a deep sense of gratitude and responsibility.