News
Q&As



Sr. Mary Pieta, Sr. Mary Casey O'Connor, Sr. Fidelity Grace, Sr. Ann Immaculée, Sr. Gaudia Maria Magdalena and Sr. Zélie Maria Louis, members of the Sisters of Life, welcome pregnant women and their new babies into their congregation's convent. (Courtesy of Sr. Catherine Joy Marie)



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Sr. Mary Casey O'Connor is a Sister of Life who welcomes pregnant women and their new babies into her congregation's convent. The Holy Respite mission opened its doors in 1999 and has been a safe home for hundreds of pregnant women. Alongside seven other Sisters of Life, O'Connor journeys with eight women per year who embrace motherhood.

Inspired by the passage "What then will this child be?" (Luke 1:66), each pregnant guest can count on the sisters to accompany them, whether it's for a doctor’s appointment, a walk in the park, a birthday party and more. The sisters keep in touch with their guests and welcome them back to visit their first home.



The Sisters of Life walk through the streets of New York City. The sisters welcome pregnant women and their new babies into her congregation's convent. The Holy Respite mission opened its doors in 1999 and has been a safe home for hundreds of pregnant women. (Courtesy of Sr. Catherine Joy Marie)

Additionally, O'Connor has a unique role model in her life who keeps her motivated in her mission. Her twin sister, Casey Gunning, who has Down syndrome, lives an autonomous life and is a lifelong athlete in the Special Olympics. Together, they give talks on the dignity of human life.

O'Connor, local superior of her convent, agreed to an interview with Global Sisters Report.



Sr. Mary Casey O'Connor of the Sisters of Life and her twin sister Casey Gunning share an embrace. (Courtesy of Sr. Catherine Joy Marie)

***GSR*: What can you tell us about the Holy Respite mission?**

O'Connor: The Holy Respite mission provides a home for women stepping into their motherhood. It is a place where women can find safety, security and space during pregnancy and into the first months of their child's life. Jesus himself, hidden in the tabernacle, is the very center of the Holy Respite.

Women are invited into the convent to be loved, restored and filled with new hope for the future. The women who live with us are given an opportunity to dream about their future and receive the encouragement they need to begin the next chapter of their lives as mothers.

In this ministry, how are the Sisters of Life trained to approach women who are pregnant and in crisis?

The women who come to us have come by way of referral. Our primary desire is to receive the women as they are. Awareness of the many circumstances, pressures and fears she might be facing is absolutely critical. A woman must trust that she is seen and heard. It is important to validate her feelings and accompany her through the various emotions she faces during pregnancy.

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>
> —Sr. Mary Casey O'Connor
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What does it mean to approach them in a nonjudgmental way?

As sisters, our greatest mission is our life of prayer. As we are daily transformed by his love, we too desire to bring Jesus' love, mercy and kindness to each pregnant woman that crosses our path. Mother Teresa suggests that when we judge, we have no room to love. We deeply desire to love — to love pregnant women back into life. We want to love them when they feel alone and unlovable — to love them in their great need. We know that love alone, true love that seeks the good of the other, has the power to restore life and hope. We aim to provide them with the spiritual, emotional and physical support they need to embrace motherhood with confidence and trust.



Sr. Faustina Maria Pia and Sr. Maria Veritas play with a mother and child living at the Holy Respite mission in the sisters' convent. (Courtesy of Sr. Catherine Joy Marie)

How do you practice reflective listening?

One of the greatest gifts we could offer another is that of listening. Though we '*hear*' things all day long, it is much less frequent that we actually '*listen.*' To listen to another is to give space for them to unfold. To allow them to express their own emotions, feelings and experiences. To listen is to communicate that the other person is important. Ultimately, to listen to another is to communicate that "I am with you — you are not alone." When we listen to another and allow the mystery of their person to unfold, we are creating a place of safety and trust that is often difficult to find in the world.

Can you tell us more about the pregnant women in crisis living with you at the convent?

Women who are pregnant and have chosen life are invited to live in our convent with us during their pregnancy and into the first six months of their child's life. More often than not, single pregnant women need to know that they are not alone. When they move into the convent, they embrace a community life — a life shared with other women in similar circumstances as well as with the sisters.



Sr. Faustina Maria Pia of the Sisters of Life with one of the babies that have been welcomed at the Holy Respite mission in the sisters' convent (Courtesy of Sr. Catherine Joy Marie)

Eager to break the cycle of isolation and self-reliance, women are able to share their lives, joys, sorrows and ultimately their motherhood with others. Though living in a community can have its challenges, it is often the place where women learn to trust again, where they are given permission to have needs, and where they can offer the unique gift of their life and love to others who are ready to receive it.

Love is not abstract. To merely "feel" love is insufficient. God wants us to actually experience his love in concrete and tangible ways. Living in community provides countless opportunities to be confronted with his love and learn to extend love in new and creative ways.

Community living provides a platform to learn forgiveness and begin again. It is a place where one can learn to love in the places they would have previously thought impossible. It is a place where patience and kindness never expire.

What can you tell us about the Hope and Healing program offered on your website?

Our Hope and Healing mission invites women who have suffered the pain of abortion to experience the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus. It is a place where a woman is renewed in love and has hope for the life that Jesus promises to those who come to him in their need. The Hope and Healing mission is a safe space where women are accompanied on their journey towards healing and wholeness. It is a place where women experience safety and freedom in sharing their stories and can encourage one another to live in the truth of God's mercy.

What are the biggest challenges in your ministry?

As sisters, we aim to give our love freely and without limits. Though imperfect, we still seek to give all that we have so that another might encounter the love of God and find new life in him. The humbling reality is that we have no control over the reception of this love. We are constantly invited to remain surrendered and detached, even susceptible to rejection. Yet, we are confident that God alone remains the divine architect of each soul, and love is never wasted when it is given to him.

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What are the highlights in your ministry?

It is particularly powerful to watch a woman come back to life through the gift of her motherhood. To witness the unleashing of new love in the form of courage, confidence, joy and hope is absolutely astounding. More often than not, the new life of their child calls forth the greatness often hidden within a pregnant woman.



Casey Gunning, twin sister of Sr. Mary Casey O'Connor, smiles with the Sisters of Life during a visit. (Courtesy of Sr. Catherine Joy Marie)

I am always astounded when a woman begins to dream again, or perhaps even for the first time. Her child often gives her a new lease on life and opens doors she would have never imagined knocking on. More than anything else could, a child calls a mother to great sacrifice, and great sacrifice is the height of love. To watch this unfold is marvelous.

You are also known for hosting talks on the dignity of life in New York with your twin sister, Casey Gunning, who lives with Down syndrome but leads a fully autonomous life. How has her life impacted your ministry to women?

My twin sister Casey is my biggest role model. More than anyone else in my life, she has taught me that love is the most important gift we can give another. Contrary to the ways of worldly success, pleasure and prestige, Casey has shown me that love alone is worthy. The human heart was made to love and receive love. Casey has witnessed the power of such love and has likewise encouraged me to invite the women we serve to experience this same love. A mother's love is of inestimable value.