Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Spirituality

A few of Sr. Kathryn Press's home churches: From left, St. Cecilia Church in Cincinnati, Ohio; Mount Sacred Heart Chapel in Hamden, Connecticut; and St. Jude Parish in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Photos courtesy of Sr. Kathryn Press)

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September 25, 2026

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Growing up, there were two parishes in our town: one with a school and one without. Our family attended the parish attached to my Catholic elementary school, the church where I received my first holy Communion and was confirmed. In high school, I was a member of the youth group, attended weekly Bible study, and went on mission trips.

In my college years, I often attended Mass in one of the dorms and was involved in campus ministry. When I moved away from home as a young adult, I joined an "intentional parish," staffed by a religious community with parishioners from all across the city — some driving even an hour for Mass. The liturgies were vibrant; I got involved in the religious education program and became known in the community. It felt at home.

But as a religious sister, I'm not a traditional parishioner.

In any given week, I may attend three or four churches for daily Mass. At different moments in my religious life, I've longed for a sense of community and belonging, to know what's happening in the lives of those around me and to celebrate and pray with them. Of course, I'm blessed to have this within my own religious community, but it's not the same as being in a parish family.

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Summer travels and change in routine are full of graces. God recently reminded me that while I may not have a parish home in the way I once knew, I do have many "homes" that are places of prayer and renewal for my spirit.

First, I have my religious community home. Mount Sacred Heart in Hamden, Connecticut, is our province chapel. It features a large gold mosaic background with a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the center. Looking down from the choir loft, you can notice the wear marks on the pews showing the use over generations. This is where I pray with my community of sisters, where I received our constitutions and habit, where I professed my vows annually for six years before professing them perpetually. When I was a young sister, I lived on the property and prayed here daily, and also dusted the pews and the kneelers each week as a novice — despite the lack of dirt and dust. Then, as a temporary professed sister, I returned each

summer for my annual retreat. But now, as a missionary sister, I get back far less frequently, and I'm grateful for each return "home."

Second is my Cincinnati church home. People often ask me, "Where are you from?" As my parents no longer live in the state I grew up in, I sometimes fumble in answering this question. For me, "home" is a place where my family is, not the place I've lived in the longest or where I grew up. So, when I go "home" to visit my parents, I go to Mass at their parish. My mom is now officially a "church lady." She's a daily Mass goer who's part of the rosary group, helps change out the candles, and serves on the funeral committee. I'm simply her "plus one." This year's visit to the St. Cecilia Parish felt even more like home to me than it had previously. I credit that to the pastor, Fr. Jamie Weber, who welcomed me after Mass, and a kind woman named Nancy who asked if I would be willing to lead a decade of the rosary before Mass. These tiny gestures helped me feel seen and "at home."

Third, I have my Pittsburgh church home. My sister moved to Pittsburgh right after I entered the convent. Neither of us had ever been there before, and we were both making our way in the real world. When she first moved, she "parish-shopped" and landed on Sacred Heart Church (now St. Jude Parish) where, for the past 16 years, I've visited almost annually. A church with a long center aisle and murals on the wall, an intimate side chapel that feels sticky in the summer, the priest being close to the people — this, God reminds me, is an easy place to pray. It's become a surprise home: I'm not really known here. The priests have changed over the years. Even my sister goes to a parish now that's closer to where she lives. And yet, each time I'm back in Pittsburgh, I feel the Lord calling me back here to pray. Sometimes a place can feel like home when we have a history there.

Homes give us roots and wings, nurturing and encouraging us. Having "church homes" — places that invite me to prayer because of the beauty of their design, places filled with meaning, places where my body and my spirit connect with God easily — grounds me. I feel safe and supported. These homes also make me think of our eternal home. As much as I might find myself belonging in any of these churches, I know that my deepest desire is for union with God in heaven. God is generous beyond our wildest dreams and this is just a foretaste of the heavenly banquet!

Where has the Lord blessed you with a church home, or a surprising place of prayer? Where have you felt wonder, worth and welcome, or gratitude, grace and grounding?