

Widows of Prayer in the News!

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By Cheryl Sherry - Post-Crescent staff writer

It is better to give, the Bible tells us. For some, giving despite overwhelming grief can be its own life lesson.

Take 67-year-old Mary Reardon of Appleton, who, instead of retreating inward when her husband, Jack, died in 1994, decided instead to focus on all the good in her life by responding to God's call to prayerfulness.

"I think at a time like that if one can focus on others instead of one's self, it's a real help," Reardon said. "And I did know the need," having worked at Monte Alverno for nearly 15 years, five with the Rev. Bill Alcuin and 10 with the Rev. Kieran Hickey.

Reardon formed Widows of Prayer three months after Jack's death for other widows who sought to devote their lives to a ministry of prayer. Nearly 20 women from several different areas parishes now regularly gather to worship, support the church's ministers through prayer and reach to widows (especially recent widows) with compassion and assistance in whatever way possible.

They meet formally for adoration, mass and a meeting each Tuesday at St. Pius X Church in Appleton. They hold a yearly retreat at Monte Alverno Retreat Center and, most importantly, commit to 1 to 3 hours of daily prayer.

Reardon was on top of the world back in the summer of 1994, having just celebrated her 40th wedding anniversary with the man who not only was her husband but her partner in faith. With six grown children and 15 grandchildren, the couple had a good life together, "not always easy, but then it is the challenges of life that make us grow in character and in our faith," she said.

On a Monday morning they attended the 6:15 a.m. mass at Monte Alverno, which abuts their own property, then went to Bible class.

"Jack would leave five minutes early because he had to get to work," Reardon said. "His last words to me as he closed his Bible were, 'See you later, dear'."

Jack never made it to work. At the age of 63, he suffered a massive heart attack at home, where Reardon found him. Instead of hanging onto her grief, she reflected on her blessings.

"I thought, 'I have so many years and have had so many blessings, there must be a reason for this and something I can do to give my thanks to God,'" she said.

"I was very much in tune with the happenings within the church and realized the need for prayer for those working within the church, especially our priests, and also the need to pray for an increase in religious vocation," Reardon said.

She approached Hickey and the Rev. John Guimond with her proposal to resurrect Widows of Prayer, an organization that dates back to the first 300 years of the Catholic Church. "In fact, the Blessed Mother and Saint Monica were members of the Widows of Prayer," Reardon said.

The first Evening of Recollection was little more than three months later Sept. 29, 1994.

"I think there were six of us that came together," Reardon said. "We were widows and everyone agreed we had time to give. What a beautiful thought to be able to do something for God with the time we did have."

Hickey applauds the program. "When a spouse dies it changes a person's whole life," he said. "All their friends and acquaintances are couples. They really feel out of place. And so many get involved in things like playing cards, which isn't so fulfilling. I have found that the Widows of Prayer is a fulfilling way for them to spend their time."

The widows' ministry of prayer was accepted by the Green Bay Diocese as a Private Association of the Faithful. Bishop Robert Banks supervises the incorporated and tax-deductible charity.

"We have chosen the Rule of Life of the third Order Regular Franciscans," Reardon Said. It is the same rule the order of sisters takes, vowing to live a simple, prayerful way of life.

The group gathers every Tuesday afternoon at St. Pius X Church, 500 W. Marquette St. in Appleton for 1 1/2 hours of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, followed by a mass, a short meeting and introduction of any new widows.

"It's come to be a real support group of those in need of prayer in addition to the prayers and the friendship," Reardon said.

"They find a commonality," Hickey said. "It also depends, somewhat, on the prayer life of the person before. It is not going to be for everybody, but it is proven to be something very fulfilling for those that have made that commitment."

There also is a nice sense of balance between the organization and the members' obligations to their families, Reardon said.

"You were wives and mothers first. This is secondary, 'the bishop told me. 'Relax. Do what you can and the Lord kind of takes you by the hand. Pretty soon you're doing more than you ever thought you could.'"

A mass also is held at St. Pius for the intention of husbands of widows present the second Saturday of each month. Widows are invited to attend and later gather for breakfast.

The annual Widows Retreat, dubbed "Wholeness and Holiness," May 17-19 at Monte Alverno, is open to all women. The 11 insignia-wearing members from several local parishes will welcome seven more into the fold at that the weekend retreat when they make their first promises after ascertaining the reality of their call. The insignia is gold heard engraved with a communion chalice and host, above which rests a dove depicting the Holy Spirit.

Although members are required to devote up to three hours a day to prayer, Reardon said it shouldn't scare anyone away. "Some people think you have to pray formal prayers, but that is not always the case. Your life can be a prayer and everything you do is done the best for Him.

"So many women find no purpose in life and find themselves lonely and don't know what to do with themselves," Reardon said. "This gives someone a purpose."

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