

Back in the 1960's, when the nuns at my grade school changed their names and their dress, it just amazed us kids. We didn't realize that nuns had toes or hair. We didn't know where they came from but we never thought they came from parents who had given them real names. I was halfway through my gradeschool career before I learned that BVM stood for "Blessed Virgin Mary," and not "black-veiled monster." We were kids; I just didn't know.

I can only imagine what our parents were thinking. Kids noticed the external changes. Parents knew something internal was happening as well; and they weren't convinced it was all that good. As large numbers of religious women and priests left the ministry, got married, entered the work force, and had kids of their own, I kept hearing as a child from nervous Catholic adults that only one medicine could cure all the ills of the church. Commitment. People craved a sense that our religious leaders were still committed to them. We needed to know that in the midst of our turmoil, God remained faithful to the church as well.

Today when we look back on those days, we understand better why so many religious left their ministry; we extend to them our compassion and support, we thank them for their work, and welcome them into a new relationship with us. But rarely do we get the opportunity to thank the religious who stayed, who gave us the commitment we needed.

Sr. Jocelyn Pfeifer, BVM came to my grade school to serve as our principal in 1963. When she arrived she looked like every other black-veiled monster I had seen in my young life. When she left us for the school at Christ the King, I had changed how I looked at nuns. They had nurtured my faith, improved my self-esteem, encouraged me to pursue my interest in music, taught me the power of the Scriptures, helped me through the changes in the church, and supported my dream to become a priest. Sr. Jocelyn changed the way she dressed. She also took back her baptismal name, Therese Pfeifer. Today she says her greatest joy is having lived through this period of church history, accepting the changes and building on them.

Today the sisters who share her community devote themselves to the ministry of teaching in fields that reach broader than grade schools: they nurse the sick, they tend the indigent, they lobby in government, they direct diocesan offices. The BVM's continue to teach and form the way we think.

Jesus said he came to light a fire on the earth. We felt the heat in the 1960's. The BVM's continue to light that fire wherever they go.

Therese, you know I owe you personal thanks for the example you set for me as a child. I also extend the thanks of our parish for the instruction you give our children. But I hope today you also feel the gratitude of our church. You were there when we needed you most, with wisdom, faith, and an indomitable spirit of optimism. You committed your life to us, and we thank you.

(introduce others in convent; acknowledge Thomasita, Vincita, Marie; announce renewal, plea for vocations)