

# Bringing Mercy *to Tulsa*

RELIGIOUS  
SISTERS SERVE  
IN MEDICINE,  
EDUCATION,  
AND VARIETY  
OF LEADERSHIP  
ROLES



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EdC Photo by Dahlia McCoy



BY CHRIS RUSH

Whether it be providing vital medical services to patients, educating the next generation of high school or college students, or writing theological and philosophical texts, the eight local Sisters of the Religious Sisters of Mercy of Alma, Michigan, are actively living a life of sacrifice and service.

The order is a Religious Institute of Pontifical Right dedicated to the Spiritual and Corporal works of Mercy and recognizes Venerable Catherine McAuley as its foundress. According to the Institute's website, "Mercy is the charism that has been entrusted to Venerable Mother Catherine McAuley in the foundation of the Religious Sisters of Mercy. The Sisters bind themselves by professing vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, as well as a fourth vow of service to the poor, sick, and ignorant."

Currently, eight Sisters live and work in Tulsa as part of a convent located at the main Saint Francis Hospital campus where they strive "to be present for anyone who needs them, whether it be patients, a patient's family member or staff."

Recently, all eight local Sisters — some medical doctors, some educators, others published authors — took part in a casual gathering hosted by Holy Family Cathedral and emceed by local Catholic filmmaker Manny Marquez in which they discussed their vocations in depth and took questions from approximately

100 laypersons, both Catholic and the Catholic-curious.

"As human beings, we're hardwired for happiness. And that's part of the nature that God gave us," says Sister Mary Hanah Doak, RSM, educator and President of Bishop Kelley High School, in explaining the call to the Religious life. "We have an intellect, we can know what's good — we have a will, we choose what's good. So, in all our choices, we're always trying to choose the good."

She explains that a call to a religious vocation typically doesn't take place



suddenly but rather is a growing sense of a call from God.

"So, as you're looking at your life and trying to answer the questions of how can I find happiness and how can I orient my life towards the good, you're responding to an invitation from Him, and He's inviting you to give up lesser goods that are truly good, like marriage is good. But if you have a call to religious life, those lesser goods are sacrificed so that you can give a greater yes to God through a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience, which are the vows we take, and service."

The Sisters wear a unique Mercy Cross, which was part of the original habit of a Religious Sister of Mercy from 1831. Today, each Sister still wears the Mercy Cross around her neck. Unlike traditional Catholic crosses or a crucifix, the Mercy Cross lacks the corpus of Christ, which is explained as a deliberate choice to emphasize the mission of bringing God's mercy to the world. The colors of the cross, white and black, symbolize the mercy of God and the misery of mankind, respectively. The Sister is to place herself on the cross, to be the convergence point between the mercy of God and man's misery

Depending on the season or activity, the sisters' habit is black, navy, or light blue. The blue is a reminder of their patron, Mary, Mother of Mercy, while black is worn for Sundays and solemnities, or more formal liturgical occasions.



Because the local Sisters work within a Catholic health system, they frequently encounter challenges to Catholic medical ethics.

“Medical ethics needs to be a system of principles that you can use to act from, to make choices when you face all different kinds of circumstances,” says Sister Mary Elisha Glady, RSM, a theology teacher at Bishop Kelley High School. “There are different ethical systems out there, right? You could make pleasure your guiding principle, but in Catholic ethics, the principles that we use come from the order that God put into creation. More specifically, in moral theology, we use divine revelation, including scripture and tradition. Ethics is a branch of philosophy. And so, it involves using our natural reason to figure out what’s right to do in this situation? [Or] what’s wrong in this situation?”

She explains that to act in God’s likeness, Catholic practitioners must always seek to do what’s good and avoid evil.

“It’s a system of principles that we can use to reason from, to make decisions in concrete situations about what’s good to do, based on the order of God’s creation.”

Sister Marysia Weber, RSM, DO, MA, serves as Vice President of Mission and Ministry and is Co-chair of the Ethics Committee at Saint Francis Health System. She is also a physician certified by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and a published author.

“Along with what Sister [Mary Elisha] is saying, it’s rooted in the dignity of the

human person and the sacredness of every single life. And really, that’s just the principle of who Jesus was, came to be, and really emulated for us in a profound way that we are His creatures. We’re in His image and likeness,” says Sister Marysia. “That is a basic principle in medicine that we uphold in every situation because that’s what Jesus taught us and that’s what our tradition shows, that’s what scripture shows. And so, when you think of Catholic medical ethics, it goes way, way back to the very beginning. And so, we have had the opportunity as Catholics to affect medical ethics for centuries. It’s not something new.”

Sr. Mary Gretchen Hoffman, RSM, MD, the Local Superior in Tulsa, is an Internal Medicine physician, FEMM Health certified, and serves as an ex-officio board member of Bishop Kelley High School.

“I’m a primary care physician, so most of what I do is not end-of-life care, although I can certainly prepare my patients for that,” says Sister Mary Gretchen, “I’m probably more on the forefront in the realm of fertility care and various issues around women’s health and whether or not to be using contraception to treat medical problems. I would say those are two hot-button topics. The Church gives us the principles to use, and then from that, I can try to apply them to each particular circumstance.”

Sister Marysia agrees.

“Our Catholic ethics, our faith, really provides the undergirding principles. And I think today, there’s so many that intend good, but they don’t know what a whole good is,” she says. “I think our culture is so used to just picking and choosing little pieces, and then really missing a bigger picture. And so when you look at the whole picture, if you really want their happiness and their health, the best way is what God created, is a family setting.”

The Marian Medical Clinic at St. Francis offers a unique approach to women’s health care by aligning with Catholic values, particularly those outlined in Pope Saint Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae*. The clinic emphasizes a Restorative Reproductive Medicine (RRM) model, avoiding the use of contraception, and instead focuses on comprehensive medical evaluations to address women’s health issues. The clinic also provides education on cycle charting, which helps women understand their reproductive health without relying on conventional contraceptive methods



or fertility methods such as In Vitro Fertilization (IVF).

“We’re offering a very good medical alternative to using IVF,” says Sr. Mary Gretchen.

“I am in awe,” adds Sr. Marysia. “It’s just amazing what they are doing to look at some root causes of things and address them.”

Sister Mary Gretchen explains that part of the work that the Sisters do also involves working with families concerning end-of-life care.

“The state of Oklahoma has certain requirements for what’s involved in an advanced directive, but I think the most important thing is that you have a particular spokesperson appointed that knows the Catholic faith and knows what you would want,” she says. “You want to make sure that there’s someone who knows what you want, and knows what the Church teaches, and how you would want that applied to your care when you can no longer speak for yourself.”

The discussion also delved into the impact of Artificial Intelligence, or AI, and its impact on both the medical profession and education, emphasizing the importance of maintaining human elements in both fields. The Sisters agreed that AI should serve as a tool to enhance the doctor-patient relationship by allowing physicians to focus more on patients rather than computer screens. However, concerns were also raised about AI potentially replacing human interaction, with the speaker advocating for ethical principles to guide AI’s integration into healthcare.

Sister Mary Hanah and Sister Mary Elisha discussed their roles at Bishop Kelly High School, highlighting how their charism and patron, St. Thomas Aquinas, influence their teaching. They also emphasized the challenge students face in reconciling societal messages with religious teachings. The sisters aim to bridge these perceived dichotomies, using theology classes to show how faith can guide more modern worldviews. This approach helps students navigate conflicting messages, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of faith and science.

“I teach in the theology department, so I teach ethics, I teach Church history, and I teach a class called Faith in the Modern

World,” says Sister Mary Elisha. “I integrate a lot of St. Thomas Aquinas into my classes. Students today face many challenges from what they’re hearing from society and culture. The beauty of using St. Thomas Aquinas as I teach is that he helps untangle those things that seem like contradictions; he helps untie a lot of things that seem like knots that can’t be overcome, so that students can really see how to reason correctly, and (that) faith and reason don’t contradict.”

“There’s always going to be a level of mystery in faith, we can’t explain everything, right? So if God’s beyond us, there’s going to be mystery, even as He’s intimately present to us. But I often find when I’m teaching that if I can help them see that this actually is believable, that it is reasonable to believe, it helps them be able to make that leap. They can have faith, and it doesn’t go against anything else that they’re learning in other areas.”

Asked why Catholic education is so important for youth today, Sister Mary Hanah shares a conversation she had with Bishop David Konderla.

“At Bishop Kelly, we’re in our fifth year there as Sisters of Mercy, and I’ve asked Bishop Konderla before, why did you ask us to come? What are you looking for? Because you could find people who are excellent educators, career educators, who could bring a bit of a different type of skill set. Bishop Konderla said to me something I have never forgotten. He said, ‘Sister, if I wanted some type of big dynamic CEO, money could buy that, but that’s not what I want. Bishop Kelley’s job — the mission of Bishop Kelley — is the conversion of young people, and that is something that religious Sisters bring a unique presence for.’”

Sister Mary Hanah concluded, “So, when I think about Catholic education, especially at the high school level, to my mind it’s mission territory. What adolescent is not questioning their faith? It’s removing obstacles so the gift of faith that God has given us can flourish. And so, as Catholic educators, we get to share this wonderful world that God created in the light of faith.”

Other local sisters in the Tulsa convent include Sister Edith Mary Hart, RSM, DO, FAAFP, a board-certified medical doctor



## A Comfortable Cup of Tea

In November 1841, Mother Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, lay on her deathbed surrounded by her fellow sisters.

She asked those gathered, that once she had passed, they would “gather in the parlor and enjoy a comfortable cup of tea together when I am gone.” Venerable Mother Catherine, who had extended such warm and practical hospitality to so many throughout her life, now ensured that her dying words would enshrine this hallmark of the Mercy charism in the hearts and lives of all those who would follow her.

To welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to visit prisoners, to teach the uneducated — these are the works of mercy, which Venerable Catherine described as “the business of our lives.”

The Sisters of Mercy often display a teacup as a reminder of their mission.



practicing family medicine and geriatrics as well as fertility care at the Marian Medical Clinic; Sister Maria Amata Rossi, RSM, a Clinical Psychologist; Sister Mary Veronica Sabelli, RSM, a college professor of philosophy and book editor; and Sister Mary Cora Uryase, RSM, speech pathologist and book editor. †