



CONGREGATION OF BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF PERPETUAL ADORATION

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**Congratulations to our Sister Sarah Schwartzberg
as she celebrates the anniversary of her First Monastic Profession!**

Here is a story featuring Sister Sarah, written shortly after she earned a master's degree in Jewish studies in 2005.

For Sister Sarah Schwartzberg, life has changed greatly from her childhood days of playing stick ball on the urban streets of Queens, N.Y.

Now she spends time seeking a life of prayer at the Benedictine Sisters' monastery set among the Big Horn Mountains in Wyoming.

Born Sandra Schwartzberg in the late 1940s in Lewiston, N.Y. near Buffalo, her family was rocked by her father's sudden death in an industrial accident when she was only 3 months old. Sister Sarah's mother took her and her older brother, Michael, to live with her father's relatives in New York City.

There she grew up in an apartment building partly owned by her grandmother, surrounded by a large family of aunts, uncles and cousins, in a city renowned for its noise, culture, schools and social consciousness.

In a neighborhood of Irish Catholic, German Jewish and a smattering of Italians, Sister Sarah was a shy child who excelled in academics and rarely did anything to tarnish her good image.

"One time my friends and I skipped class to go to a Mets game," she recalled. "We left after the first game of a double-header. Thinking about doing something so out of character was much more exciting than actually doing it."

Sarah learned early on that the world was in desperate need of change and was determined to be a part of it.

"I came of age in the '60s, and we were out to change the world," she said. "We wanted to eliminate poverty and find justice for those who couldn't find it for themselves. It was a time of idealism and of social responsibility."

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Sister Sarah (standing, on right) celebrates the anniversary of her first monastic profession on April 6.

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She graduated early from Hunter College High School, a prestigious public college preparatory school, and at age 16 entered New York University. She earned a degree in sociology and went to work for the state as a case worker at the tender age of 20.

With role models like John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Sister Sarah got involved in civil rights and peace movements, but it wasn't enough for the young woman with a passion for justice and helping the poor. Something was missing, so she began a journey of discovery that would lead her to new places and new faces. Sister Sarah wanted to explore religious life. Father Andrew Ansbro, a Passionist priest originally from Brooklyn, N.Y., arranged for her to teach at the Turtle Mountain Reservation of the Ojibwe tribe in North Dakota.

"It was the first time I'd been farther west than Pennsylvania," she laughed. "Since I had no training in education it was a very humbling experience. I think I helped the brighter students but lost the ones who struggled. I learned a lot from the experience; perhaps more than the students did."

While teaching wasn't what she had expected it would be, the opportunity did give her a chance to experience religious life. She was later introduced to the Benedictine Sisters, entered its St. Louis, Mo. community in 1971 and chose her grandmother's name, Sarah.

"I wanted to pursue a life of prayer, and I wanted it within a community," she said. "It was hard to find a place that offered both at that time."

The sisters balance a life of work and prayer, following the Rule of St. Benedict and supporting themselves mainly by the sale of altar breads and liturgical vestments. Interreligious dialog is important to Sister Sarah and appeals to her interest of exploring all faiths.

"I enjoy the focus of sharing in different religious practices," she said. "I think it's the only way to peace in our world."

She has taken that interest to the next level by completing a master's degree in Jewish studies from the Spertus Institute. The program, which features distance learning techniques coupled with bi-annual seminars at its Chicago-based school, was a wonderful fit for Sarah.

"It's ideal for someone in a community because you're not gone very often," she said. "I am especially interested in the Scriptures, so this was a chance to really dig in and explore them."

Her studies have provided a lot of insight with her position as a past board member for Monastic Interreligious Dialog, an organization dedicated to exploring relationships among spiritual practitioners of various faiths. She has also participated in Nuns of the West, a summit of Christian, Buddhist and Hindu sisters.

"It gives us a chance to talk with other committed women who are dedicated to spiritual practice. We all have mutual concerns – balance of work and prayer, the role of authority and spiritual practices to name a few."

As a young woman Sister Sarah remembers a chance meeting with Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, an organization that provides shelters and food to those in need and promotes human rights within a nonviolent culture.

"I was in such awe of her that I didn't say a peep," Sister Sarah said. "She was eating with the men who had gone through the soup line. I admired her work immensely but realized it was something I couldn't do."

Apparently God had a different path in mind for her. It is one that Sister Sarah has enjoyed following and has provided her with a sense of peace and well being.

"To younger people I say don't give up after a few hard knocks," she said. "Life is not easy. It's about perseverance."