

Disabled Catholics draw on suffering to minister

PHILADELPHIA – Men and women across the country who are members of a little-known community that is open to people with disabilities – as well as those without – are imitating the crucified Christ by drawing on their own suffering to minister to others.

“Handicapped people are not worthless,” said Maria Burke, 53, a parishioner at St. Catherine of Siena in Horsham who has multiple sclerosis. “We have something to give to the world. We can still contribute.”

Ms. Burke is one of 24 women and six men who have become Franciscan Missionaries of Jesus Crucified, a secular institute for laypeople, many of whom have disabilities.

Members consecrate themselves to God by professing perpetual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in the spirit of St. Francis. They are called to live exemplary Christian lives in the ordinary circumstances of their family, parish, work, civic and social environments.

For Ms. Burke, the institute is an answer to a lifelong prayer.

“Long before I was diagnosed with MS, I just felt this need inside of me for religious life,” said Ms. Burke.

In 1987, after she learned she had multiple sclerosis, she gave up on pursuing a vocation to religious life. She lost her independence and relies on an aide to help her.

“It wasn’t so bad at first,” Ms. Burke said about her condition. “I went from a cane to a walker to a wheelchair, and I fought it every step of the way.”

Ms. Burke admits to being “mad as hell” when she was first diagnosed. “Whenever I could no longer do something I could always do before, I’d get frustrated. And the

more frustrated I got, the angrier I got,” she told The Catholic Standard & Times, newspaper of the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

One day, Father Lawrence Gleason, parochial vicar at St. Catherine at the time, brought her information about the Albany, N.Y.-based Franciscan Missionaries of Jesus Crucified.

Being a part of the institute has given her “a whole new way of looking at things,” she said.

“I’m not angry like I used to be. I’m at peace with everything. It’s a wonderful feeling. It really and truly has brought me peace,” she added.

Louise D. Principe is the former general minister of the Franciscan Missionaries of Jesus Crucified and one of the group’s founding members.

“We’re all in various stages of disrepair,” said Ms. Principe, 63, who was born with a hereditary muscle disease. In 1993, surgery on her spine left her partially paralyzed from the neck down.

“Jesus saved the world by uniting his will to the will of the Father in perfect obedience,” Ms. Principe said. “It has nothing to do with ‘doing’ a lot of stuff. We can do this, too, no matter what our condition, because it doesn’t depend on ‘doing.’

“It’s a matter of ‘being.’ And ‘being’ does not depend on whether I use my power wheelchair or whether someone uses a voice synthesizer to speak. That’s irrelevant,” she said.

The institute has canonical status as a public association of the faithful, Ms. Principe said.

It accepts people with and without disabilities who have a desire to consecrate their life to Christ in the secular world; who have an interest in serving others and promoting Christian values in society; who have moral, emotional and psychological balance; and who are over the age of 21 and have a means of support.

Initial formation takes place within a person’s everyday environment over a three- to

five-year period. Missionaries recite morning and evening prayer, and attend monthly days of recollection and an annual weeklong retreat.

Aside from prayer and suffering, the missionaries are called to address the needs of their suffering neighbor as a witness to the dignity and value of human life, regardless of its condition.

William Watts, 38, a professed member of the Franciscan Missionaries, lives at Good Shepherd Home in Allentown.

He has muscular dystrophy and uses an electric wheelchair, a ventilator and a tracheal tube to help him breath. But that doesn't stop him from ministering to the home's 99 other residents, most of whom have cerebral palsy.

"People always thought that persons with disabilities were not able to have vocations but God does call people," Mr. Watts said. "And it helps us to know that the Lord does have a purpose for us."