

Mount de Sales nourishes religious vocations

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Whenever Margaret Smith attended morning Mass before classes at Mount de Sales Academy in Catonsville, the high school student was awed by the neat rows of Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia who lined the pews in front of her.

Wearing bright white habits and black veils, with long strings of rosary beads clacking at their sides, the religious sisters who help staff the all-girls school radiated what Smith recalled as a sense of holiness.

“I can’t even put it into words,” said Smith, a 2012 graduate. “They were in love with the Lord. I looked up to them.”

The sisters impressed Smith outside the chapel as well.

In the classroom, they taught students with patience and generosity. On the fields, they played sports with passion. They encouraged students at plays and special events. Elsewhere, Smith said, they “knew how to have a good time” at spirit days and other activities.

“They’re real people – so human,” she remembered. “They’re so filled with joy.”

Smith wanted what the sisters had.

After graduation, she entered the Dominican novitiate in Nashville, Tenn., taking her temporary vows last year. Smith is now known by her religious name, Sister Anna Margaret.

The 20-year-old former parishioner of St. Thomas Aquinas in Hampden isn't alone in her journey to the convent.

Since 1983, seven graduates of Mount de Sales have entered the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia. At least two other alumnae have entered other religious orders including the Franciscans of the Immaculata and the Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration.

"We try to help them see that God has an amazing plan in store for them, and they are never more happy, more themselves or more alive than when they are doing what God is creating them to be," said Dominican Sister Angela Marie Russell, a 26-year-old religion teacher at Mount de Sales and one of six Dominicans on the school's staff.

For some, that may be the religious life, Sister Angela Marie said. For others, it may be the married or single life. The school emphasizes the beauty of all vocations, she said, and the faculty and staff - religious and lay alike - are "good witnesses of all these beautiful Catholic vocations."

Theresa M. Greene, Mount de Sales' vice principal of academics, said sophomores study the sacraments, including the sacraments of marriage and holy orders. A senior morality course covers vocations in a more "in-depth, life-experience way."

"It is meant to help to give students some more detailed information to help guide them in discerning and choosing the vocation God places before them," she said.

For Sister Anna Margaret, attending Mount de Sales' annual optional trip to the Dominican motherhouse in Tennessee to learn more about the lives of the sisters was key to her decision to become a religious sister. This February, 35 students will make the trip.



Sister Anna Margaret Smith

Sister Anna Margaret said the strong Catholic identity at Mount de Sales also played an important role in answering the call to religious life. In addition to opportunities for daily Mass, students participate in monthly adoration and class Masses. Prayer begins each class and students complete community outreach projects.

“As an eighth-grader, I didn’t want to go to Mount de Sales,” said Sister Anna Margaret, remembering that she was the only person from her public school going there. “I’m not sure I would be here (in the novitiate) if I didn’t go to Mount de Sales and meet the sisters and form beautiful friendships there. I’m very grateful to the Lord.”

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