

Twenty years of support for the newly single

When Claire Lotz of Fullerton received her divorce decree in the 1970s, the Catholic mother of two felt like a pariah in society and disconnected from her religion.

"I didn't know any other divorced people and I felt like I was excommunicated from the Church," said Ms. Lotz, now a 65-year-old parishioner of St. Joseph, Fullerton.

"In my generation, we were raised to believe that divorce was a big no-no."

Shame kept her from taking Communion for years.

However, after moving from Howard County to the Baltimore area in the late 1980s, she was referred to the Friends of Mercy - a support group for people who are separated, divorced and widowed launched by a nun from Mercy High School, Baltimore, - and the humiliation she felt about her divorce was replaced with confidence and a re-energized religious bearing.

As the group prepared to celebrate its 20th anniversary Sept. 16, Ms. Lotz reflected on the vital part it has played in her life - which includes a strong network of friends and the place where she met the man she married three years ago.

The anniversary celebration will include a liturgy celebrated by Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, eastern vicar, and a buffet dinner at the Sheppard Pratt Conference Center in Towson.

Though wheelchair-bound these days, 81-year-old Friends of Mercy founder Sister Joannes Clifford, R.S.M., has maintained her passion for the group throughout the past 20 years and has served as a steadfast champion of its more than 50 constituents.

The origin of the group - which regularly meets at Mercy High School's Northeast Baltimore campus and other venues 2 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month - can be traced to Sister Joannes, who took a course on ministering to the newly single in 1979, after receiving letters from Mercy High alums seeking advice following the collapse of their marriages.

Break-ups are never easy for those who go through it, but Catholics suffer unique guilt over the end of a marriage because of the Church's opposition to remarriage without an annulment, Sister Joannes said.

"They feel like they are divorced from their spouse and the Church," she said. "I

wanted to find a way to help provide some support for them.”

Fortified with a grant, Sister Joannes began holding periodic lectures for the newly single featuring top speakers to help separated, divorced and widowed citizens deal with their new status.

In 1987 a group of people attending one of these lectures approached her about starting a monthly support group and the Friends of Mercy held its first meeting later that year.

Though Friends of Mercy is a non-religious support group, many of its members are practicing Catholics and have found comfort from the many priests who have attended meetings over the years who bestowed non-judgmental support for their single-hood journey, regardless of the circumstances, Ms. Lotz said.

During the group’s heyday in the early 1990s, Friends of Mercy boasted more than 150 members, but the numbers have dwindled in recent years and its base tends to be a 50-plus crowd, Sister Joannes said.

“I would like to see us attract some of the younger people to the group, or start a young-person’s group, because I think we can be some help to that segment of the population,” she said. “The Internet has offered newly single young people a place to meet other single people. They may find people to date from the Internet, but we’re also offering support and community here.”

Though Ms. Lotz did meet her husband – 61-year-old John Lotz – at Friends of Mercy, and several other members have met their current spouses through the group, she insists it is not a dating service.

“Ultimately, we’re here to help each other through the tough times that come with being newly single and the good times too,” she said. “We can also be a good resource with things like annulment.”