Sisters wait to receive Communion during Mass at the Founders Hall

Nuns optimistic despite school's coming demise

By JOHN POPE

It happened when a friend is terminally ill. Some acquaintances talk shockingly of miracles, some are grief-stricken, and some accept the inevitable, saying the end should be as dignified as possible.

The theme of approaching death permeated the celebration of Mass in a bright, cheerful room at St. Mary's Dominican College. The friend was the 16-year-old woman's college, scheduled to close this summer because, its officials say, it won't have money to open any fall.

The institution at St. Charles Avenue and Broadmoor was used to be a girls' high school. Consequently, some of these sisters have known Dominicans since their teens, and their memories can stretch back to the days when nuns attended Mass behind a special litticework. But now all is closed. The building is closed black carriages with curtains across the windows. A great deal of the building is closed because they were supposed to be set apart from the rest of the world.

For the elderly nuns, the connection to the college is more than mere memories. They are former students, and they are former students of the school, a Dominican residence, a novitiate, a small library, a dining room and a modern chapel where a priest celebrates Mass daily. They are not sure where they'll go when the college closes.

"We don't worry," said Sister Mary Dominic Ray. "We know God will take care of us."

That's the reassuring answer one could expect from an 85-year-old woman who has worn a nun's habit since 1926. But it's not comforting enough for some of the others, who look pale at the thought of leaving their tranquil home, where the loudest noise is made by the trickling fountain on the front lawn.

"It makes me feel very sad," said Sister Mary Emily Baracco, who is one year away from celebrating her 50th anniversary as a nun. "It's almost like losing a member of the family. I'm wondering why we didn't have more of it before the last months."

"I'm crushed," said Sister Marguerite Bru, a longtime French instructor who managed to learn five classics a semester even during the 13 years she was the college registrar.

But, she said, "we've been going through this for two years. Whatever pain there has been has worked itself out of our system. I still have a lot of pain inside, but I've learned to live with it."

In spite of the pain and anxiety, the college has to continue through the summer session.

A sister descends the stairs of main building

Sister Walda A. Warden, Dominican's president, "We have to acknowledge the past — we have given much to prepare women for life in a Catholic value system — but to look back on the past, with all of its ills, aids and bets, does no good."

"This is the way I have dealt with it: If I were 35 years old, I'd want to go with care, understand and dignity, knowing people love me for what I have done and celebrated me for what I've been able to give. Everything has to do. If I were my own to go, and if they were trying to use artificial life-support systems to keep me alive, it would just downgrade the process."

Warden, a former football coach, has been "learning to live more securely and less securely," she said, "and I love it."

One woman who embodies this spirit is Sister Mary Elizabeth Englert, 82, a sharp-eyed professor of chemistry and religion, who seems to be almost deftly optimistic.

"I don't think we have to give up," she said. "I'm still having sex will get ELS million to pay for what we've given so far, but we'll have enough money to stay open. If we sold our land facing St. Charles, we'd have enough money to stay open. We don't have to have such an elaborate facility."

Sister Mary Elizabeth Englert, O.P., in her chemistry lab

To relieve the pain, she might feel, Englert teaches two biochemistry classes and works in her laboratory. "Once I get into a class, she said, "I get involved in it and forget about everything else."

Engert, who holds a doctorate in chemistry and has received several research grants, has kept up her usual duties. But many of her fellow residents of Founders Hall have not. Some are too ill to work, but no one ever retires — feeble nuns are described as being in "the proper ministry" — and when the word "retirement" comes up, pious eyebrows shoot heavenward.

"You never retire in a convent," Bay said.

"You don't retire until six days after your death," said Sister Mary Joseph Lillis, Dominici's financial officer.

"God bless us and save us, there's always something to be done," Ray said. "We help in the chapel and pray and do little acts of charity. I don't sit here and twiddle my thumbs and say, 'What am I doing to do next?'"

Several hours ran the resident hall.

Bay, who was the archivist and librarian, keeps the books, and Sister Mary Reginald Warner, Dominican's former librarian, is in charge of the holding the library room.

Sister Mary Charlotte Prin, whose husband was a doctor and a founder of Saraceno Mayo Hospital, works in the infirmary. Baracco, who operates Founders Hall's mail room, used to manage the food service for the college, the high school and the convent.

"She's a little mite," Ray said, "but you should have seen her with the big pigs and pain."

Founders Hall has been home for older nuns in the Dominican order since March 1981. Before then, they lived in Harpswell, near Phippsburg. When Founders Hall was opened, they moved onto a campus that was vastly different from the one many knew when they entered the order more than half a century ago.

For instance, Warner, a nun for 54 years, couldn't get D.H. Lawrence's novels for the Dominican library in her early years there. They were much too racy, but now, she said, no one thinks twice when the books turn up as required reading.

And when Englert was much younger, trou- ners were banned on campus — even in plays when women had to take all the male roles.

"I remember when we did William Tell," she said, stalling a giggle. "There was the girl playing William Tell's son, in a little skirt with a giant apple on her head."

But some things never change. Most residents still wear their long, white habits and black veils, even though distinctive religious attire became optional after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

"I'm an old-fashioned lady," Englert said. "I entered with this habit. I've shortened it some, but I'm uncomfortable in anything less."