Eric Gorski

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2004 Finalist
Supple Award
GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. - In the basement of their motherhouse, in a section of the red-brick building that once teemed with boarding-school girls, the Dominican sisters maintain a display tracing their 126-year history.

It starts with a picture of a sister in full habit baking bread at an orphanage in the 1940s and ends with the image of a sister in street clothes being arrested after throwing her own blood at the Pentagon.

The one in handcuffs is Carolyn Gilbert, a few years and jail stints ago. With her bookish glasses, she looks like the junior high teacher she once was.

On Friday, Gilbert, 55, and fellow Grand Rapids Sisters Ardeth Platte, 67, and Jackie Hudson, 68, will stand before a federal judge in Denver and be sentenced in a case that has drawn international attention and launched a debate about protest and consequences in a nation on edge over terrorism.

On Oct. 6, 2002, the three sisters cut a chain-link fence and sneaked onto a Minuteman III missile silo in northeastern Colorado, where they drew crosses with their blood on the silo lid and whacked railroad tracks with hardware-store-issue hammers.

Despite the sisters' claim that their actions were symbolic, not destructive, a jury in April found them guilty of obstructing national defense and damaging government property. The maximum sentence is 30 years in prison, but prosecutors have said the sisters likely will face between five and eight years.
U.S. Attorney John Suthers, who is Catholic, said in a statement he hopes the case will serve as a deterrent to the sisters and other activists who break the law.

Nuns in orange prison jumpsuits might be hard to understand for those who grew up with "The Sound of Music." But for the three sisters, the journey from orphanage to missile silo is a natural progression.

"Whatever God asks of us, whatever we have to sacrifice, we will do it, and we will do it with joy," Platte told her fellow sisters during a visit to Grand Rapids.

The sisters believe nuclear weapons are the "taproot" of social and economic injustice because the billions of dollars spent on them could go to programs for the poor and needy. Standing against militarism, they say, is a way to challenge skewed priorities that cause orphanages and soup kitchens to exist in the first place.

Their methods come with risk and, from some quarters, scorn.

Since the 1960s, Catholic sisters have engaged in social activism ranging from civil-rights marches to siding with migrant farmworkers. But relatively few break the law, and some newer conservative religious orders shun activism.

To critics, the three sisters are the last of a generation, part of a culture of rabble-rousing that has contributed to the steep decline in religious vocations. To supporters, they are courageous, dedicated, faithful, wise — even martyrs.

Gilbert, Hudson and Platte took their vows during a different era, when career choices for women were limited and the convent meant freedom.

The three sisters, all of whom grew up in devoutly Catholic communities in Michigan, changed with the times and with evolving notions of Catholic sisterhood.

"These are extraordinary women," said Elizabeth McCalister, the widow of celebrated peace activist Philip Berrigan. "They are game and willing, they work hard, they think deeply and see to the center of issues. They couldn't do all the issues well. They found the one issue that affects everyone."

Also called the "order of preachers," Dominicans are known for simple, austere living. Gilbert, Hudson and Platte often speak of their community's charisma, or spiritual gift: the search for "veritas," or truth.

Their vocations began here, on 34 acres set among Douglas firs and a nameless stream, where several of the 80 sisters in residence are confined to nursing-home beds, and the soothing sounds of women saying the rosary float out from the chapel every day.

The Dominican motherhouse sits on the edge of Grand Rapids, a sleepy, conservative city of 200,000 that is home to direct-sales giant Amway, nationally renowned furniture-making companies and a thriving evangelical Christian community that includes Calvin
As a girl in Saginaw, Jackie Hudson attended a school run by Dominican sisters. Sisters didn't drive then, and Jackie often accompanied her mother taking a sister to a farm to buy eggs and chickens. Her father had attended seminary as a young man and said the rosary on his knees every night.

Ardeth Platte was raised in Westphalia, Mich., a small community of German farmers. Her father was a World War II veteran and a missionary.

"I kept being asked, 'Have you ever thought about being a sister?' I said, 'Always,'" Platte said. "I had this desire to be totally free to serve God and people without restraints."

Carolyn Gilbert grew up in small Traverse City in northern Michigan. She graduated from high school in 1965 and became a sister, teacher, liturgist and poet.

"I grew up in an era when the idea was to serve other people, to volunteer your time, to give your life," Gilbert said. "I also grew up at a time when women were stay-at-home moms, and I saw religious women as being at the forefront. They were the principals of schools. They were teachers. I saw them as some of the freest people in the world. They didn't have the responsibility to husband and children. Their responsibility was to the larger community."

All three sisters took up teaching. But their priorities, and those of their church and community, changed.

In the 1960s, religious life in the United States was transformed by church social documents and the second Vatican council, which modernized church practices. The Vatican encouraged religious orders to work on poverty and justice issues and reconsider their missions.

After the council, many sisters stopped wearing habits to knock down barriers with the broader community. Several moved into inner-city neighborhoods or became Latin American missionaries.

Said Platte: "We rejected the patriarchy, and we became a circle, everyone in the circle giving their God-given gifts."

For Platte, that meant running a rape crisis center and a school for dropouts. In 1973, believing that government was a force for change, she was elected to the City Council in Saginaw, Mich.

During Platte's 12-year term, including two as mayor pro-tem, she fought business tax incentives and what she viewed as efforts to keep minorities out of white neighborhoods, said Pamela Leckie, who was elected at the same time.

"She is stubborn, stubborn," Leckie said. "The businessmen would complain about her, and I would say, 'At least you know where Ardeth is coming from.' She never waffled, which I think is admirable."

The other two sisters took less prominent paths. Hudson taught piano and vocals for 25 years before starting her activism by
working on behalf of orchard workers in western Michigan. Gilbert followed Platte to Saginaw and helped start the Home for Peace and Justice there.

Their shift to nuclear activism took place when cruise missiles arrived in Michigan in 1983.

The sisters say their stance is grounded in the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt not kill, steal, or worship false gods, which in this case were "false gods of metal."

"If you're going to worship the one true God and believe in God's family, believe in creation, we had to stop all that destroys it," Platte said.

Platte and Gilbert moved to towns outside two Great Lakes missile bases. They distributed leaflets, prayed and served time - from a few hours to six months - in jail.

The closure of the Michigan nuclear sites in the 1990s prompted the moves of Gilbert and Platte to Baltimore's Jonah House activist community and Hudson to Poulsbo, Wash., near a Trident submarine base. Hudson drove a transit bus and tuned pianos to support herself.

In September 2000, the sisters spilled blood and pounded hammers on an $18 million fighter jet at an air show at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs. Felony charges against them were dropped when it was determined the damage totaled less than $100.

The action was classic Plowshares, an anti-war movement that has staged 75 nonviolent and symbolic "actions" against military targets since 1980. The movement takes its name from passages in Isaiah and Micah that speak of "beating swords into plowshares."

The action at the Weld County silo last October was staged to coincide with the one-year anniversary of the start of the U.S. war against Afghanistan.

The sisters use blood in their actions because of its symbolism: It gives life on one hand, and on the other it is spilled in war. Jesus gave his blood so others could live, the sisters say; so did the sisters, with the help of doctor friends who drew it from their arms.

The sisters prayed and sang for an hour before soldiers with automatic weapons arrested them.

At trial, the judge rejected the sisters' citation of the Nuremberg international war crimes tribunal, which recognized that people have an obligation under international law to break domestic law to prevent their country's crimes against humanity.

The sisters were convicted, and they decided against appeal, which they feared would set legal precedent damaging to other activists.

U.S. Attorney Suthers, in a statement, said: "No other country on Earth provides as many avenues for peaceful and lawful protest as does the United States. But the defendants insist on unlawfully entering onto highly sensitive government installations, damaging
government property, and interfering with government operations."

Suthers said the sisters have taken similar actions before and were not deterred by lighter sentences.

The sisters' advocates respond that the prosecution was an attempt to silence criticism of the Bush administration's hunger to wage war. Civil disobedience, they say, is an American birthright dating to the Boston Tea Party.

Yet within the Catholic sisterhood, there is disagreement about whether the sisters went too far.

Sister Mary McGreevy, chair of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, said activism fits with church teaching, but civil disobedience that puts the sisters and others in danger does not.

"Sometimes these actions seem to create stronger polarization and a greater determination on both sides that they're right," said McGreevy, whose group represents 100 more traditional communities in which sisters generally wear habits and focus on teaching and health care. "Without question, there is something inherently wrong in killing one another. But we have to be able to speak in a reasoned way."

The three sisters say their case has invigorated activists, not deterred them. On Saturday, activists plan to return to Weld County and "symbolically disarm" another nuclear weapons system.

On the other hand, some Grand Rapids residents upset with their actions have urged people to withhold donations to the community.

"You never know the ripple of an action," Gilbert said. "The important thing is that we brought our spirit of nonviolence to a violent place. Because of our presence for even a short time on that missile silo, I think that spirit is somehow still there."

The sisters' visit to Grand Rapids last month fell on Pentecost Sunday, one of the holiest Christian holidays. At home, the tears came easily.

Platte stood at a podium. She thanked the community that gave birth to her vocation, nurtured her as a teacher, politician and activist, and led her to a Colorado missile silo and a prison cell.

``God,''' she said, ``you can take me now.''

http://cyberlib/ProQuestPublisher/pqp-bin/pqp.exe?operation=getdoc&database=2004;200... 1/28/2004
On a June day in 1989, Jesse Lee Thomas Jr., a sharecropper's son and former Baptist preacher, was baptized into the Mormon faith. He dressed in all white to symbolize purity.

Soon afterward, Thomas was ordained into the Mormon priesthood, starting on a path that led to several leadership positions in his northeast Denver ward, or church.

Until the announcement 25 years ago today of a revelation from God, a black man never would have been able to reach such heights in the Mormon Church.

For reasons that remain murky, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormon Church, barred blacks of African lineage from joining the priesthood for more than a century.

The church has no clergy. Males 12 and older are eligible for the lay priesthood. The position carries the authority to bless, baptize and teach, among other things.

As the church marks the anniversary of the revelation that lifted the ban, debate continues about what took so long, and about the timing of the doctrinal flip-flop.

The revelation's legacy seems evident to hundreds of thousands of Mormon converts in Africa and South America. In Brazil alone, the church says, membership grew from 40,000 in 1970 to 840,000 in 2002.

But in the United States, scholars say, black Mormons remain few and the church has struggled to retain black members.

The Mormon Church didn't always put restrictions on black involvement. Joseph Smith, who founded the faith in 1820 in upstate New York, was present at meetings where blacks were ordained, said Armand Mauss, a professor emeritus of sociology and religious
studies at Washington State University who has studied the subject.

Smith's successor, Brigham Young, instituted the ban. At the time, the country was divided over race issues and many religious institutions discriminated against blacks, prompting the formation of black denominations, which started seminaries.

Mormons of the era justified the ban by saying blacks "bore the mark of Cain," the oldest son of Adam and Eve, who killed his brother, Abel. Connecting the black race and Cain is folklore that dates to the Middle Ages, said Mauss, who is an active Mormon.

The ban was not much of an issue in this country until the 1960s. Suddenly, cities refused to book the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and major universities stopped playing sports against church-owned Brigham Young University.

The priesthood policy began to interfere with the church's missionary zeal. An effort to dispatch Mormon missionaries to Nigeria was rebuffed in 1963 when authorities there learned of the ban and refused to issue visas, Mauss said.

In the early 1970s, the church began more aggressively eyeing potential growth areas, including Brazil, a racially mixed country with a large black population.

According to Mormon doctrine, God continues to provide revelations on Earth. On June 9, 1978, then-church president Spencer Kimball, who is considered to be a prophet, announced the revelation.

Current church president Gordon Hinckley, who as a high church official in 1978 was present during the priesthood revelation, described the event in a 1988 magazine article: "No voice audible to our physical ears was heard. But the voice of the Spirit whispered with certainty into our minds and our very souls. ... All of us knew that the time had come for a change and that the decision had come from the heavens."

Mauss said revelations are not bolts out of the blue. In Mormonism, the Lord is petitioned about certain subjects and answers the requests, so it's more a conversation between humans and God.

The timing seemed all too convenient to many outside observers. The church, after all, disavowed polygamy in 1890 when Utah's statehood depended on it.

"The cynical way is to say revelation is a convenient way to solve any problem Mormons run into," said O. Kendall White, a professor at Washington and Lee University in Virginia who has written articles on blacks and Mormonism. "The other reading is to recognize it as a combination of divine and human sources. I see it as further accommodation to American society and the pressures that existed in society."

Among the first black men to join the priesthood was Joseph Freeman, a convert then living in Hawaii.

The change meant Freeman, who previously could only be civilly married by the church, could take part in a holy ordinance that
"sealed" him together with his wife and children for all eternity.

Freeman moved to Denver in 1986 and oversaw maintenance of the Denver Temple in Centennial for 15 years before moving to Salt Lake City two years ago.

"You cannot feel 100 percent equal when you can't participate fully," said Freeman, 49, who will give the invocation today at a Salt Lake City celebration organized by the Genesis Group, a black Mormon group under the official church umbrella. "That time has changed, just as slavery and other civil rights issues have passed."

The church does not track membership by race. Mauss estimates the U.S. black Mormon population at a few thousand, "certainly not anywhere near 10,000."

Mauss said no more than one-third of black members in the U.S. stay with the church more than five years, in part because after learning the history of the ban, many leave.

Retention is also a problem because blacks sometimes are hassled by other blacks about joining, and some Mormons "continue to fall back on the folklore of the past" to explain why the ban was ever adopted, Mauss said.

Blacks who have joined and stayed with the church view the priesthood ban as just another example of white oppression, and although the church took longer than other institutions to change, they think it's part of the past and time to move on, Mauss said.

Some observers said they see great potential for black American Mormon growth. White said he sees attraction in the faith's strong family emphasis and its system that gives members leadership opportunities.

Jesse Thomas felt those things and more. He was introduced to the faith by a co-worker.

He and his wife, who is white, found in the Mormon Church an institution that answered their questions about the afterlife and welcomed them and their three children.

Thomas said the ordination ban wasn't much of an issue for him because it had been gone 11 years when he joined the church.

He learned of the history just before his baptism and it didn't change his mind. He said God moves in ways that people often don't understand, and it was God's place to decide when it was time.

"There are some (blacks) who are more dogmatic, who feel, 'How could you, with that history?'" Thomas said. "But African-Americans, unless you are an ideologue, tend to be an accepting people. ... No one can convince me the church is racist or segregationist."

Thomas worked in health care for 20 years and ran several HMOs. He
sits on three state boards and advocates on health, education and housing.

He hosts and produces a local television show, "Citizen Thomas." Thomas ran unsuccessfully as a Republican to unseat Democrat Diana DeGette in Colorado's 1st Congressional District in 2000. He failed this year in a bid to become Denver auditor.

Next year, Thomas' son, Julian, will turn 12. At the family's ward house, Jesse Thomas will lay hands on his son's head and usher him into the Mormon priesthood.

MORMON MEMBERSHIP

Worldwide: 11.7 million

United States: 5.4 million

Colorado: 112,000

Denver metro area: 50,000; third largest religious group in the area, behind Catholics and Jews, according to a religious census released last year.

Sources: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Glenmary Research Center
The un-churches Their flocks are young. Their formula is no formula. But Colorado's 'emerging churches' are finding plenty of pilgrims eager to break fresh paths to their faith.

PowerPoint presentations are part of services at the Journey in Westminster, above. Below, prayer at Denver's Scum of the Earth Church. PHOTO: Laura Nicholas writes at the journaling table at the Journey in Westminster. The church is built on the concept of shared leadership; there are no senior pastors. PHOTO: Denver Post photos/Helen H. Richardson Jake Beeney worships at Scum of the Earth Church, a Denver congregation that is part of the 'emerging church' movement.

Welcome to the Journey. Church starts when the lights go down at 10:30 a.m. The room is bathed in yellow, dancing candlelight.

Don't feel like listening to the sermon? No problem. Spend the time writing a prayer request at the journaling station, a table off to the side with parchment and six Celtic crosses.

Since the Journey began meeting three years ago in a rented room at Front Range Community College in Westminster, worshipers have sought to connect with God in ways most people don't associate with church.

They paint. They read their own poetry. They imitate the chanting of monks.

"The Journey is just a little different," said Michael Noel, the Journey's 29-year-old, Baptist-trained co-pastor. "That's what I tell people, whether they come from a church background or not. It's going to look different."

Noel is among a small but growing group of young evangelical Christian pastors preaching the gospel of the "emerging church," a movement that began as an effort to reach young adults but now is attracting a wider audience by emphasizing community, freedom in worship style and connection to Christianity's past.

It's in part a reaction to "seeker-sensitive" megachurches that have dominated the evangelical scene for 20 years, recognizable by their polished worship services and long menus of programs designed
The un-churches Their flocks are young. Their formula is no formula. But Colorado's 'em...

The term "emerging" refers to both younger generations emerging in society and to the importance of the past - basically, an acknowledgment that Christianity didn't come from nowhere, but emerged from something.

Because young adults are less likely to have a religious foundation than their parents, they crave connections to Christianity's roots, rather than a desire to escape them, the thinking goes.

Regardless of their ages, people turning to these new churches say they value honesty and would rather struggle with tough issues than be given easy answers.

An elusive definition

Defining a church as emerging can be difficult because such groups take so many forms. That elusiveness, in fact, is part of the character of a movement that shuns structure and hates being put in a box.

"There is no formula," said Sally Morganthaler, a Denver author and consultant who works with emerging churches nationwide. "If you're going to become a model, then you become a franchise."

Some emerging churches want to stay small, believing that's the only way to maintain real relationships. Others hope to grow and touch as many people as they can.

Many use candles, incense and crosses - elements of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and mainline Protestantism that seeker churches reject - to forge a connection to Christianity's rich history. Others say that's not who they are.

Some emphasize shared leadership over the pastor-as-CEO approach typical to the seeker movement. Others have senior pastors (though they may be only 25).

Some are staking out urban settings, following young adults back to cities. Others are in Parker, south Boulder County or suburban Colorado Springs, in some cases meeting inside megachurches.

To some scholars who track changes in the American religious landscape, emerging churches are a niche movement that will remain small. Others believe they could prove influential, at least causing established evangelical churches to rethink their approach.

Roots in the megachurch

The West has been fertile ground for the experiment. In Colorado, churches such as Pathways and The Next Level have led the way for newer congregations with names as vanilla as Denver Community Church and provocative as Scum of the Earth Church.

Throughout its history, evangelical Christianity has shown it can change with the times, altering methods but not the message. Generally, evangelical Christians stress a conservative theology, the authority of the Bible and the importance of winning new
converts.

The emerging church has its roots in the mid-1990s, when young evangelical pastors noticed large churches brimming with boomers were lacking 18- to 30-year-olds. They believed the megachurch had become an inflexible institution, unwilling to experiment and too focused on gloss and measuring success with membership numbers.

One of those early emerging leaders was Ron Johnson, a disciple of Southern California evangelist Rick Warren, a dean of the megachurch movement and, more recently, best-selling author of "The Purpose Driven Life."

Johnson founded Pathways Church in 1995 when he was 32.

The church met at an elementary school and a University of Denver auditorium. But the congregation didn't really take off until it moved into the Grant Avenue Community Center and Sacred Space, a historic Methodist church with worn wooden pews and stained glass in Denver's West Washington Park neighborhood.

The average age of a Pathways regular is about 30, and 90 percent live in Denver. Many have either been away from church for a long time or are exploring Christianity for the first time, Johnson said.

The church recently added new service times and saw attendance grow from 450 to 650, he said.

Art and dance are woven into worship, a recognition that God's hand can be seen both in art and the artist, Johnson said. That, he said, appeals to the church's many "cultural creatives," a well-educated, arty subculture of urban dwellers less interested in making it than making a difference.

"We aren't trying to be different," Johnson said. "We're trying to be ourselves."

'The church of the bar'

Like many emerging churches, Pathways generally avoids self-help-style programs, instead pouring money and volunteers into local charities such as Urban Peak, which helps homeless youths.

"There's a lot of talk about the community, not just door-to-door evangelizing," said Beth Dewese, 28, who attends Pathways. "A lot of churches do the inward stuff or the overseas stuff but forget about what's closer."

Just as Pathways changed from its inception, so did The Next Level, which started as an evening service for college students in 1993.

At its zenith, TNL was one of the nation's best-known young-adult churches, drawing 2,700 a week to its Tuesday night services with concert-quality music and production.

In 2001, TNL's charismatic young founder, Trevor Bron, resigned. About that same time, the church reinvented itself. TNL started what it calls "core gatherings" on Sundays to provide more community for the growing number of TNL folks who were getting
married and having kids, said Jared Mackey, TNL's ministry pastor.

About 180 people between ages 25 and 38 attend the Sunday services, which alternate between meeting at a church and in people's homes. About 900, mostly between 18 and 25, come on Tuesday night.

Mackey believes there's a place in the religious experience for spectacle - in TNL's case, the big Tuesday night event - as long as it is combined with programming emphasizing relationships.

"Any church that has an hour and a half on Tuesday or Sunday as its full expression of following Christ, I think that's being challenged," Mackey said.

Successors to Pathways and TNL have proven to be diverse.

Mike Shepherd, 39, started Connected Life Church in August. He calls it "the church of the bar." It meets at the D-Note in Old Town Arvada on the last Tuesday of each month because the unchurched crowd "wants to play on the weekend - they want to ski or hike."

Shepherd fills the club with incense and flashes ancient religious art onto projection screens before launching into programs such as "Spirituality and 'The Matrix,'" or "Microbrews in the Bible."

"One of our big phrases is to make this a safe place to engage at the level where you feel comfortable," he said. "It's safe to explore. I've said, 'If you agree with everything I've said, I'll buy you a beer.' I haven't bought one yet."

Frank Scardina, 34, founded Denver Community Church three years ago and recently took possession of a 1909 church building at Washington Street and East Mississippi Avenue in Denver. The congregation already numbers about 200, with an average age of 27.

The house band plays originals, remixed hymns and contemporary music. On a recent Sunday, a guitarist broke a string - twice.

"Things go wrong," Scardina said. "It doesn't feel slick; it doesn't feel like a performance. We kind of get together and have church. People come across as very real, very authentic, not putting on a show."

The Journey in Westminster, with the candles and journaling table, is built on the idea of sharing leadership. The church has no senior pastor. Michael Noel and Tim Nicholas are co-pastors, and the goal is to grow more pastors from within the congregation.

"When you hear about the emerging church, a lot of people think, 'Throw some candles up and do a cool slide show,'" Noel said. "To me, that is so secondary. The real goal is freedom, allowing people to be who they want to be."

The Journey is backed financially by Foothills Community Church in Arvada, a large Southern Baptist church. It's not unusual for emerging churches, despite doing things differently, to lean on megachurches to get started.

Some emerging churches are even closer to suburban megachurches:
They are part of them.

The Crossing, led by 30-year-old Christian coffeehouse manager Brett Crimmel, started independently two years ago but recently became part of Southeast Christian Church in Parker.

In Colorado Springs, 11,000-member New Life Church has a service, "Saturday Night," that fits the emerging profile, with candles and free Starbucks coffee before church. Many worshipers get together afterward for dinner or a movie.

The Saturday Night pastor, 29-year-old Rob Brendle, enjoys the resources of Colorado's largest church, founded in 1985 by Ted Haggard, now president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

Brendle has no plans to launch a stand-alone church. Rather, he wants to ensure a solid future for New Life Church as its baby-boomer-dominated base grows.

"I am training New Lifers, people who are going to fill up that building in 20, 30 years," he said.

Robert Webber, a professor at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, Ill., and author of "The Younger Evangelicals," thinks emerging churches will prove influential beyond evangelicalism, much like megachurches have shaped how people of different faiths worship for two decades.

"I certainly don't think everybody's going to go there, just as everybody didn't go for the contemporary thing," Webber said. "Megachurches will last. But what could happen is, as their leaders die, the churches will die."

In contrast, Scott Thumma, a megachurch researcher at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, views emerging churches as little more than meeting the needs of a subculture of believers, not a movement in the making.

At most, Thumma said, he expects megachurches will incorporate the ideas and spin off new services, which already is happening.

"As long as we live in a country where bigger is better and large size equals success, the megachurch approach to religion is still going to be what most people think of as successful," Thumma said.

Punks and dancing outcasts

Morganthaler, the church consultant, sees much good in emerging churches but is concerned about the lack of women and minorities leading them.

Many emerging churches have Baptist roots, and Baptist churches don't permit women to be lead pastors.

"At these emergent conferences, you see this sea of young guys, soaking in the plenary talks all given by men," she said. "You will see a woman introduce the plenary speakers, because that looks good."
At 6:30 p.m. on a recent Sunday, Scum of the Earth Church began its weekly gathering with pizza.

A deejay spun Bjork and Cake, alternative rock favorites.

Many in the crowd of 200 looked ready for a punk show.


The walls were covered in art produced by Scum regulars, including a wall-sized mural of Bible scenes and surrealistic interpretations of Christ's Resurrection.

"We are a church for the left out and the right-brained," said Mike Sares, 49, the pastor.

Founded as a Bible study by Five Iron Frenzy, a Denver-based Christian band, Scum of the Earth meets weekly on East Colfax Avenue just east of Colorado Boulevard.

The church's name comes from 1 Corinthians 4:11-13: "To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world."

Sares sees different priorities in the Scum crowd. They want to sing, they don't want to be sung to. They don't want to go to church to listen to a sermon, watch a drama skit and go home without talking to anyone. They want to offer a spare bedroom to a stranger who got kicked out of the house.

Most of all, they come to Scum of the Earth Church to connect with kindred souls.

"You can come in here and not have everyone stare at you," said Steve Warren, 21, who until recently wore dreadlocks and still stands out with nine body piercings.

Near the service's end, Warren, a snowboarder and the son of missionaries, joined others in front of the stage for the closing song.

He closed his eyes. He lifted his hands skyward.

Around Warren, some people wept. But mostly, it was a scene of joy, a blur of dancing outcasts, a release of pent-up energy and a coming together, all at once.

The band was playing a variation of "Amazing Grace."

EMERGING CONNECTIONS

Here is a partial list of emerging churches in Colorado, gleaned from websites dedicated to the movement and interviews. For more information about emerging churches on a larger scale, visit www.theooze.com or www.emergentvillage.com.

Blue Sky Church, Loveland: www.blueskychurch.com
Cool River Church, Superior: www.coolriverchurch.com

Connected Life Church, Arvada: www.connectedlife.us

The Crossing, based at Southeast Christian Church, Parker: www.churchcrossing.com

Denver Community Church, Denver: www.denverchurch.com

The Journey, Westminster: www.thejourneychurch.org

The Next Level Church, Englewood: www.tnl.org

Pathways, Denver: www.pathwayschurch.org

Pierced Chapel, a ministry of Woodmen Valley Chapel, Colorado Springs: www.piercedchapel.com

Saturday Night, a ministry of New Life Church, Colorado Springs: www.saturdaynightnlc.com

Scum of the Earth Church, Denver: www.scumoftheearth.net

Vanguard Church, Colorado Springs: www.vanguardchurch.org
Locked away in a box headed for Denver is an inexpensive piece of cactus fiber smaller than a postage stamp said to have been worn by a saint and touched by the mother of God.

The fiber is a shred of the Tilma of Tepeyac, a burlap-like cloak that an Aztec peasant named Juan Diego wore on his shoulders when the Virgin Mary appeared to him on a Mexican hillside in 1531, according to Catholic teaching.

The vision, which became known as Our Lady of Guadalupe, transformed the faith of Mexico and gave birth to profound devotion to the dark-skinned Virgin.

On Friday, the tilma piece will arrive in Denver for a three-day visit, the start of a national tour promoting reverence for relics, the remains or effects of Catholic saints. The tour comes nearly a year after Pope John Paul II canonized Juan Diego as a saint.

The veneration of relics might sound right out of the Middle Ages, but the practice has been experiencing a renaissance, thanks in part to the pope's unprecedented string of saint-making and his vigorous efforts to revive ancient church sacraments.

The last major relic tour in the United States, featuring the bones of the beloved French nun Saint Therese of Lisieux, "the little flower" of the Catholic Church, surprised organizers by drawing 1.2 million pilgrims in 1999 and 2000.

On the darker side, fraudulent relics are being peddled for profit on the Internet, continuing a long tradition of charlatans who prey on the pious but gullible.

Often misunderstood as idol worship or merely ghoulish, relics
provide a bridge between past and present, between holy and ordinary, Catholic scholars say.

"It's one of these things about the Catholic Church that people look at and think, 'What is this strange practice?'' said Teresa Sanders, an associate professor of theology at Georgetown University. "Really, it's not strange at all. People want some tangible thing to bring the presence of somebody closer. People save baby shoes or locks of hair. It's really the same thing. It makes people more real, makes events more real."

Mark of a miracle

The cult of relics dates to the church's earliest days, when the remains of martyrs were carted away from arenas or marketplaces where they had been killed.

In 1999, St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver received a bone fragment of its namesake saint as a gift marking the seminary's opening.

The unusual thing about the Juan Diego tilma is that not only is it connected to a saint, it bears the mark of what millions of Catholics believe was a miracle.

The story says the Virgin appeared to the humble peasant and instructed him to tell a local bishop to build a church in her honor.

The skeptical bishop asked for a divine sign. When Juan Diego returned to the bishop with flowers Mary had placed in his cloak, he opened it to reveal an image of the virgin on the white cloth.

Whether the image is of this earth has been the subject of speculation and inquiry ever since.

In 1982, a private study commissioned by the abbot of the Basilica of Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, where the cloak is housed, concluded it was a painting. The abbot was forced out of his job in the 1990s when the study came to light and embarrassed the church.

A 1992 investigation using ultraviolet and infrared photographs found the tilma is a painting that had been painted over twice.

Believers say the original image appears to be stamped or pressed. The paint, they explain, was applied later to touch up the original as it faded. Why, they ask, would such a flimsy piece of fabric remain intact after four centuries?

The very existence of Juan Diego is a matter of dispute, as well. Some historians urged the pope not to canonize a man of dubious being.

'This is our own'

Catholics are obliged to believe miracles are possible, but it's up to each person to decide whether particular stories are true. Mar Munoz-Vivoso, head of the Denver Catholic Archdiocese's Hispanic ministry office, said Catholics don't need to believe in a relic's authenticity to gain value from it.
"For some people it might not matter," said Munoz-Vivoso, who believes the tilma image is supernatural. "It might just matter that it has a meaning to their faith, and the devotion has produced fruits in their life. To me, it does matter. If it weren't authentic, it means you can play around with people's faith, which I don't think anybody should do."

The half-inch-square piece coming to Denver was cut from the corner of the tilma, far from the Marian image. It's thought to be the only piece removed. The Mexico City archbishop gave it to the Los Angeles archbishop in 1941.

The 16-city tour is being staged by the Apostolate of Holy Relics, a Los Angeles nonprofit group that promotes veneration of saints. The group is borrowing the relic from the Los Angeles Archdiocese, which displays it in a museum.

The tilma piece is kept in a locket at the end of a silver chain that dangles around the neck of an ornate 17th-century statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

No one knows how much attention the relic will attract, but it's expected to strike a deep chord with Hispanics, who make up an estimated 22 percent of the archdiocese's membership.

But the tilma, tour organizers say, should hold broad appeal.

"America is a fairly young place in terms of Christianity," said Andrew Walther, a Los Angeles historian who's coordinating the tour. "Most relics of saints are European. So this is our own."

Rescuing legitimate relics

Throughout history, fakers and scoundrels have sought to profit from relics and the devotion they inspire. In Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," a man tries to pass off animal bones as the relics of saints.

The modern-day equivalent is eBay, the Internet auction house, said Tom Seraphin, whose Los Angeles organization, the International Crusade for Holy Relics, seeks to "rescue" legitimate relics.

Seraphin said he's seen a guardian angel feather and a locket holding hair that Jesus breathed for sale there.

Ebay four years ago banned the sale of human remains, which is illegal in some states. But most relic sales are legal, which is eBay's guiding principle on what to allow, said spokesman Kevin Pursglove.

Some of the relics online are legitimate. Already, pieces of a habit dispensed by Padre Pio's religious community, the Capuchins, have wound up on the Net. The stigmatized monk was canonized a saint last summer.

Generally, relics are dispensed by religious orders after gaining approval from the Vatican.

The Catholic Church forbids the sale of relics. Buying them is
murkier and depends on intent, Seraphin said.

"Are you buying for the intention of selling or to protect and venerate the relic?" asked Seraphin, who is the caretaker of 1,200 relics, including slivers of the cross Jesus was said to have been crucified on.

Modern relics aren't always religious. Seraphin pointed out that after the Sept. 11 attacks, President Bush held up the badge of a dead firefighter and pledged to carry it with him. The badge was a relic.

Sister Moira DeBono, director of the Denver Archdiocese's office of liturgy, said the relics of Catholicism remain relevant today.

"Some of our modern saints, we know they reached sanctity by being good husbands, good wives," DeBono said.

"Say you're having a problem with one of the kids. Wouldn't it be a natural to look for someone to help? You talk to someone who's older. How about someone who's holier?"

RELIGION AND RELICS

There are three kinds of relics: First-class relics are corpses of saints or any part of them, usually small pieces of bone. Second-class relics are objects intimately connected to a saint or Jesus (the tilma is second-class). Third-class relics, the most common, are items that have touched first- or second-class relics.

Saint Augustine defended the cult of relics in the third century, saying that when Catholics pray before an altar containing a martyr's relics, they are praying not to the martyrs but to the God of the martyrs.

The Second Council of Nicaea (A.D. 787) required relics be installed in a church before consecration. The 1917 Code of Canon Law mandated a "sepulchre" be cut into the altar to contain relics, a practice endorsed again in 1983.

Some famous relics: the Shroud of Turin burial cloth in Italy, the Crown of Thorns in Paris, the five ancient boards at Our Lady of the Hanger inside the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome, the iron links at the church of St. Peter in Chains in Rome.

Buddhism is also rich with relics. The earliest came from the bo tree. Buddhists venerated trees grown from cuttings of seeds from the original tree under which Buddha received enlightenment.


THE DENVER VISIT OF THE

TILMA OF TEPEYAC RELIC

FRIDAY

At 5:30 p.m., a pilgrimage with the relic will begin at the future
home of Centro San Juan Diego at 28th and Lawrence streets, a Catholic Hispanic center that will open this summer. The walk will end 1.5 miles later at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception at East Colfax Avenue and Logan Street. Auxiliary Bishop Jose Gomez will celebrate a bilingual Mass there at 7 p.m.

SATURDAY

A "marathon of rosaries" for vocations to the priesthood will be held at the cathedral from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. and will continue after noon Mass until 4 p.m. The relic will be on the altar of Our Lady.

SUNDAY

The relic will remain on display all day. The tour closes with a Mass celebrated by Archbishop Charles Chaput at 6:30 p.m.
COLORADO SPRINGS - He should have been there. He should have seen her, dressed in her Easter best, carrying a flickering candle into the church at dusk Saturday.

Joe Stanley was supposed to be standing at his wife Rebecca's side when the priest anointed her with oil.

He had walked with her though six months of classes, discernment and prayer.

But he couldn't be there when she took those last steps, to witness the ancient ritual in which his wife accepted his faith as her own.

On Saturday night, at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Colorado Springs, Rebecca Stanley, 22, college student and soldier's wife, became a Catholic.

Joe Stanley, 26, her husband of eight months and an Army mechanic based at Fort Carson, was somewhere in the desert, probably in Kuwait.

Joe's deployment was supposed to be in January, then February, then March. For a while, it looked as if he still would be around for Saturday's Easter vigil, a three-hour service in which Rebecca and six other adults at St. Joseph joined the church.

His unit, the 502nd Personnel Support Battalion, left for the Middle East on April 7.

The deployment left Rebecca alone in a city she barely knew, far from her family in New Jersey, her only company the two kittens her husband left for her.

But in the past six months, she found more than faith in her twice-a-week classes at St. Joseph.
She found a family in the other people who were weighing whether to become Catholic - Tom, the fire department mechanic; Tony, the recently laid-off sound engineer; Christina, the Safeway clerk; and Rebecca's sponsor, Vicki Mostofo, who once worked at Fort Carson.

"There is something powerful that happens," said Tim Rowan, the class instructor. "You get together week after week, talking about your faith, and it inevitably leads to talking about what led them to the faith. You can only talk about doctrine and the Mass for so long. Faith happens in day-to-day life."

Rebecca Stanley prayed at a Methodist church as a young girl, was baptized in a Presbyterian church at age 9, and attended a Quaker boarding school as a teenager.

None of it stuck. To Rebecca, church was more cultural - like going to school or to a relative's for dinner - than it was spiritual.

She met Joe Stanley four years ago through friends. He is the oldest of six children in a devoutly Catholic family.

Faith is so important to Joe that he wears it on his body. A tattoo of Jesus with a crown of thorns adorns his leg. On his chest is a heart with flames shooting out the side - the sacred heart.

His faith was tested in 1999, when his younger brother, Matthew, died of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. He was 19.

"Joe felt his brother was very pure," Rebecca said. "He'd say: 'Why did God take my brother? He should've taken me. I was the rebellious one.'"

In November 2001, while he was working as a delivery driver, Joe enlisted in the Army. He was good with cars - he hopes to one day own his own custom shop - and thought the Army was a good career move.

In May, after basic training, Joe was stationed at Fort Carson. In August, with Rebecca in a white dress and Joe in his class-A dress uniform, the couple were married by a New Jersey justice of the peace.

A month later, Rebecca began taking part in a program, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, at St. Joseph, down the street from their apartment.

"I thought it would be for the both of us and for our future - our future family," she said.

The process of converting to Catholicism has evolved through the years. The old way, which consisted of one-on-one meetings with a priest, has been replaced by group meetings that focus less on dogma and more on building community and personal faith.

Rebecca and six other candidates met Sundays after Mass to discuss that day's readings and homily, the sermon.

The group met Tuesday nights for more freewheeling sessions covering the church's teachings on sex, divorce, remarriage and the death penalty.
Joe Stanley usually attended. He became part of the group. He was there when the discussion turned to the Iraq war, which Pope John Paul II has condemned.

The priest leading the discussion laid out the church's opposition.

Joe raised his hand. "I'm leaving next week," he said.

The room was silent.

Rebecca, who thinks her husband is just doing his job, said the pope's position is idealistic.

"He thinks the war is wrong, that peace is the answer, and that's humbling and great, but sometimes I don't think that's possible or realistic," she said.

A week before his deployment, Joe added another tattoo, below his bellybutton: "They'll never take me alive."

That was his tough-guy side. He didn't think he was in danger, Rebecca said. He confided in her that he believes his brother is watching over him, keeping him safe.

Since Joe's deployment, the class has drawn closer to Rebecca.

The shy, quiet young woman has opened up more, said Mostofo, Rebecca's sponsor. The church paired the two, who didn't know each other.

"She's just a sweet kid," said Mostofo, who did telecommunications work for Fort Carson for six years. "I'm old enough to be her mother, but I feel like her sister. I have a shoulder to cry on."

Rebecca came to the Catholic faith for her husband and for their future. Ultimately, she found community in that faith at a time he couldn't be with her.

Rebecca can't imagine what Holy Week would have been like without the other candidates. She doesn't believe it was luck or fate that drew her to them, but God's will.

"I think back to when I called the parish to ask about the classes," she said. "What was it that made me pick up the phone? Was it just me?"

She spoke with Joe last week. He couldn't say where he was, only that he's playing a lot of cards.

"He's concerned about me, my safety and finances," said Rebecca, who is studying to become a teacher. "I don't want him to worry. I want him to know I'm OK, that I'm getting through this."

She doesn't want to tell him the truth: For all the support she's found, she still goes to Safeway alone, watches CNN alone, cries when she comes home.
"I just want the time to go by like that," she said, snapping her fingers.

Near the end of the Easter vigil on Saturday night, Rebecca and the others received their first Communion.

She ate bread and sipped wine, which Catholics believe are Jesus' body and blood.

In class last week, Rowan, the instructor, reminded Rebecca and her classmates of the meaning of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

When you return to the pew to pray, he said, "think about how you are now one with Jesus, one with a community. You are not alone.''

JOINING THE FAITH

The numbers of adults baptized as new Catholics or baptized in other faiths and converted to Catholicism in the Denver archdiocese:

1998: 1,851
1999: 1,694
2000: 2,595
2001: 2,175
2002: 2,037
The fight over "Roy's Rock," the 2½-ton Ten Commandments monument removed last week from an Alabama courthouse rotunda amid prayers and protests, has galvanized evangelical Christians on both sides of the issue like no other debate in recent memory.

The courthouse steps in Montgomery continue to draw activists and regular folks from across the country who view the monument's removal as another attempt to yank God from the public square.

Some were responding to a challenge from James Dobson, founder of Colorado Springs-based Focus on the Family, who urged his national radio audience to "be a participant."

But just as striking were the people who were criticizing the scene from afar: evangelical leaders who believe the refusal of Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore to comply with a court order to remove the massive monument violated his Christian duty to uphold the rule of law.

The divide blows apart the myth that evangelical Protestants are in lock step on the issues.

But despite the differences, there is consensus among evangelicals that the values and symbols they hold dear are under barrage by secular and pluralistic forces.

"This was a moment where people said, 'Enough is enough,' and there was a guy at the center of the storm who was articulate enough to motivate them," said Gary Schneeberger, a Focus on the Family spokesman.

The standoff at Roy's Rock is the latest development in the difficult 200-year-old negotiation of the intersection of government and religion.

Some Christian leaders call it a watershed moment that could create new activists. Others believe energies would be better spent
working quietly with people of other faiths on common concerns.

The debate over publicly displaying the Ten Commandments resonates strongly with evangelical Christians. Jews, Catholics and mainline Protestants are more likely to focus their activism on social justice, support a stricter separation of church and state and believe religious symbols belong in the church or synagogue, experts say.

The Rev. Don Sweeting of Cherry Creek Presbyterian Church in Englewood said evangelicals have been so moved in part because they believe passionately "in a higher law, in God's laws. When you take that away, our human laws can go all over the place."

At issue is a clause in the First Amendment that states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Sweeting said the intent was to prevent the government from establishing a denomination, not bar religion from the public square.

"There's a misunderstanding with a lot of people who think Christians and evangelicals want to see everything become a Christian nation," he said. "I don't think that's the case. They recognize that Christianity was America's first faith, and they want to see that acknowledged without sweeping that all away. Ultimately, there's no disrespect for others who are not part of that tradition."

A 5,280-pound granite marker proves a potent symbol for Christians. Moore installed it in the Alabama Judicial Building in 2001, saying it represents the moral foundation of U.S. law. He refused a federal judge's order to remove it.

Moore's holy war finally ended Wednesday, when workers wheeled the monument out of view as protesters outside lay on the ground and chanted "Put it back!"

The Rev. Barry Lynn, director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, hailed the development as "a tremendous victory for the rule of law and respect for religious diversity. Perhaps Roy Moore will soon leave the bench and move into the pulpit, which he seems better suited for."

Douglas Groothuis, a philosophy professor at Denver Seminary, said there's a strong argument that the monument is constitutional, given that the U.S. Supreme Court opens with an invocation ("God save the United States and this honorable court") and a frieze of Moses holding the Ten Commandments is displayed in the Supreme Court building (along with the Muslim prophet Muhammad and Chinese thinker Confucius.)

At the same time, Groothuis said, "you're not going to save America by posting the Ten Commandments everywhere."

He cites deeper motivations. "The larger concern is that society has lost its moral anchor, its moral absolutes, anything above human opinion."

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Randall Balmer, chairman of the Religion Department at Barnard College in New York and author of "Blessed Assurance," a history of evangelicalism, said the monument is a rallying point for people who have seen America become less homogenous and want to say, "Give us our country back."

Thanks to changes in immigration law, the United States in recent decades has become much more religiously diverse. U.S. Muslims outnumber Presbyterians and Episcopalians combined, according to some estimates.

As an expert witness who testified on behalf of plaintiffs seeking to remove the monument, Balmer said the main problem was that Moore refused to install other symbols of American jurisprudence.

"The placement and size was meant to be a religious statement and a statement of defiance," Balmer said.

Balmer and others argue that the separation of church and state has served this country well.

"We Americans are an extraordinarily religious people, and a major reason for that is we have largely kept government out of the religion business," he said.

Courts have sent mixed signals about public displays of faith.

In 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed mandatory prayer in public schools. In 2000, the court ruled that Texas public schools may not begin football games with organized, student-led prayer.

On the other hand, courts have permitted student-led Bible study groups to meet in public schools and allowed religious holiday displays as long as they're inclusive. Colorado this year passed a school voucher program that includes religious schools.

Moore's refusal to follow the order to remove the stone has complicated what would normally be a clear-cut issue for evangelicals.

Richard Land, social issues spokesman for the Southern Baptist Convention, an evangelical denomination and the nation's largest Protestant body, with 16.2 million members, argues that the judge's tactics raise troubling questions.

"Do evangelical Christians really want to say that this United States government is no longer a legitimate government and that we are no longer obligated to obey its courts when we disagree with their rulings?" Land wrote. "If so, let us understand it for what it is. It is insurrection."

Other evangelical leaders, however, contend the judge was not flouting the law, but a judge's order that rests on shaky legal legs.

Among the strongest endorsements came from Dobson, who traveled to Alabama and compared Moore's stand to Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of a Montgomery bus in 1955.

Already, Focus on the Family is steering the issue away from
activism and toward legislative action. Dobson said that now is the time to urge U.S. senators to confirm conservative nominees to the federal bench.

The Rev. Richard Cizik, vice president of governmental affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals, said he doesn't support making religion in the public square the centerpiece of evangelical activism.

Cizik said he sees greater potential working with a broad coalition on common concerns, such as ensuring international religious freedoms.

"Most of the public knows how we feel about the role of God in public life," Cizik said. "We have to substantiate that we are willing to work with non-Christians, secularists and others to achieve a common respect for each other."

Jewish input has been noticeably lacking from the Ten Commandments controversy.

Rabbi Bruce Dollin of Denver's Hebrew Educational Alliance said Jews, as a minority in a majority Christian country, generally support separation of church and state out of fear of being treated as less than full citizens.

Rabbi Howard Hirsch of the Center for Christian-Jewish Dialogue in Colorado Springs provides another reason: "Most Jewish people, based on their history, feel whenever you mix religion and politics, it does not go well for the Jews."

Now that the saga in Alabama appears to be winding down, the question is whether the debate over the law of man, the law of God, one man's stubbornness and a core principle of U.S. democracy will have a lasting impact on attitudes and policy.

"The fact that a large number of people remained after the removal may be a signal of something deeper at work here," said Corwin Smidt, executive director of the Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich. "I think it bears some attention."

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Embracing tradition Denver Catholic group seeks holiness through poverty, prayer

At 7:15 each morning, a prayer service is held in the dim light of St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church in north Denver.

Before the empty pews, a small cluster of people quietly gathers in front of the altar, seeking to fulfill one of the hidden legacies of Pope John Paul II.

A 35-year-old former stockbroker from Denver makes sure the candles are lit. Two priests just arrived from Argentina and France slip on their vestments. A young Polish nun dressed in white from head to toe prays next to a 20-year-old Evergreen woman who once bared her midriff as a member of a University of Colorado dance team.

For a half-hour, the blond-brick church is filled with ancient chants, prayers - even speaking in tongues.

The eight people lost in prayer belong to the lone U.S. outpost of the Community of the Beatitudes, a French movement that calls priests, nuns, single people and families to live together under one roof in a radical commitment to poverty, prayer and obedience.

At the invitation of Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput, the community has been based since 1999 in a 14-bedroom former convent behind St. Catherine's.

Now, the community has its first American aspirants, and since last
month its two resident priests have been running the 900-family
parish and its grade school.

"This is radical," said Patricia Campos, 31, who left a
successful retail career to join the community as a lay person.
"It's a life that stands in the midst of the world and says, 'I
will live a life for what I believe in, even if it goes against all
worldly reason, even though it doesn't make sense to other
people.'"

As John Paul II marks his 25th anniversary as pope this week amid
speculation about his weakening condition, many commentators will
make note of his contribution to world politics and his determined
and controversial efforts to steer the Catholic Church toward
tradition.

But in Denver, the Community of the Beatitudes and a handful of
"new movements" that stress community and orthodox practices are
attempting to live out one of the pope's lesser-known legacies:
calling all Catholics, not just members of religious orders, to a
holy, almost countercultural Christian life.

In the decade since John Paul II spoke of "a new evangelization"
at World Youth Day in Denver, the city has become a national center
for these renewal movements. Most are driven by lay people
committed to obeying church teachings, not challenging them.

John Paul II has signaled he believes these movements are the wave
of the future in the Catholic Church.

Stirring hearts, controversy

The new movements are not without controversy, however. Some
Catholics fault them for promoting elitism and exclusivity,
advancing a narrowly conservative agenda or exercising excessive
control over their members.

Though the movements at this point are a blip on the U.S. Catholic
landscape, some are gaining traction by tapping into the spiritual
hunger of young Catholics who prefer tradition over fighting for
women priests or a more democratic church, battles waged for years
by their baby-boomer predecessors, scholars say.

Take Sarah Conley, the former CU Gold Rush Dance Team member. She
is studying to become a nun and joined the Community of the
Beatitudes because she wanted to wear a habit, a tradition that
many women's religious orders have abandoned in the last 30 years.

"I don't want to be rebellious," Conley said. "I don't want to
be anybody who changes anything. I want to follow the tradition in
all of its beauty."

Some conservative lay movements at work in the Denver Archdiocese -
Cursillo, Regnum Christi, Focolare - predate the Second Vatican
Council's call in the 1960s for greater lay involvement in the
church.

The newer movements flowered in Europe and Latin America after
Vatican II; some made inroads in Denver before World Youth Day in
1993, others came here or expanded afterward at the urging of
Francis Stafford, Chaput's predecessor, who until recently headed a Vatican office that championed the new movements.

Chaput has talked of receiving a note complaining that Denver was "a magnet for every flaky, right-wing new group in the church." Chaput, however, is one of the strongest supporters of the new communities among U.S. bishops. He has said he believes they "blow dust off our discipleship and set our hearts on fire."

"All of the movements in one way or another can make some people uncomfortable because the church, like anything human, can tend to be a place of comfort," said Bill Beckman, who worked as the Denver Archdiocese's liaison to the movements before the job was eliminated in budget cuts. "Our way of being Catholic or being Christian needs to be shaken up from time to time."

Of the groups in Denver, the Beatitudes are the most unusual.

Founded in 1974 by a Frenchman who was formerly a Protestant pastor, the group is one of few Catholic communities that includes both clergy and lay people.

The idea is to enrich members' lives by exposing them to people with starkly different callings. A nun doesn't have to live apart from children. A single person can live down the hall from a priest.

The movement grew out of the Catholic charismatic renewal, which stresses experiential worship - clapping, hands in the air and speaking in tongues.

In 1999, Christian and Christine Meert, a French couple who'd been living in a Beatitude monastery in Europe, founded the Denver community, one of 95 houses with 1,700 members in 30-plus countries.

The Beatitudes are centered on monasticism and contemplative prayer, with a deep devotion to Mary.

But they also borrow from Judaism and Orthodoxy to honor Catholicism's historic ties to those traditions.

The Denver community holds Shabbat dinner on Fridays and stages Jewish dance on Saturday nights in the convent basement. The white walls of its chapel are lined with the icons of saints, an Orthodox tradition.

Community members dress only in brown, symbolizing the earth, and white, for the Resurrection. They live simply, sharing a Toyota Corolla with 248,000 miles and a broken taillight. Their modest budget relies on donations, marriage preparation classes run by the Meerts, and the two priests' diocesan salaries.

Several times a day, the members gather to pray together. They study the Bible and Vatican II documents. They share meals. They pray more - alone. Night prayer at 8:30 is followed by the "great silence," when members tend to chores without a word. Bedtime is 9:30.

Some days and evenings, community members stage retreats or prayer
Embracing tradition Denver Catholic group seeks holiness through poverty, prayer

services at other parishes.

"In a world with a lot of material needs, we can be a little light," said the Rev. Jose Sanchez, 43, a native of Argentina who arrived two months ago to shepherd the community.

For the four American aspirants in the house - ranging in age from 20 to 35 - sacrifices were necessary.

Patricia Campos of Denver once was a married, well-paid manager of a Ross Department Store, living in a well-furnished condo with a closet full of clothes.

But Campos, who was raised Catholic, said she wasn't getting fulfillment out of those things. She said she felt called to something more radical, more holy, and through an acquaintance met the Beatitudes.

Now divorced, Campos has given up her independence. She can't wear makeup. She can't eat fast food, except for rare "feast day" trips to McDonald's.

Before moving into the house, she held a garage sale to help pay off her student loans, medical bills and car - the community won't accept anyone with debt, nor will it accept large gifts from members, Meert said.

Campos has no intention, however, of becoming a sister, which is one reason she was attracted to the community.

"I grew up with this idea that holiness is just for nuns and priests," Campos said. "I think most people do. Our job is to be good and not do anything bad so we don't end up in hell. Just be good and get by, don't do anything terrible, and we're fulfilling our vocation as Christians. That's not right."

The only single lay man in the house, Patrick Mercado, said he never felt drawn to poverty. But he too said he wasn't satisfied with his work as a stockbroker, paralegal and writer - a common refrain among adults in their 20s and 30s drawn to the new movements.

"I just got tired of finding the right job, the right wife," said Mercado, who still hopes to marry and have children. "With the economy going bad, I thought I would at least give it a try. I don't know if this is it. My ultimate goal is my relationship with God, and right now, the community is where I am finding that."

Finding freedom in structure

The idea of spirituality as a heroic, countercultural stand is common in the renewal movements, said William Dinges, an associate professor of religion and religious studies at the Catholic University of America who has studied traditionalist Catholics.

He said it's partly a response to the perception that too many people define Catholicism in their own terms - taking what they like of the faith and leaving the rest - and a repudiation of 1960s liberalism.
Dinges said valid concerns have been raised about control asserted over members, though he points out that Catholic seminaries have long used strict rules.

A more valid criticism, he said, is the movements can lead to elitism, an attitude that "I'm more Catholic than you are - more Catholic than the pope."

But to those in the movements, the unabashedly Catholic orthodoxy is liberating, not limiting, Dinges said.

"These groups have higher costs, and in a sense, higher rewards," Dinges said.

Those costs and sacrifices can lead to suspicion, however.

Conley, the former CU student and the youngest resident of the Denver house, said her parents worried she was joining a cult. Conley tried to reassure them by explaining that the Vatican and the archdiocese recognize the group.

"We don't have the obedience of slaves," she said. "We are not controlled in our way of thinking. It's a following of the church."

But joining does involve an often tough break with the past. For the first year, new initiates are instructed to limit contact with family because, Meert said, "you can't be inside and outside - that doesn't work."

Conley said she felt called to the Catholic sisterhood when she was 12 years old and an elderly nun visited her youth group. She didn't listen immediately to the call, though. She went to CU with plans of becoming a broadcast journalist but left after a year to join the Beatitudes, whom she first met at a Friday Shabbat dinner.

"People don't understand at all," Conley said. "They think, 'Oh, you threw away all those fun years.' But what did I throw away? I threw away a lot of superficiality, a lot of emptiness."

Now, a young woman who once drove a new Volkswagen Beetle and performed at football games is a radical in a white blouse and a brown skirt. She is living a life of poverty, striving to be holy, following the urgings of John Paul II, whom she considers a saint.

"It's not an easy life," she said. "It's a beautiful life, though."
Several "new movements" in Catholicism, most of them conservative in orientation, have migrated to the Denver area in recent years. Among them:

The Neocatechumenal Way: Started in Spain in 1964, the lay movement offers a plan of Christian education and initiation for those already baptized. The process can take 10 years. As of last year, 22 communities were meeting in 10 parishes in the Denver Archdiocese.

"People who have drifted away from the church find it attractive, or people who never learned much about the church," said the Rev. Robert Reycraft, whose St. Louis parish in Englewood has three "Way" communities. "It's not a weekend retreat. This goes on for years."

At Reycraft's church, Way members have their own Mass and go door to door evangelizing - unusual behavior for Catholics. Some U.S. bishops complain the Way has split parishes into those who belong and those who don't. Dioceses in Milwaukee and Palm Beach, Fla., banned it.

A seminary affiliated with the movement, Redemptoris Mater, opened in Denver as a result of World Youth Day in 1993 and has 32 seminarians from 10 countries.

Marian Community of Reconciliation (Fraternidad): Founded in 1991 by a Peruvian lay man who is responsible for a family of conservative movements, it came to Denver five years ago at the invitation of then-archbishop Francis Stafford. Six consecrated lay women who have taken vows of celibacy and poverty live in a friary at St. Elizabeth's Church on the Auraria campus in downtown Denver. Previously, the women were based at Saints Peter and Paul Church in suburban Wheat Ridge. The women offer counseling to families and have a strong emphasis on evangelizing young people, said Rossana Goñi, the local superior. The women all work; Goñi is a journalist at the archdiocese's Spanish newspaper.
About 40 people, mostly college students, join the community each Thursday at 11:30 a.m. to pray the Rosary before Mass at St. Elizabeth's, Goñi said. Two more young women - one from Mexico, one from Canada - are studying to join.

A sister organization of lay consecrated men, Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, runs a Catholic retreat center in Estes Park.

Families of Nazareth: The group began in Poland and includes consecrated lay people, priests, sisters and brothers.

It was started in the Denver Archdiocese after World Youth Day by a group of single people but has become more active in the last two years and now includes families, said Anne Mary Hines, a retired dietitian who is the movement's Rocky Mountain facilitator.

Five parishes in the Denver Archdiocese host weekly one-hour meetings in which participants "faith share" - a Bible passage is read, and people relate it to their day-to-day lives.