

Changing churches

Former Catholic nun looking forward to new life, opportunities as Episcopal priest

By Roxanne Evans

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As a child, Annie Finn played church with her brothers and wanted to be the priest. It wasn't long before she learned that Catholic girls became nuns, not priests.

Finn grew up and became a nun. But today, she is studying at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest to become a priest in the Episcopal Church.

"In September of 1984, I left my local (Catholic) congregation with clothing, books, Bible and bedroll and \$1,300 to begin a new journey," she said.

"I felt anger and frustration at being limited. There was a limit to what I could do as a woman in the Catholic Church," Finn said. "My anger motivated me. But I am not angry anymore. It was a good 20 years, but I'm looking forward to the future."

Finn, a friendly woman with short, light brown hair and gray eyes, said she prefers not to think of herself as a former Catholic or as an ex-nun. She prefers to look toward her future, which is part of what she considers a "spiritual journey."

Her journey began in Houston, where she grew up in the Catholic Church in the same parish with the Most Rev. John McCarthy, bishop of the Diocese of Austin. Her teachers from elementary through high school were nuns from the Dominican order. After college, she joined that order.

Although she felt a calling by the church at an early age, she once considered marriage. And in 1962, when Finn entered the convent, it was against the wishes of her parents.

"They were always so family-oriented. They wanted me to get married and have a family," she said. In fact, family opposition to her vocation led her to leave the convent and become a teacher for a time.

Finn returned to the Dominican order in 1964. "It was an exciting time in America and in the Catholic Church," she said, referring to the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements and changes in the church brought about by the Vatican II council.

Most of Finn's work with the Catholic Church has been in adult ministries and programs for the disadvantaged, including work with sharecroppers in Richmond, Texas.

A turning point came in the late 1970s. She was named an assistant pastor at St. Gregory's Catholic Church in Houston, where she assumed a great deal of responsibility for parish operations.

On one hand, she said, it was rewarding, but



Annie Finn, formerly Sister Susan, felt frustrated and limited as a Catholic.

on the other hand, frustrating.

"That's where my struggle began. I could counsel and hear confessions, but not give absolution," she said. Absolution is the administration of the sacrament of penance, in which sins are forgiven through the priest.

"I could be with the dying, but not give the last rites," she said. "I could sign checks, but not the ones going to the chancery. I began to question what I was about."

She came to Austin and became a pastoral counselor, and she grew increasingly uncomfortable with the way the Catholic church handled people with painful problems, particularly divorced couples.

"The more I knew about the structure of the church, the more uncomfortable I became," she said.

While a director of a campus ministries program at the University of Texas at San Antonio, she shared office space in an Episcopal Church facility, was embraced by that community and began attending Episcopal church services, she said.

Two years later, Finn, who was then Sister Susan, left the Dominican community and the Catholic Church. Her parents, who live in Navasota, are supportive of her new plans, she said. A brother, however, refuses to speak to her, she said.

Although there are similarities between the Episcopal and Catholic churches in belief and tradition, the Episcopal Church appreciates and encourages diversity, which appealed to her, Finn said.

"For me, the Episcopal Church was a homecoming, a middle ground that is the best of both Protestantism and Catholicism. I believe that in the Episcopal Church there is a lot more room for diversity. There is a very concerted effort to appreciate diversity," she said.

Not only are women allowed to become priests, but priests also are allowed to marry, because, Finn said, the concept of priesthood is broader.

Finn, 46, doubts that the Catholic Church will allow women to become priests in the near future.

"Many things would need to occur, including a renewal of the whole understanding of the priesthood," to be tolerant of women as priests and married men as priests, she said. "These are the areas in which the Catholic church fails to be catholic or universal. I don't think women will be allowed to become priests — at least not in my lifetime. There is so much tradition."

Even if a change were made, Finn said she would not want to be a Roman Catholic priest within the present structure.

"If tomorrow I was offered a chance to be a priest in the Catholic Church, I would not accept it. It's a matter of personal integrity. I do not want to be a public representative in the present structure," she said.

Although Finn did not leave the convent to marry, she said marriage would be a nice bonus. But she jokes that her past could have a chilling effect on some relationships.

"You tell a guy you were a nun, and it can either make it or break it," she said.

Finn will finish her Anglican studies program in 18 to 24 months. After that, she will be ordained a deacon in the West Texas Diocese of the Episcopal Church and later be ordained a priest. She said she would like to be in the San Antonio area and would welcome an opportunity to have her own parish.

Finn is one of about 90 students at the seminary, said Bob Kinney, public information officer. Many of the students have had previous careers and many of them have backgrounds in other religions, he said.