

'Master architect of this bizarre theology'

Cloistered nun played key role in Somers group

By DAN BARRY
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When the Dominican nuns at the Monastery of Our Lady of Grace in Guilford raise their voices in communal prayer, the power and beauty of their song can be felt in a nearby grotto, where stone benches are set for people to reflect privately on their faith and their lives.

Thousands of Catholics each year come to the cloistered convent, hidden in the woods, to meditate, browse in the gift shop — or just listen to the sisters profess their faith in song.

But the voice of one nun rises above the rest in its impact and range.

Sister Marie Louis Bertrand is in such demand that people often make appointments months in advance for a few minutes of her time, and she's said to be hundreds of letters behind in her correspondence.

Although Sister Louis, as she commonly is known, took a special vow as a cloistered nun to shun most contact with outsiders, she has acquired an international reputation as a "spiritual director" who helps to guide people in their faith.

Her admirers say she has solidified marriages, counseled troubled youths and been an inspiration to people searching for meaning in their lives.

But Sister Louis has another side, one filled with claims of mysterious revelations and miracles, according to more than a dozen people who once sought her spiritual guidance.

They say the nun, who was born Geraldine LaBelle in Leominster, Mass., claims to be a mystic who has the power of "bilocation" — the ability, attributed to some saints, to be in several places at the same time.

Among her other claims, they say, are that the Virgin Mary has "borrowed" Sister Louis's "humanity," and that she has a fleet of angels to do her bidding.

Her control over some people is said to be complete. She gives them advice — or demands — on everything from what color car they should buy to which investments to make and whether to take a prescribed medicine.

Sister Louis also has played an integral role in propagating the beliefs of the Apostolic Formation Center, a Somers-based Catholic lay organization currently under investigation by a Jesuit theologian for allegedly advocating heresy.

Ex-members of the organization claim it is a dangerous cult. And they charge that both Sister Louis, as the center's spiritual director, and its founder, J. Roy Legere, mixed fear with the mystical aura of the Catholic religion to brainwash followers.

They say they were told that the Second Coming of Christ would be in Somers, after which a new kingdom free of evil would be established under the governance of Christ, the pope, Legere — who was given divine dimensions — and the organization's faithful members.

Sister Louis even warned followers that they would be persecuted for those beliefs and might someday have to go "underground," according to ex-members and a transcript of a 1979 lecture given by Paul Legere, the founder's son and successor.

Charles A. Shattuck Jr., the center's last president before it closed earlier this month, maintains that Sister Louis's role as spiritual director ended when he succeeded Paul Legere in 1983.

He added that the new organization he's formed, which is moving out of state, has nothing to do with the cloistered nun in North Guilford.

It's just a coincidence, he says, that his new organization's name, Our Lady of Grace Formation Center, is the same as that of Sister Louis's monastery.

But former members — and apparently the diocese — are not convinced. The ex-members say that Sister Louis's influence continues.



Sister Marie Louis Bertrand: 'warm, sincere and not overly pious.'

"She was the master architect of this bizarre theology," one high-level former member said recently.

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While biographical details about Roy Legere were at the base of the center's doctrine, little of Sister Louis's past apparently was shared with the center's members. They were told that she worked as a bank teller in Leominster before entering the Dominican order almost a half-century ago.

"As much information as was shared about Roy, very little was shared about Sister," an ex-member recalled.

Despite her continuing central role in the center, Sister Louis has been given a low profile in recent years, according to ex-members.

"There's no mention of Sister Louis in a newsletter or on a tape," one former follower said. "It's 'a good friend of ours,' or 'a woman I know.'"

"You won't see her name anywhere," he added. "It's part of the whitewash."

Even personal encounters with the nun take on a certain mysterious aura. Appointments with her are held in a small room adjacent to the monastery's chapel where visitors were separated from the sisters by barred grilles, similar to those in prison visiting rooms, until 20 years ago.

Nevertheless, her critics and admirers

agree that Sister Louis is a gifted communicator with the ability to assess a person's personality traits quickly.

"She's just a master at having perfect relations with people, at saying the right things at the right time," recalled a man who says he paid her more than a dozen visits.

"She's warm, sincere and not overly pious." But ex-members charge that Sister Louis and Legere preyed on the hopes and fears of those who trusted them.

"Her secret is, tell them what they want to hear," one former member said. "The problem is that everybody goes away happy because they all hear what they want to hear."

"There are lots of people who would love to know what God says," another ex-member said. "Sister and Roy both fed that need. But the consequence is that people opened themselves up to be led in any kind of direction."

For many people, that direction was toward Somers. Several people who asked not to be identified said they had moved to Somers from out of state on the advice of Sister Louis. They were told that Somers was where Christ would establish his new kingdom, with the assistance of Legere.

Legere first met the Dominican nun in 1967, a year before he established the Apostolic Formation Center. A confidant of Legere recalls that, after some initial suspicion, he came to trust Sister Louis's visions

and chose her to be his spiritual director. From then on, she supported his sense that he had been personally chosen by God to aid in the Second Coming.

Members were often told that Sister Louis had said that if they touched Legere, it would be the "closest they would come to divinity this side of the veil."

Both Sister Louis and Legere claimed to have visions of Christ and the Virgin Mary. "Many to this day believe that Mary has borrowed Sister's humanity," one ex-member said.

Those claims gave their influence a redoubled effect on many followers.

"Between his revelations and her revelations, they made quite a team," one ex-member recalled sardonically.

Emboldened by the spiritual support of Sister Louis, Legere began espousing his interpretation of Catholic doctrine, which gradually became centered around himself.

The most startling example of this was a practice that came to be known as the Divine Intimacy of the Holy Seed, in which Legere and certain members of an elite core of followers known as "emissaries" participated in ritualized homosexuality, even though such acts are forbidden by Catholic doctrine. The "divine intimacy" was based on the belief that Legere was the "twin" of Christ, and had been directed by God to spread Christ's seed.

One ex-member who acknowledges he participated in the act said he went to Sister Louis in 1972 to ask for an explanation of the "divine intimacy."

"It was doing a job on me," he recalled. But, he said, the nun encouraged him to take part and told him "God was doing something unprecedented, and that I was to pray to the Holy Spirit for light."

"She rubber-stamped everything Roy wanted or said," he added.

After Legere died, Sister Louis told the center's members that his spirit had been distributed among all of them — but that his son Paul, whom she called the "anointed one," had received most of his father's graces.

She also continued to propagate the notion that people could have direct contact through her with Christ and the Virgin Mary. For example, several of the center's members traveled to Lockport, La., at Sister Louis's prompting to visit a man named Klebert Belanger, who claimed to have visions of the Virgin Mary almost daily.

Belanger has made a living out of his alleged relationship with the Virgin Mary. At one time he had a toll-free telephone number that people could call to order rosaries that supposedly had been blessed personally by Christ's mother.

In 1982, Bishop Warren L. Boudreaux of the Houma-Thibodaux diocese in Louisiana warned against the "false hopes" that Belanger's undocumented claims were nurturing.

Boudreaux's comments followed reports that a follower of Belanger had died because he told her the Virgin Mary wanted her to discontinue taking her medication.

Shattuck and others continued to visit Belanger after the bishop's warning, according to ex-members.

For some members, Sister Louis's presence was constant. They were told that through the power of bilocation she could be simultaneously at her monastery and the center's Somers headquarters. If they felt ill, they were instructed to send their guardian angel to sister. The angel would return carrying strength for them to get through the day.

One ex-member said that Sister Louis claimed to have attended his wedding — a claim he said he believed at the time.

"What else could someone believe?" he asked. "She seemed to have the total approval of the church."

Another former follower admitted she