



Photo by Laura Husar Garcia
Felician sisters sit in the front row at Mother of Good Counsel Provincial Chapel in Chicago during Easter Sunday mass. The average age of the 221 sisters living at the Felician convent is 76.

Rhythm, rituals of nuns' daily lives subject of exhibit

Pair lived at convents to document 3 Polish orders

By Maria Mooshil
Tribune staff reporter

A pair of weathered hands lovingly cradles a cross in one of the 60 black-and-white images that form "Beyond the Veil: Nuns at Home," a photo exhibit depicting the daily life of three orders of Polish nuns in Chicago.

The hands belong to Sister Mary Columbine Kowalska, who at 104 is the oldest nun photographed in the collection by Poland-born Iwona Biedermann and Laura Husar Garcia, a former Tribune photo editor.

Biedermann and Husar Garcia, who each profess a longtime interest in nuns, spent a year photographing the women whose orders helped to build and tend schools, hospitals, orphanages, churches and retirement centers in Chicago's Polish immigrant community.



Photo by Iwona Biedermann
Sister Mary Columbine Kowalska displays her cross.

During the project, the two at times lived with the nuns, "getting to know the rhythm of their days," Biedermann said.

The photographs show the Felician Sisters, the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth and the Resurrection Sisters involved in various activities, including praying, preparing meals, doing laundry, exercising, sleeping, having their hair done and playing cards.

"There's a human element here," said Biedermann, 42. "We both share a fascination of seeing them not just as nuns but as women."

Walkers and wheelchairs are common sights in the photos, a poignant reminder of the escalating age of the religious women, many of whom entered their convents as teenagers, and their diminishing numbers.



Photo by Iwona Biedermann
Sister Paula Shire, 78, snuggles behind folded laundry at Mother of Good Counsel in Chicago.

At the Nazareth province, or "mother home," in Des Plaines, the average age of the 124 nuns is 81. The youngest sister at Resurrection's Chicago province is 44. She entered the convent 25 years ago.

"We're trying to capture a piece of history," said Husar Garcia, 35. "Things are changing. Things are shifting, and we want to tell people [the nuns'] history. . . . This is an important sto-

ry that needs to be told . . . because a lot of these women helped build this community. It wouldn't be here without the work of these nuns, who've taken zero credit for it."

"Beyond the Veil: Nuns at Home" runs through Jan. 31 at the Polish Museum of America, 984 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago. For more information, call 773-384-3352 or visit <http://pma.prcua.org>.