

IN THE ARCHDIOCESE



CR Staff/Owen Sweeney III

Mary Strom (right) pins a corsage on Sister Joannes Clifford, R.S.M., founder of the Friends of Mercy, before the group's 20th anniversary celebration Sept. 16.

Friends of Mercy celebrates 20 years of offering support to divorced, widowed

By CHAZ MUTH
cmuth@catholicreview.org

When Claire Lotz of Fullerton received her divorce decree in the 1970s, the Catholic mother of two felt like a pariah in society and disconnected from her religion.

"I didn't know any other divorced people and I felt like I was excommunicated from the church," said Ms. Lotz, now a 65-year-old parishioner of St. Joseph, Fullerton. "In my generation, we were raised to believe that divorce was a big no-no."

Shame kept her from taking Communion for years.

However, after moving from Howard County to the Baltimore area in the late 1980s, she was referred to the Friends of Mercy – a support group for people who are separated, divorced and widowed, launched by a nun from Mercy High School, Baltimore, – and the humiliation she felt about her divorce was replaced with confidence and a re-energized religious bearing.

As the group celebrated its 20th anniversary Sept. 16, Ms. Lotz reflected on the vital part it has

played in her life – which includes a strong network of friends and the place where she met the man she married three years ago.

The anniversary celebration included a liturgy concelebrated by Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, eastern vicar, and Father Joseph Breighner, and a buffet dinner at the Sheppard Pratt Conference Center in Towson.

Though in a wheelchair these days, 81-year-old Friends of Mercy founder Sister Joannes Clifford, R.S.M., has maintained her passion for the group throughout the past 20 years and has served as a steadfast champion of its more than 250 current members.

Sister Joannes, who took a course on ministering to the newly single in 1979, started the group, which regularly meets at Mercy High School and other venues 2 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month, after receiving letters from Mercy alumae seeking advice following the collapse of their marriages.

Break-ups aren't easy for those who go through it, but Catholics suffer unique guilt over the end of a marriage, Sister Joannes said.

"They feel like they are

divorced from their spouse and the church," she said. "I wanted to find a way to help provide some support for them."

Though the church teaches that marriage is a lifelong commitment, it does welcome all divorced people, said Monsignor Jeremiah Kenney, judicial vicar for the Archdiocese of Baltimore and its delegate for canonical affairs.

"Divorce is not a Catholic reality as much as it is a civil reality," Monsignor Kenney said. "We acknowledge the fact that it does exist. The church welcomes all divorced people. We welcome them to worship with us."

He said a marriage is considered invalid under canon law when people re-marry after divorce without a recognized annulment.

Fortified with a grant, Sister Joannes began holding periodic lectures for the newly single featuring top speakers to help separated, divorced and widowed citizens deal with their new status.

In 1987 a group of people attending one of these lectures approached her about starting a monthly support group and the Friends of Mercy held its first

meeting later that year.

Though Friends of Mercy is a non-denominational support group, many of its members are practicing Catholics and have found comfort from the priests who have attended meetings over the years who bestowed non-judgmental support for their single-hood journey, Ms. Lotz said.

During the group's heyday in the early 1990s, Friends of Mercy boasted more than 150 attendees, but today about 50 attend each meeting, Sister Joannes said.

She would like to see younger group members.

"The Internet has offered newly single young people a place to meet other single people. They may find people to date from the Internet, but we're also offering support and community here," she said.

Though Ms. Lotz did meet her husband – 61-year-old John Lotz – at Friends of Mercy, she insists it is not a dating service.

"Ultimately, we're here to help each other through the tough times that come with being newly single and the good times, too," she said. "We can also be a good resource."

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