

College Station nun cooks up new Communion bread

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The heart of Sister Lynn Marie D'Souza, Benedictine Sister of Perpetual Adoration and Texas A&M graduate, ached for celiac sufferers.

Imagine not being able to receive holy Communion without risking serious health complications. For thousands with celiac disease, consuming gluten, a protein in wheat and some other grains, can be dangerous. Even the small particle of consecrated host dropped by the priest in the chalice can make it medically inadvisable to receive Communion in the form of wine.

The Benedictine sisters in Clyde, Mo. have made and sold altar breads for almost 100 years. Celiac sufferers asked them for help. With the experience of producing over two million hosts each week, they are experts in making bread that conforms to the Vatican requirements for use at Mass.

The treatment for celiac disease is a gluten free diet. However, some amount of gluten is required for the hosts to be considered "bread." The question became, can hosts be made with a low enough gluten content to be safely received by celiac sufferers?

For a number of years,

Benedictine Sister Jane Heschmeyer experimented with low gluten recipes. The results were either a dough that was not of the right texture and would not cook properly, or hosts that were inedible.

In 1999, Sister D'Souza joined the order as a postulant. She was assigned to work in the business office, where she had to field the calls of celiac sufferers. "When I heard the longing for the Eucharist in their voices, I became determined," she said.

Sister D'Souza has a degree in biomedical science and joined forces with Sister Heschmeyer. They continued experimenting. One day they were working with batters made from two different types of wheat starch. Sister Heschmeyer suggested they mix the starches together and make a batter.

The resulting batter was messy and almost impossible to work with. Discouraged, Sister D'Souza plopped some of it onto a waffle iron while they cleaned up. There was no reason to expect that this concoction would yield better results than any of their previous experiments. However, when she checked the waffle iron later, there was evenly cooked and delicious bread! Today they believe the Holy Spirit was their invisible cooking partner.



BENEDICTINE SISTER LYNN MARIE D'SOUZA, a graduate of Texas A&M University, has perfected a recipe for low gluten hosts. This allows people with celiac disease to receive communion. (Photo by Mary P. Walker)

About one year ago, the Vatican verified that the sisters' recipe meets the requirements for altar bread, and today the order provides low gluten hosts to more than 260 parishes and individuals. At Mass, these hosts are placed on a separate paten or pyx to avoid contact with the higher gluten hosts. Celiac sufferers are advised to check with their healthcare providers before receiving the hosts.

For Sister D'Souza, helping to bring others to the sacraments is a joyful manifestation of her religious vocation. She was born in St. Louis, Mo., the youngest of five children. Her parents, Ed and Zita, immigrated to the United States from

Mangalore, India, a Catholic region known as the "Rome of the East." Although India has a very small percentage of Catholics, her family has practiced the faith for centuries.

"My parents are very devout," she said. "For us, our faith was part of who we were, not something we did just on Sundays." Her father, Ed, remembers praying the rosary in the evening at home. "We also made the home a happy place to be and welcomed our children's friends," he said.

When she was 14, Sister D'Souza's family moved to College Station, where they were members of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish. Sister D'Souza attended public school and participated in the parish's youth group.

She believes that the move to Texas was an important part of her faith formation. "St. Louis is a very Catholic town. At school in Texas, I was asked questions about what Catholics believe. I had to really learn about my faith to explain it," said Sister D'Souza.

After high school, she attended Texas A&M University with the dream of becoming a physician. Again, she sees the work of God in her choice of colleges. "God wanted me to be at St. Mary's Catholic Center at Texas A&M. There I met people who valued and cherished the Catholic faith as much as I did. People were excited about the Lord Jesus," she said.

After graduation, she became a full-time volunteer for Starcross, a faith community of men and women who

live in the Catholic monastic tradition. One of their ministries is to care for children with AIDS. She ran a tractor and put up fences as part of her work, which surprised her father, who recalls that his daughter never helped in the yard at home.

During her first year there, Sister D'Souza realized that God was calling her to religious life, and she stayed for three more years discerning where this call would take her. During a week of monastic living at the monastery in Clyde, she became interested in the Benedictine order. She said, "I loved the balance of work and prayer. There was real joy in the community and you could tell that the sisters are happy living this life."

The Benedictines in Clyde are semi-cloistered. They live and work within the monastery, but leave to attend workshops and for appointments. They also keep an atmosphere of silence during the day. When they speak, they use subdued voices.

Sister D'Souza made her first vows in August 2002 and hopes to make her final vows in the summer of 2005. Her parents, who never imagined that their youngest child would become a nun, are delighted and believe that they have been blessed by God. Ed said, "It is so comforting and joyful to see Lynn contented and at peace in the monastery. What more can a parent ask for?"

For more information about the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration or low gluten altar breads, visit their Web site at www.benedictinesisters.org.

BENEDICTINE SISTERS
Jane Heschmeyer and Lynn Marie D'Souza make low gluten hosts to distribute to parishes and individuals. (Photo by Mary P. Walker)

