

# Adoring Christ (in everyone)

an interview with Sister Marian Wehler, OSB, and Sister Tina Geiger, RSM  
on working, living, and praying together in Catholic Rural Ministry

by Linda Romey, OSB

*Oil City, Pennsylvania, a scant 90 minutes south of Erie, is both as different and as similar to Erie as Sister Marian Wehler, OSB, and Sister Tina Geiger, RSM, are to each other. The two sisters are Catholic Rural Ministry of the Diocese of Erie, Western Vicariate, based in Oil City, and in this interview they talk about how they work, live, and pray together. Sister Marian represents the tail end of the Silent Generation, and Sister Tina is a Baby Boomer; they came of age in different worlds and even different churches—pre-Vatican through post-Vatican II. They entered different religious communities, Sister Marian became a Benedictine Sister right out of high school and Sister Tina, a Sister of Mercy in her late 20s. They both have missionary experience in Africa and Latin America.*

*Oil City, where the Benedictine Sisters staffed schools from 1875-1981, has a current population of 9,750, about 1/10 the population of the city of Erie. It is more rural than urban, with a lower poverty rate (16.5% in Oil City) than the city of Erie at 24.7% according to census.gov. There are fewer resources in Oil City, and less opportunity in its depressed economy, which can make the poverty seem more overwhelming. In both cities, people long for connection, they seek spirituality and a sense of meaning amid so many uncertainties.*

**Linda:** *The two of you staff Catholic Rural Ministries (CRM) and also live together. What were some of the differences you needed to bridge in order to work, live, and pray together?*

**Tina:** Marian had been here almost five years before I came. And the only thing I knew about Marian was that she smiled a lot! (Ed. Note: Sister Clare Marie Beichner, SSJ, who began CRM in Oil City with Marian in 2007, left in late 2011, which is when Tina joined CRM.)

I'm a Sister of Mercy and our foundress, Catherine McAuley, added a fourth vow of service recognizing a rhythm between contemplation and action. Our ministry and its concerns inform our prayer, and our prayer informs and strengthens us for ministry.

**Marian:** It didn't take long after Tina joined CRM for me to realize there would be a lot of laughter in our ministry!

As a Benedictine, community is primary and we respond in daily prayer and ministry, building community with our sisterhood as well as being community builders wherever we go. Communal prayer was one of the first serious conversations Tina and I had. Setting aside prayer times is a part of my daily rhythm and since our schedules vary so much, we usually make morning prayer our communal prayer. However, on any given day, we may be leading a retreat or bible study, or attending Mass in one of the parishes we serve, which includes communal prayer with others. Those times of presence with others also build community.

Tina likes contemplative or centering prayer. *Lectio divina*, along with journaling, is my favorite. We both love scripture and always center our prayer and shared *lectio* around the Gospels.

**Tina:** And for practical matters, we agreed to a monthly house meeting—we had to decide who would wash dishes and who would put them away, for example!

**Marian:** We eventually settled into workable routines, and after 12 years, we have integrated our distinct charisms and our unique gifts in ways that enable us to do this ministry. We've learned to



Sister Tina and Sister Marian are present to school children, teens, and adults in their ministry. "After learning about the gift of 'wonder and awe in God's presence,' it makes me realize that everything in this world is because of God. The retreat was a lot of fun, too, and I learned a lot," said a student after a retreat.



listen well to each other. St. Benedict knew that mutual listening is key for community living and growing in relationships—he began his Rule, the 1,500 year-old wisdom tradition Benedictines live by, with the word “listen.”

**Tina:** When you don't know anything about the other person with whom you're going to live and work until you're thrown together, as was the case with Marian and me, you have to learn to love, trust, and keep an open heart and mind.

**Linda:** CRM is sponsored by the Diocese of Erie under the Office of Religious. You work in counties in the Oil City Deanery (Venango, Clarion, Forest, and Titusville in Crawford County) which includes about 16 churches. You lead retreats, organize scripture sharing and book studies, lead confirmation retreats with teens, attend many parish functions, and more. How do you share mercy and build community with what must be very diverse populations?

**Marian:** We make it a point to never talk politics in our programs because the Gospel is our value system, that's the message that will change the world. People come to us who aren't Catholic, too. They don't have to believe as we do. Not everyone has the same theology, either. We bring the teachings of Pope Francis, such as *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti* and now synodality into our conversations. People can then reflect and decide how to respond. There's a lot of pain around certain issues, too, for example, when parents struggle with having a son or daughter who is gay, or in the LGBTQ community. Those parents need pastoral care. Again, we listen.

**Tina:** We stress not only God's love for us but the reality that God's love is within us. You know, if we kneel before the tabernacle, we ought to kneel before one another because we are temples of the Holy Spirit. Just think how different the world would be if everyone “knelt” before each another.



Sister Tina: “I love that line that says we walk and live and have our being in the presence of God. So I have a sense that everything I do and everything I am and wherever I am, I am already in the presence of God. So the whole being is a prayer. You know, there's that prayer that says, 'just to be is blessing. Just to live is holy.' I believe that.”



Sister Marian: “Catholic Social Teaching is integral to our spiritual enrichment programs. NETWORK Advocates for Social Justice, inspired by Catholic Sisters, included us in a roundtable discussion on rural poverty here in Oil City as well as in a zoom meeting with some of our community partners.”

**Marian:** Yes, recently I had this aha experience in rereading the chapter on receiving guests in the Rule of Benedict. “All humility should be shown to the guests on arrival or departure by bowing the head or prostrating the whole body on the ground. Christ is to be adored in them as it is he who is in fact being received.” I don't ever remember hearing the word “adore” in such a strong way when it comes to meeting another.

**Linda:** Your ministry at its core is to be “women of hope and compassion.” How do you do that in the current depressed economy in Oil City? According to Data USA (<https://datausa.io/profile/geo/oil-city-pa>), the 2020 median household income is \$41,591 (median earning for men, \$40,342; for women, \$25,661).

**Tina:** We answer the door. When people ring the doorbell on the morning of your day off, you get up and answer the door because, as you say Benedict teaches, it's Christ at the door, and you serve the Christ in whomever is there. I mean, the phone can ring at 9:00 p.m. And why is it ringing at 9:00 p.m.? Obviously, nobody else is helping the person. So, we'll find out what the problem is and do whatever we can do.

**Marian:** It's not only about finding money for what they need, but also about sitting with them and listening to them, to their stories. We collaborate with organizations like St. Elizabeth Center, Community Services, and others, and make referrals that might procure additional help. We listen with compassion and offer a kind word.

**Tina:** Most agencies won't help pay for a car repair, for example, and if you don't have your car, you can't get to work. You can't get to the grocery store or get your medicine. If this person can't pay their electric bill because her husband got a cancer diagnosis and is going into treatment and can't work and her salary is too low, you pay their electric bill this month. But what about next month? The client and I try to create a plan for self-sufficiency.



**Marian:** Helping people in need is one aspect of our ministry, another is offering spiritual enrichment and nourishment through our presence in gatherings that bring people together. In those situations, we learn much from our rural neighbors. I see a lot of resilience in people and feel energy in the dreams and hopes of the younger generation.

**Tina:** But until there is access to transportation, to living wages, to childcare, some people will always need help. What gives me hope is witnessing the movement of the Spirit in the lives of those we touch—the relief on a mother’s face when she realizes that the water for her and her children is turned back on; the hope that an abused one can move to safer lodging because we can help with the first months’ rent or security deposit; the joy when someone finds out they are eligible for this or that social assistance program, which means they can afford to go on. And in faith sharing we also witness the broadening of people’s view of God in their mature walking into deeper active faith.

**Marian:** There’s a lot of rural poverty and human struggle. I think that’s why we feel called to be here. I recently went to a County Human Services board meeting where we looked at statistics. Later as I walked out to the parking lot with one of the board members, he said, “I thought our world was getting better.” He seemed discouraged. I said to him, “Maybe that’s why we’re here.” That’s why he has his job and I have mine, because we are needed. People who are hurting need to know others care.

Is there hope? Of course! I love these lines from National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman: “The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is light if only we’re brave enough to see it, if only we’re brave enough to be it.” When people work collaboratively to make good things happen in the community it gives hope, it certainly gives light to my heart and to my life. And I want to be “brave enough to be it.”

Sister Tina and Sister Marian (seated), with members of their scripture reflection group, Marge Hajduk, Alison Dilks, Mary Ellen Hynes, Lorretta Warcholik, and Heidi Heck.

“I’m grateful for the sisters’ insights and how they lead us to deeper understanding as we listen to each other’s reflections on the scriptures. When I go to Mass on Sunday, after having already shared the scriptures in our group, I find the homily more meaningful,” said Heidi. “For me personally, they help me express my faith with honesty. I struggle with the Church, but I feel like I can participate with the sisters, whether it’s scripture study or book discussions or anything else,” added Alison.

The reach of Sister Marian and Sister Tina’s ministry is wide. As Mary Ellen noted, “They ask no questions when someone comes to them in need. And if they can’t help, they look until they find someone who can. I don’t know where they get their energy. We’re here in Oil City, but they work in the entire deanery, it’s a very large area.” Heidi spoke of the broader impact of the sisters’ work with those in need: “They are involved with St. Elizabeth Center, where I’ve volunteered for ten years,” she said. “They help in so many areas and sometimes share the stories and concerns of those whom they’ve helped in our scripture sharing. What they bring means so much.” Mary Ellen added, “Coming together with other women to reflect on the scriptures leaves me with a calmness and

*Linda: Reflecting on the quote on the cover of this magazine, where do you find the God of all strength when the waters around you are thundering loud and wild?*

**Marian:** I think that question has more than one answer. One part for me is centering ourselves in God so that we don’t have to try to control things and instead put trust in God who loves us. Another part is communal, it is turning to friends who care; they are always a source of strength for me. Tina and I belong to “Together We Can,” a group working against racism locally. We are doing a book study on *Caste, The Origins of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson. Mutual education is a powerful tool in opening our eyes to the causes of oppression and raising hope.

And, hope and strength have to do with answering the door and looking into someone’s eyes with kindness and giving a welcoming smile that says, “You are important.” Perhaps they will feel in some small way that God sees them and loves them. The wild waters may calm down for both of us.

**Tina:** I do like the idea of being right in the wild waters of rapids. But when you ride the rapids, there’s somebody in the raft who knows the river, and is like the rudder. And it’s looking to the back of the boat and seeing Christ as the rudder. We’ve had a lot of those situations, whether it’s running out of money, running out of energy, running out of steam, and still, you must get the oomph up because people are coming the next morning. We quote Julian of Norwich often: “All will be well, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.” But Julian’s description of the meaning of that line is about the power of love flowing through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go. Wow. Why don’t we quote that? That’s the line that sticks with me because “all will be well.” We will be well. But it doesn’t make any sense until you know that you can rely on this power of Love (God) that flows through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go—no matter what.



peace and then the sisters model for us how to put it into action by their example of outreach.”

“The sisters are a part of our larger community beyond their ministry. You run into them at the coffee shop or a local restaurant or shop. They help people in need, but everyone knows them, they are so approachable,” said Alison. Because of their faith and spirituality, we as a group have grown in our spirituality,” agreed Heidi and Mary Ellen.