



Country Girl to City Sister

Sr. Mary Anne Zuberbueler has been called...to the City.

By Jonathan Liedl

When you take a look at the place where Sr. Mary Anne Zuberbueler grew up, a 45,000 acre goat and sheep ranch near the tiny southwestern Texas town of Comstock (population, 281), you might wonder how on earth she became a religious sister.

The local parish, ironically named in honor of Mary, Queen of the Universe, is miniscule and simple, lacking the overwhelming beauty and grandeur of an urban cathedral. When Sr. Mary Anne was a kid, Sunday Mass was celebrated in the morning—but on Saturday; there was no dedicated priest for the parish, so the local bishop had to give a special dispensation. And the catechetical and faith formation offerings paled in comparison to those you might find in the cities or suburbs; in fact, Sr. Mary Anne remembers attending the local Baptist church's vacation day bible camp in the summers, because that's what was available.

In fact, unlike many young girls who go on consecrated life, Sr. Mary Anne didn't have any profound encounters with religious sisters during her youth.

"I thought religious life just existed in Europe or books I read," she admits.

But what Sr. Mary Anne's upbringing lacked in stained glass and encounters with religious, it more than made up for with a strong emphasis on relationships, selflessness, and service—all factors that she says prepared her to become a member of the Nashville Dominicans, the community she has been a professed member of for the past 25 years.

For instance, the lack of widespread entertainment options and modern conveniences made human bonds more important and appreciated. "There was so much community and a spirit of dependence," she shares. "We all worked together because we all needed each other."

Sr. Mary Anne says that her family didn't watch much TV—not because her parents wouldn't allow it, but "because it only came in when the weather was right." Without the distraction of technology, she says she had a lot of time to reflect on deeper things.

"I had a lot of time to ponder, with maybe some day dreaming mixed in!" she says.

Even the landscape of the region—flat, ever-expanding desert terrain dotted with sagebrush and tumbleweed—helped her meditate on creation and her place in it. She remembers asking her dad about the meaning of "infinite thy vast domain" after hearing the line in the hymn "Holy God We Praise Thy Name."

"He pointed out the window at the ranch and told me that that was a vast domain, but God's was even bigger," she recalls. "It helped me understand that your life can't be just about you, it has to be about something beyond you."

Responding to the call

Some of Sr. Mary Anne's peers couldn't wait to get out of Comstock. She didn't count herself among them.

"I could've seen myself living there for the rest of my life," the self-described nature-lover says. "If it was in God's will, I would've stayed."

But God called Sr. Mary Anne out of southwest Texas and into a life of service in the city. After studying at Texas A&M and Christendom College, Sr. Mary Anne joined the Dominicans in 1989.

She has since devoted herself to Catholic education as a teacher and principal, serving in schools near Indianapolis, Washington, D.C., and in Nashville. She is currently the dean of the school of education at Aquinas College in Nashville, Tenn., where, in her own words, she



“teaches teachers to teach.”

Many of the lessons Sr. Mary Anne learned in Comstock have come into play as an educator. For instance, helping run things on the ranch prepared her to place sound structures in place, and to think through the long-term consequences of short-term plans. She also says her upbringing in a rural setting helps her better understand some of Christ’s parables, which often use agrarian imagery.

“The Gospel story about the sheep and the goats? It’s for real,” she says, as she knows firsthand how “wily” of goats can be.

The country-city connection

Sr. Mary Anne says she misses the wide-open spaces of southwest Texas “to some degree,” but finds opportunities to reconnect with God through creation when she can. In addition to annual visits home, she tries to get to her community’s retreat house and enjoys quiet walks on Aquinas College’s 85 acres.

“Even if you’re busy, you have to find time to go away for a bit,” she says, pointing to Christ’s focus on prayer and solitude even in the midst of His ministry.

But like Christ, Sr. Mary Anne recognizes that the quietness and solitude of the countryside are meant to aid her in her vocation in the city, not supplant it. She also draws inspiration from her order’s founder, St. Dominic. He was born in a rural region of Spain not too different than her Texas hometown.

“But he built all of his monasteries and convents in the cities, because he went to where the greatest need was. I’m called to do the same.”

Sr. Mary Anne is a living example of what Timothy Cardinal Dolan, the archbishop of New York, told Catholic Rural Life in Spring 2014 interview, when he noted that a disproportionate number of vocations and future evangelizers come from the countryside. In fact, from Mary, Queen of the Universe parish in Comstock, several other vocations have flourished, including a Dominican friar and one of Sr. Mary Anne’s younger brothers, who is a diocesan priest.

Cardinal Dolan suggested that, because of this steady supply of vocations from the countryside to the city, Catholics need to do more to ensure the well-being of vibrant rural parishes and communities.

Sr. Mary Anne agrees, recognizing God’s grace builds on the natural virtue and community found in rural settings, making them a good starting place for vocational discernment.

“We need to keep things simple,” she says. “Technology is eating us up and encroaching into every part of our life. We don’t even give ourselves permission to think, to be. It’s easier to do in a rural setting. It’s easier to be detached and open to serve.”

Far left: Sister Mary Ann with two of her brothers back on the ranch. Below left: Sr. Mary Ann Zuberbueler, OP. Below right: Mary, Queen of the Universe parish in Comstock, Tex. Submitted Photos.

