

New chancellor aims to serve by listening first

By Ed Langlois

OF THE CATHOLIC SENTINEL

The new chancellor of the Archdiocese of Portland is a Franciscan sister who has worked as a non-sense prison guard and as an immigration attorney who wears her religious habit in court.

But Sister Veronica Schueler is far from iron-fisted. Like her community, the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, she works gently, addressing the particular needs of each individual, whether in a classroom or a prison cell.

“Our charism is based in relationship,” said Sister Veronica, who started



Sr. VERONICA SCHUELER

in her new post Jan. 9. She served most recently as vice chancellor of the Diocese of Palm Beach, Florida.

The archdiocese has been without a chancellor since the retirement of Mary Jo Tully in August 2016. The chancellor’s job differs from diocese to diocese, but it’s a lofty position that deals in archives, records, internal accord and public relationships. Sister Veronica’s new office is modest, but just across the hall from Archbishop Alexander Sample’s.

Sister Veronica will serve as the archbishop’s delegate for consecrated life — a liaison with convents, monasteries, abbeys and houses of priests like the Jesuits and the Congregation of Holy Cross. Her first step, she said, is to meet local religious communities to discover how she can help them.

Her Franciscan forma-

tion has defined the way she embraces the world. “We very much take one person at a time, one situation at a time,” she said. “You find you get more patient. You get more willing to work in the process. We very much believe you need to meet people where they are.”

Sister Veronica has worked in many un-churchy settings. Through it all, she wears a simple brown habit, a black veil and a simple cross forged of two nails. No one has ever harassed her for her identity. On the contrary, she said, many people are intrigued and inquire about her life.

Sister Veronica lives with nine other Franciscans at their convent in Bridal Veil, above the Columbia River Gorge. The community came to Oregon four decades ago and established Franciscan Montessori Earth School.

The sisters rise early to pray together, then grab breakfast before heading off to work. They reconvene for evening prayer, dinner and mutual support.

“There is really an effort to share your day and ask about other people’s days,” Sister Veronica said. “You share your feelings, your disappointments, news from your family.”

Chatting with another sister, a grade school teacher, Sister Veronica admitted it was humbling to work with inmates who critiqued her all day. The teacher smiled and said that 6-year-olds offer the same service.

Like all Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, she helps work the land and care for animals. The Bridal Veil sisters have goats, among other creatures.

Sister Veronica had visited Oregon but this is her first time living in the



Sr. Veronica Schueler, an attorney and former prison guard, is new chancellor of the Archdiocese of Portland. Consecrated life has made her more patient and more willing to start with people as they are, she said. (Ed Langlois/Catholic Sentinel)

state. She is undaunted by the anti-religion reputation, saying that she has handled worse on the cell blocks.

Daughter of a federal worker, she and four brothers were raised in Massachusetts. “We all talked like the Kennedys,” she said.

The family then moved where the father’s job sent them: Ohio, Michigan, Washington, D.C.

As an undergraduate, she began at the University of Connecticut and finished at the University of Pittsburgh with a major in writing and a minor in criminal justice. After graduating, she landed a job as a guard at a Pennsylvania

women’s prison.

“I originally went into it with the idea of helping people — a very compassionate mindset,” Sister Veronica said. “I very quickly found that the women were so tough and so verbally assaultive that I adopted a more a law-and-order mentality. I never lost the other — it was always there. But you needed to be able to stand up to them for anything good to happen.”

She valued the work, yet had a sense there was more to life. A college friend helped her meet the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, whose motherhouse is in Connecticut. Religious

life had not been in her plans, but the idea endured. After years of visits and meetings with the Franciscans and plenty of prayer, it became clear she should move ahead. She entered the community in 1985.

Religious life, she said, has allowed her to be who she truly is.

While still in formation, she continued prison and criminal justice work, even wearing a habit in state and federal facilities. In conversation with her superiors, the idea of law school emerged. She moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to live with a community of sisters there and enrolled in law school at Western Michigan University.

After graduation and admission to the Michigan bar, she was offered a job with the Michigan teachers union. She subsequently practiced in Minnesota and Maryland, learning immigration code. That led to a position with Catholic Charities immigration law services in Houston, where she eventually became co-director. In all, she spent 15 years working in immigration law.

“It turned out to be my specialty,” said Sister Veronica, who is an intermediate Spanish speaker.

The Franciscans closed their Houston house and Sister Veronica joined her community’s foundation in south Florida, eventually taking the job in the Diocese of Palm Beach. Among many duties, she handled paperwork for priests from northern dioceses who retire in Florida and want to help out at local parishes.

In light of shootings at U.S. churches in the past several years, she was establishing a church security committee.

“Sister Veronica is a very

good worker and diligent in her efforts,” said Father Albert Dello Russo, chancellor of the Diocese of Palm Beach. “Sister is bright and intelligent with a fun and engaging personality.”

She holds a certification in health care ethics from the National Catholic Bioethics Center.

Sister Veronica reads history and classic novels and tries to keep up on science. Her heroes include the modern popes, each of whom has brought something important to the church, she says. She admires how Pope Francis is nudging the world to accompany migrants and understand their lives.

She admires civil rights leaders like Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Among the saints, she has a special devotion to those who entered the lives of immigrants, including Mother Cabrini.

“She’s a very loyal, steadfast Franciscan,” said Sister Suzanne Gross, a longtime member of the religious community who leads a hospice and does pro-life ministry for the Archdiocese of Hartford, Connecticut. “She has through the years demonstrated her commitment to caring for individuals. She has a real stick-to-itiveness and commitment to be there for others.”

Sister Suzanne said Sister Veronica’s love of the church prepares her well for the chancellor’s duties.

“She has been able to work well in government issues and then church settings,” Sister Suzanne said. “She’s always been devoted to the true sense of the law — its purpose and meaning.”

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