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From Maryland college to North Dakota monastery

Roxane Salonen

Sister Veronica, then Elizabeth Hartley, was sitting in her dorm room at the University of Maryland flipping through a directory of religious communities in February 2002.

"The entry for the Carmelite Nuns of the Ancient Observance in Wahpeton, N.D., caught my eye, so I immediately typed the address of their website into my computer," she said in a written account shortly after professing her solemn vows last month.

The daughter of Jonathan and Wanda Hartley of Linthicum Heights, Md., Sister Veronica grew up a parishioner of St. Philip Neri and is the oldest sister to two siblings, a brother and sister.

Before coming to North Dakota, she spent a year in France as a French and history major. But something about the life that was unfolding before her seemed wrong; at least until Carmel of Mary came onto her computer screen that cold, February day.

"As the page appeared on the screen, I read the words, 'I have found the one whom my heart loves. I will hold him fast and not let go,'" she said, quoting from the Song of Songs 3:4.

"My heart started beating faster, and somewhere deep within me I knew that I had found what I had been searching for all my life."

When she told her parents she hoped to enter Carmel, she said they offered their support but asked that she finish college first. She had two and a half years to go. During this time, she would visit other religious communities on occasion, and each time her mother would ask if any had spoken to her heart, hoping she would pursue a vocation closer to home. "Each time I would answer, 'Yes, but not like Carmel of Mary!'" she said.

Sister Veronica said that since her joyful entrance into the North Dakota monastery on All Saints Day 2004, she feels that the Diocese of Fargo has become her true home. "Although I remain hidden most of the time, I am filled with an intense and tender love for all the people of the Diocese of Fargo," she said. "I am confident that, through the surrender of my poor little life in union with Our Lady, a superabundance of Christ's healing peace and exultant hope will be poured out upon the world. May God be blessed and praised forever for his great mercy!"