Franciscan Sisters make a new home in A.C.

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ATLANTIC CITY - When Agnes Holtz and Ann Kateri decided to make a full-time, life-long commitment to a religious life, they did not know their choice would lead them to the Franciscan Sisters of the Renewal and this resort.

Now known as Sr. Agnes and Sr. Ann, they along with Sr. Joseph Van Munster and Sr. Chiara Fedele, have moved into St. Michael Rectory and are converting it into convent that will be dedicated at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday on the same day as the Wedding of the Sea Festival.

The Sisters wear wedding rings, which signifies successful completion of the final stage of commitment, which is called the Perpetual Vow. They made a life-long commitment to living the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

Their location in the resort is the first time that the Franciscan Sisters of the Renewal have established a convent outside of New York City in this country.

Bishop Dennis Sullivan of Camden has known the Franciscan Sisters of the Renewal for many years from his time in the Archdiocese of New York, said Michael Walsh, spokesman, Diocese of Camden.

Within the last years, the Sisters, not the ones now living in the resort, had mentioned to the Bishop that they had been looking for an area to open a new convent to expand their ministry.

"Ultimately, they felt that Atlantic City was an area where they could be of most use to the community," Walsh said.

The Sisters live the Gospel values in simplicity according to the ideals of Saint Francis of Assisi.

"He tried to follow Jesus in a radical way, in a manner of the first Apostles, to live the Gospel, to live the words of Jesus, intensely, radically, to not own anything of his own, to go and serve the people in need. Francis reached out to the most needy people in his time, which were the lepers," Sr. Ann said.

The Sisters will be dividing their time among prayer, ministry and work.

They arrived on July 31 in the city and haven't decided yet what work they will be doing to be of service to the resort.

Before Sr. Ann joined the Franciscan Sisters, she graduated from Harvard University in Massachusetts with a degree in sociology while also doing premed requirements. She had taken the Medical College Admission Test and planned on being a missionary doctor.

"I knew that in my heart, I was to be among the poor and to serve, particularly for the Catholic Church, so I did that for six years in different ways in D.C. before finally realizing the Lord wasn't calling me to do good things for him. He just wanted my heart," Sr. Ann said.
Sr. Ann, 40, has been a Sister for the past 12 years.

As a child, Sr. Agnes lived in Florida and had been playing tennis since age 8. She had a tennis scholarship to attend the University of North Florida. She played tennis and received her nursing degree. She worked as a pediatric oncology nurse for a year.

"I was really searching in college. I was growing in my relationship with Jesus. When I worked as a nurse, it just wasn't enough to be working with children with cancer. There was still something missing, so I ended up looking at different Orders," Sr. Agnes, who joined the Franciscan Sisters two days before 9/11. "My whole life made sense in the context of this vocation."

Sr. Agnes, also 40, has been a Sister for the past 16 years.

Besides work, the Sisters will spend part of every day praying. They pray five hours daily, typically at 6 and 7:30 a.m., noon, 5 and 8:40 p.m.

Another sacrifice women who join the Franciscan Sisters make is limited contact with family.

Each sister can make monthly calls to family and can visit her family for two weeks each year. In addition to this, a sister's family may visit her two weekends each year.

Over the years, Sr. Ann said she has seen that as she has given her life over to the Lord, He has taken of her family.

"The Lord is not outdone in generosity," Sr. Ann said. "We give ourselves to the Lord. He takes care of our families in better ways than we could."