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By Tanya Connor

She grew up in a large family in Worcester and spent years in leadership among her fellow religious. Last week she began a new ministry – as liaison between them and the bishop.

She is Sister Cathleen Toomey, a Sister of Mercy of the Americas. She entered the congregation in a house once part of the Underground Railroad. She wouldn't stay long, figured her father, who sometimes received late-night calls from the bishop – thanks to his four teenaged daughters. She was the second pursuing religious life, not as serious as her older sister. As Sister Cathleen puts it, "I majored in fun" in school.

But decades later, in this Year of Consecrated Life, Bishop McManus has appointed her Episcopal Liaison to Religious for the Diocese. She is to "maintain a bond" between him and "members of religious institutes and other forms of consecrated life."

She succeeds Sister Paula A. Kelleher, a Sister of St. Joseph who retired as vicar for religious last year.

Sister Cathleen is to represent the bishop, serve members of consecrated life and support the vocation to consecrated life, her job description says. She is to communicate with religious, attend their events, be a resource for them, maintain data about them and provide opportunities for celebrations of jubilees and World Day for Consecrated Life. Bishop McManus said she will also work with the diocesan Development Office in preparing for the annual Retirement Fund

for Religious collection.

Sister Cathleen said she will work half time as liaison and half time in her present position as assistant to the regional superior of the Augustinians of the Assumption, using her office at Emmanuel House at Assumption College. Bishop McManus said she will also have space in the Chancery.

Sister Cathleen is the second of nine children of John and Irene Toomey. She said her father, his brothers Lawrence and Richard, and other family members operated R.J. Toomey Company, known for its clerical and confirmation apparel and school uniforms. Her mother's father, Dr. Timothy J. Foley, was a founding doctor of St. Vincent Hospital. Sister Cathleen said one of her father's sisters married one of her mother's brothers, so six of her 68 first cousins are "double cousins."

Her parents had four girls and "my father was just waiting for his Danny," she said. Four boys followed. Seven years after the last boys, who were twins, another girl arrived.

The year the four oldest were all students at Notre Dame Academy, they were pictured in the newspaper, Sister Cathleen said. She thought the same happened when the boys were all at St. John's High School in Shrewsbury.

Four teenaged girls kept the telephone occupied; they didn't have cell phones, Sister Cathleen noted.

"Sometimes the phone would ring at 10:30 at night," she said. It would be Bishop Wright, finally reaching her father. She said she didn't know what the calls were about.

Her oldest sister, Maureen, entered the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur after high school and is now a pastoral associate in Springfield, she said.

Then she said she wanted to join the Sisters of Mercy, who taught her and her siblings at Blessed Sacrament School in Worcester. Her father said he'd have to think and pray about it, and ultimately agreed.

"He said to me, 'I'll give you three weeks,'" she recalled. "I would remind him of that as he got old: 'Remember those three weeks? It's kind of extended.'"

She joined the Sisters of Mercy because she felt they were the best fit for her, she said. She was attracted to their care of children, but then they closed their orphanage near St. Paul's Cathedral. That wasn't her only reason for joining, however.

"Besides a call to religious life, within that call there's a call to a specific community," she said. "It's the spirit of the community that draws you. The members you know, the ministries in which they're involved."

She entered in 1957 at the Asa Waters Estate in Millbury, where part of the Underground Railroad had been under the spiral staircase, she said.

She did three years of college in the congregation's Teachers' Institute and her fourth year at Anna Maria College, finishing in 1964. In 1965 she made her final vows.

She spoke about serving in the following ways. She taught for a year at St. Paul's School and seven years at Mercy Centre and was vocation and formation director for the Sisters of Mercy of Worcester.

In 1971 she was elected New England Regional chairwoman for what was then the National Sisters Vocation Conference. Later she was its national director for three years and worked from its headquarters in Chicago, giving workshops throughout the nation. (She's been to almost every state.)

In 1980 she was elected to the leadership team of the Sisters of Mercy of Worcester. At the General Chapter in 1984 she was elected major superior, and given the responsibility to carry

out the Chapter decision to become part of a larger Mercy community. That process was completed in 1986. In 1991 other groups of Sisters of Mercy joined, and all formed the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

Sister Cathleen said she served in leadership for the sisters for 16 years. She also did campus ministry part time at Assumption College.

From 1994-2001 she was pastoral associate at St. Rose of Lima Parish in Northborough, then became director of campus ministry at Assumption College. In 2006 she took her present job as assistant to the Assumptionists' regional superior.

At the celebration for consecrated life at the cathedral in June Bishop McManus asked her to take the liaison job, she said.

"I think it's a ministry of presence in many ways, whether you're speaking to an individual or listening," she said.