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Petal ministry helps put back stuffing

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By Claudia Loucks

DAVENPORT -- Chemotherapy can cause hair and prayer loss

"Cancer treatment just takes all the stuffing out of you," said Sister Elizabeth Thoman, a member of the Congregation of the Humility of Mary, Davenport.

Sister Thoman, a Los Angeles resident, recently visited congregation headquarters and shared information about her "Healing Petals" ministry. For information about Healing Petals, visit a www.chmiowa.org Web site.

Her ministry dates back to 2004, when she was diagnosed with breast cancer and began chemotherapy.

She expected side effects and "inconveniences" such as energy, appetite and hair loss, due to treatment.

"But nobody warned me about how hard it would be to pray," she said. "Words just jumble together, you have no energy, and concentration is impossible. Just when I needed prayer the most, it eluded me."

Picking up a book of nature photographs changed all that, Sister Thoman said.

"Suddenly I felt a great calm come over me," she said. "The images spoke to me of the grandeur of creation. I felt enveloped in the love of God. As I turned page after page, I found myself, as the Catechism used to say, 'turning my heart and mind to God.' I was praying. I was delirious with joy. It was one of those insights in life that transforms you forever."

Soon, however, she started taking her own photos.

"The pictures seem to take themselves," Sister Thoman said. "The lens allows me to see right



Photo: Claudia Loucks / correspondent
Sister Elizabeth Thoman, Congregation of the Humility of Mary, displays with some of the photographs included in her 'Healing Petals' ministry.

into the heart of the flower. To me, the act of photography is itself a prayer."

She's since been declared clear of cancer, but remains deeply committed to using the power and potential of images to inspire prayer and meditation, especially among those who are sick or elderly.

"Having known firsthand the impact of pain and illness on one's everyday ability to function, my goal is to bring affordable beauty to those in physical or emotional pain and to inspire new ways to image the Divine," she said.

Her "Healing Petals/Images for Prayer and Reflection" ministry provides close-up photographs of flowers placed in hospital rooms, nursing homes and at the bedsides of cancer or chronically ill patients.

"Any disease, but especially cancer, is a spiritual journey," Sister Thoman said. "You learn to slow down and pay attention to what is important. When you are feeling lousy, just gazing at a photograph on your bedside table of a sunlit tulip or the intimate folds of a gorgeous rose can create the calm and quiet needed to relax and heal – physically, emotionally and spiritually."

She's also getting many requests for larger prints for use in altars, chapels, counseling centers, medical offices, or rooms used for meditation, prayer or quiet breathing.

"We're all in need of healing every day," she said. "Thomas Merton told us, 'We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time.' We shouldn't wait to get cancer to discover how to experience the presence of God all around us."

Sister Thoman, a former Marycrest College student, joined the congregation in 1964.

She founded a Center for Media Literacy, a national non-profit organization and led it for more than 30 years in Los Angeles.

Sister Thoman continues to work in the field of media literacy education part time ... when she's not taking photographs of flowers.