

Renewal in a Religious Community

Sisters of St. Joseph Hold General Chapter

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"Chapter" is the title traditionally given to an administrative meeting held by a religious community; it may be further specified as a "Chapter of Elections," "Chapter of Affairs," and so forth.

After the Second Vatican Council, all religious communities were advised to hold a special "Chapter of Renewal" in order to examine thoroughly their way of life and make any changes which they felt were necessary in order to render their lives and apostolic works more effective in the contemporary world.

During July, 1969, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester held their General Chapter of Renewal at Nazareth Academy, on Lake Avenue here in Rochester. There were forty-seven delegates to this Chapter, thirty-six of whom were elected by the Sisters of the Congregation, and eleven who were ex-officio members by reason of the administrative posts they hold in the Congregation.

There were also three young Sisters, aged 19, 27, and 28, representing their age groups; they had the right to speak but not to vote. The age levels of the elected delegates ranged from 30 to 60.

Mother Agnes Cecilia Troy, re-elected by the Chapter for a second six-year term as general superior of the Congregation, was president of the Chapter.

Preceding the actual convocation of the Chapter, all of the Sisters in the Congregation had been involved for over a year and a half in research, workshops, correspondence with other religious communities, and discussion with clergy and lay people as well as among themselves.

There were seventeen general areas of their study including administration, each of their apostolic works, care of the retired Sisters, spiritual and professional growth, finances, and vocations.

Among the advisers brought in during this time to address either the entire Congregation or the delegates specifically were:

Sister Kathryn Sullivan, R.S.C.J., a well-known Scripture scholar; Rev. Richard Hill, S.J., a theologian who has worked with several religious communities on their Chapters; Sister Agnes Sheehan, C.S.J., who spoke on virginity and community; Rev. Robert J. O'Connell, S.J., of the theology department of Fordham; Mrs. Peter Regenstreif, Ph.D., of the sociology department of Nazareth College; Dr. James Conway, of the University of Buffalo, who spoke on group dynamics; Rev. Ernest Larkin, O. Carm., theology department of Catholic University; Rev. Charles Schleck, C.S.C., research associate in Sister Formation Problems; George Cardinal Flahiff, C.S.B., who gave the key-note address on July 4; Mr. Michael Horn, one of the firm of accountants which prepares the Congregation's yearly financial report; Rev. Edward Stokes, S.J., a canon lawyer stationed at Mundelein Seminary in Illinois, who spent one week working with the delegates.

During the twenty-three days on which the delegates met to present, discuss and finally vote on the proposals sent in by the Sisters of the Congregation, observers from the Community were welcome. Over 200 Sisters were able to attend at least one of the sessions, and many returned for several of them.

The proposals were grouped into four general areas: "Life in a Consecrated Ecclesial Community," which included the topics of prayer, the



Mother Agnes Cecilia formally opened the Chapter on July 2, 1969.

rigorous vows, community living, and religious dress; "Preparation for Life in a Consecrated Ecclesial Community," which dealt with the "formation program" for the young Sisters and the on-going professional education and training of all the Sisters; the third section was on "The Apostolate" and was concerned with the total concept of apostolate as well as with the various works within that apostolate — educational, health, social, missionary, and future works; the final area was "Government," which explored the newer concepts of religious authority — collegiality, subsidiarity, accountability and responsibility — and the means to implement them.

The Chapter met once again on September 28 and formally closed this session, but provided for a second session to be held next summer. At this time, each area of experimentation will be evaluated and further decisions made.

General Goals of this Chapter:

To understand better the role of religious communities in general, and of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester in particular, in the Church and in the world today.

To make whatever changes or adaptations in the lives and works of the Sisters which seem necessary or useful in order to fill this role more effectively.

To determine by controlled experimentation what changes are necessary or useful in areas where there is, as yet, no clear agreement.

There had been some experimentation in a few areas even before the Chapter; most of this was ratified and, in many cases, increased by the Chapter.

Personal Freedom

Before this era of renewal and adaptation, the day of the Sisters was quite thoroughly regulated. Everyone rose and retired at the same hour, most prayers were said in common, meals and activities were pretty much centered in the convent and school (or hospital, for the Sister-nurse).

Increasingly in the past few years — and now further encouraged by the Chapter's approval — the individual Sister has been asked to be personally responsible for more and more of these actions, while at the same time her sphere of activities has widened out much more into the parish, the civic community, and her own family and friends.

On the surface this looks easier — "you can do what you want"; actually, given the values which a Sister must hold as essential — prayer, dedicated and professionally competent service, a life of truly Christian community — it is in many ways much more difficult to have to personally plan each day in such a way as to incorporate all of these values.

Apostolic Works

Most of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester are engaged in, and committed to the importance of, the apos-



Mother Agnes Cecilia greeted Cardinal Flahiff, C.S.B., Archbishop of Winnipeg who spoke to the Sisters on renewal based on prayer, the Scriptures, and vowed commitment.

tolate of education. They help to staff fifty-five elementary schools, five high schools, and one college in the Rochester diocese, in addition to Holy Childhood School for Exceptional Children, Nazareth Hall Cadet School, St. Joseph's Villa and Trinity Montessori School.

The other work in which the Congregation has been traditionally engaged is nursing; they run two hospitals, two nursing schools, and two homes for the aging, plus the 100-bed infirmary for their own sick and retired Sisters.

In the past few years, however, as new needs have arisen, more of the Sisters have branched off into other apostolic works — two in full-time Newman work at Ithaca College and R.I.T.; fourteen in full-time CCD, or parish assistant work, both in the city and rural areas; three are in the Urban Ministry and over thirty in other Inner-City work, primarily education; twelve are in Brazil in the Congregation's first foreign mission.

The numbers in these areas are still relatively small; however, the Congregation is open to the fact that constant evaluation of priorities in the many current needs of society is necessary.

Religious Habit

Three years ago the Congregation took its first steps toward modernizing the traditional religious garb by exchanging the long veil, starched headress and stiff gumpie, or "bib," for a simple hat-like headress and veil.

About a year and a half ago the Sisters were given the option of shortening their long habit skirts, and then of wearing any suitable black dress or suit with the simple headress and veil. This is the "official" religious dress of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, as ratified by the Chapter and as still worn by vast majority of the Congregation.

Because there is some evidence, however, that even such a modified religious garb is occasionally a barrier to communication — especially with young people and non-Catholics — twenty-one of the Sisters are experimenting until June 30, 1970, wearing contemporary dress at all times. These Sisters are of various ages and engaged in various works of the Community; they will evaluate for the Chapter, at its second session next summer, what they have found to be the advantages and disadvantages of wearing a dress which in no way distinguishes them as Sisters.

Formation Program

Until a few years ago, the girls who entered the St. Joseph Order were largely high school graduates and they came in rather large groups each

September, usually numbering around thirty and sometimes as many as fifty. Their program at the large East Avenue Motherhouse was a very definite one, with nine months as a Postulant, ordinarily attending college and dressed in a modified religious garb. They received the habit and a new name at the end of their Postulancy, spent a year as Canonical Novices, made temporary vows, and then usually went out to teach or on for more education.

Now so many things are different. The number of young women entering is smaller — thirteen last year, five this year. Many of them are older, with college or work experience behind them. Their "postulancy" is a very individual program which includes some weeks at a regular parish convent plus whatever work or study they would ordinarily be pursuing. Their dress is that of any modern girl.

Even the novitiate is different: there are no "religious" names; the novices are spending their novitiate year in a regular convent, adding shopping, cooking and general homemaking to their classes in Scripture, theology and philosophy. At the end of their novitiate, they may either make temporary vows — as the novices have in the past — or make a "promise" to live the life of a religious, hopefully to culminate in the making of perpetual vows from three to six years later.

Names and Living

There are other changes and experiments also: All of the Sisters were given the option of returning to their baptismal names or of retaining their religious ones. Either practice has a sound theological backing, although the latter has been more common for the past two or three hundred years. The idea of retaining one's Christian name emphasizes that entrance into religious life is an intensification of one's original vocation to be a Christian as signified in Baptism. To take a new name, on the other hand, emphasizes the equally true fact that one is following this Christian vocation along a new and different path. About 300 of the 900 Sisters in this Congregation have returned to their baptismal names.

Various experiments in improving the administration of the entire Congregation and of the individual convents include: greater emphasis on "house meetings" to decide matters of importance; "Commissions" in different areas such as Experimental Living, Spiritual Growth, Apostolic Works and On-Going Education; one group of six Sisters who are living for this year in a rented house on Hamilton Street and "starting from scratch" as far as religious life structures are concerned in order to see, if possible, what kind of community living evolves naturally in the contemporary situation.

The important thing to remember in all of these changes and adaptations is the reason for them — the very earnest desire on the part of the Congregation to provide for the kind of religious life necessary to serve today's needs; women of great faith and prayer; of vision and professional competence; of selfless and intelligent giving. These are values which endure; if the changes and adaptations the Sisters are making do not prove useful in attaining these goals, they hope to have the openness and honesty to try still other means.

AFFIRMATION

We, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, are religious women in the Church, who in response to the love of Jesus Christ, live out our baptismal consecration in a community of faith, hope and love, with the vows of virginity, poverty and obedience as the sign and mode of our consecration to the Most Holy Trinity.

Caught up in this Trinitarian Life and mystery, we live in community as persons, diverse and unique in our self-giving, but united in our shared openness to one another and to the Spirit who speaks in community.

In the spirit of our Trinitarian consecration, which gives a unique dimension to our service, we are committed to the service of the Church, living out the Paschal mystery as a fully apostolic community, and we share the Christian mission of the Church — to bring all men to Christ. Fortified by a deep personal devotion to the Eucharist, we strive to fulfill this mission by serving the people of God through education, care of the sick and all the other works of mercy, in the spirit of charity and humility.

Open to the Spirit and open to the world, the Institute is in process of renewing itself according to the norms of Vatican Council II:

The fundamental norm of the religious life is a following of Christ as proposed by the gospel. It serves the best interests of the Church for communities to have their own special character and purpose. Therefore loyal recognition and safekeeping should be accorded to the spirit of the founders, as also to all the particular goals and wholesome traditions which constitute the heritage of each community.

Perfectae Caritatis #21 a, b

The Institute seeks to deepen its awareness of its fundamental nature and purpose, while adjusting its life and work to the changing society in which we live.



Each area for discussion was presented by a different delegate, with Sister Jamesetta Slattery acting as general Chairman, and Sister Dorothy Ellen Muldoon as Parliamentarian.



Traveling microphones insured that every delegate's remarks would be heard. In the foreground are Sisters Elaine Ryan and Marion Hoctor.



Many of the daily observers were the young Sisters of the Community who often discussed points with the delegates during the breaks in the day's work.

Our work in the Chapter ought to begin with the renewal of our vision of God and our consecrated relationship to Him as individuals and as a Congregation. Only when the delineation of our identity and the perspective of our goals are sharpened, can we proceed. Unless the renewal the Church asks of us is a spiritual one, a renewal of heart and mind, the most desirable changes on behalf of contemporary needs will fail.

Opening address to Chapter given by Mother Agnes Cecilia Troy

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