

New Emphasis for Sisters of Mercy

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The Individual in Community

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"I don't like them in those short black dresses; they just don't look like nuns."

"I see Sisters at all sorts of places; don't they have to be in before dark anymore?"

"I never knew Sisters could have money; where is their sense of poverty?"

"Sisters should stay in their convents where they belong, not out traipsing the streets, getting involved with elections, racial issues and the like."

For the past five years, at least, these and similar statements have been heard, not only in reference

Mercy Apostolates

(Photos at top of page, 1 to 4.)

Sr. Marietta, Directress of Novices, first president of Mercy Sisters' Senate; Sr. Mary Sullivan, teaching English at R.I.T.; Sr. Catherine Pfeiffer, physical ed teacher at Mercy High; Sr. Theresa Margaret, specially trained coordinator of the new geriatrics program for retired Sisters, wheels one of the elderly into the Community Room; Sr. Mary Barbara, head of Mercy High's music department is currently directing music for Blackfriars' production of "Three Penny Opera"; Sr. Marie Raymond, psychiatric nurse for the Mercy Motherhouse, is consultant to the Steuben County Mental Health Clinic.

to the Sisters of Mercy in Rochester, but also about any religious women in any city who have begun the work of self-examination and renewal.

The "soul-searching" of the Rochester Sisters of Mercy Congregation formally came about in a carefully prepared Chapter of Affairs, June, '67 to April, '69.

Unfortunately, for the most part what the ordinary layman has seen and made judgment upon are some of the external physical changes — probably the least important aspect of renewal — but external long associated wrongly, as being intrinsically necessary to the state of "sisterhood."

What the layman has not seen is the serious research, fact-finding, discussion, prayer, and change of attitude which led to the deeper internal changes that motivated the external differences.

The Sisters of Mercy's renewal program is a part of the whole movement in the Church. In 1965 when Vatican II concluded, a special plea went out to all Congregations of Religious Men and Women to renew from within, and in so doing, become more relevant without. The "how" was partially spelled out in the "Constitution on the Church," and more specifically in the "Decree on Renewal of Religious Life."

The Sisters of Mercy of the Rochester Diocese had already shown some signs of exterior change even before and during the Council sessions. Their first major step in 1954 had been the updating of their Constitutions which had been originally designed for a contemplative congregation, not an active one. The second step was the five-year study of their "18th-century-style habit," culminating in the adoption of a simplified revised garb in 1965.

The extensive work of renewal was done in the Community's Chapter, convened in June, 1967.

After several months of preparatory Commission work, and nearly two years of regular delegates' meetings, the Chapter finally concluded in April, 1969. Many of the decisions of the Chapter were already under experimentation by the end of the two-year period, since the group had agreed that any proposal adopted would go into effect as soon as the mechanics could be worked out.

Despite some mistakes, and the tedious slowness inherent in democratic government, the delegates felt that major progress had been made. Mother Mary Bride, the Superior General, herself said: "The base of this renewal is broad enough to permit removal of old non-essentials of our Constitutions; at the same time it is flexible enough to allow the elimination of that which experimentation may prove ineffectual or harmful."

Probably the most basic concept that came out of the Sisters' deliberations, and is already evident in all phases of their religious life endeavors—formation, education, apostolates, community and spiritual life—is the emphasis upon the **INDIVIDUAL IN COMMUNITY.**

One must have the personal freedom to study, pray, work, recreate in the framework of her own personality. Then her growth, if necessary, will contribute to the growth of the whole Congregation.

COMMUNITY LIFE

GUIDELINES:

Community Life in each local house must be a shared experience of unity in essentials, respect for diversity, and mutual love and acceptance. In reference to the first point, the Sisters need to come together for some worship, meals, and creative leisure to be supportive of a common bond; however, there must be a respect for each individual and for her need for diversity within the community, as well as respect for diversity even among the several local communities.

EXPERIMENTATION:

Housing—After the Superior General and her Council have made the annual appointments, a Sister may choose the group of Sisters she would like to live with for the year, subject to the approval of the Council and the Experimentation Committee. She may choose (a) to relate very specifically to a small "sub-group" within a large community where she is already appointed for the year; (b) to join a small group and move into a large convent with a large community, subject to the approval of the Pastor, and the Sisters already stationed there; (c) to initiate the opening of a new "convent dwelling" with other Sisters. Such a choice would be made, considering the problems of finance, transportation, apostolate, obligations to the Congregation etc.

Example: A few young Sisters have elected to live in small convents rather than the Motherhouse.

Government—At the expiration of the term of the local superior, a community may choose the form of government they wish to live under for one year. The options include (a) the nomination and election of a superior; (b) the nominations of a few and have the General Council appoint one from among them to be superior; (c) the decision to accept an appointment by the General Council; (d) the decision to have complete collegial government.

Example: Cardinal Mooney High School Faculty elected a superior and committees to share the responsibility with her; St. Charles Convent chose complete collegial government.

Clothing—Under the supervision of the Experimentation Committee, the Sisters may choose to wear contemporary dress with their religious veil. The style of dress is limited to four possibilities, and the colors are black, grey, brown or blue.

In a few instances, under a controlled experiment situation, some Sisters are "testing" the need for the veil as a religious symbol by not wearing the veil at all. Somewhat more leeway is possible for a single instance, and for vacation time. The habit experimentation is under constant revision.

Example: The Sisters at Good Shepherd Convent wear no specific mark of religious life, e.g. the veil, with their contemporary dress.

Poverty—(a) In keeping with the new theological thinking about the vows—in this case, poverty, the Sisters may elect to go "on the budget." Such an arrangement gives the Sisters an opportunity to share in the burdens of the community's finances, to feel dependent upon one another, to have more opportunity for per-

sonal decisionmaking, to experience the problems of the laity and to exercise voluntary poverty. The budget must take care of their contemporary dress, entertainment, personal supplies.

The Congregation still takes care of room, board and medical needs, as well as family emergencies. The amount of money allotted to each Sister is decided by the community and is essentially the same for all members of the Congregation.

(b) Individual groups of Sisters may agree to experiment by opening their convent homes to lay people for one reason or another. They may (a) occasionally give hospitality to lay women; (b) rent rooms to suitable women for a limited period; (c) house foster children until they can be placed; (d) arrange for retreats. These are always subject to the approval of the Sisters living in that community, of the Pastor, and of the Experimentation Committee.

Example: Holy Family Convent in Auburn has cared for foster children until they were placed. Young working girls occasionally stay at the Mercy novitiate until they can secure an apartment.

GOVERNMENT AND FORMATION

GUIDELINES:

The government of the Mercy Congregation is vested in the General Chapter (when it is in session), in the Superior General and her Council, in the Local Superior and/or the Local Community and in the individual.

All of these exercise the authority of the new thinking on obedience—radically Christian—which demands complete openness and attention to the call of God, speaking through the Community, the Church and Society.



Sister Mary Bonaventure, vice-principal, Mercy High School, is a Senate member and heads the Congregation's Finance Committee.

EXPERIMENTATION:

In addition to the opportunities that the Sisters have in community (note Community Life above) to choose the form of government under which they wish to live, the Chapter set up a new governing board called The Senate that would function at the highest level with the Superior General and her Council until the next Chapter. During this two-year period of experimentation, the Sen-

ate of 15 members acts only in an advisory capacity to the Council.

Example: The Senate is currently making an in-depth study of the Congregation's educational works with a view to recommending a re-allotment of personnel. This is a valuable study in the light of the dearth of vocations and the financial problems of Catholic Schools.

Formation—The Formation Program of the Sisters of Mercy as provided for under the section on Government is also under a period of experimentation. The four Directresses of the Postulants, Novices, Temporary and Renewed Professed Form a Team of Formation. Together with the Congregation's psychologist, and a representative from the General Council, they work out the total Formation program of a Sister from the time she joins the Congregation until she is a finally Professed Sister. Team methods provide greater continuity, flexibility, and mutual support in providing for the long-range needs of the young members of the community.

Example: Girls aspiring to become Sisters of Mercy are not accepted until they have pursued some higher education; or have had the equivalency in work experience. Interested young women just out of high school may engage in a pre-entrance program affiliated with the Formation Team.

Former barriers of separation between the young sisters and the professed sisters are being removed. Aspirants now have an opportunity to see and actually work with Sisters in various apostolates right from the beginning. The Sisters no longer take vows all together, but as the individual and the community decide together that she is prepared.

THE APOSTOLATE

GUIDELINES:

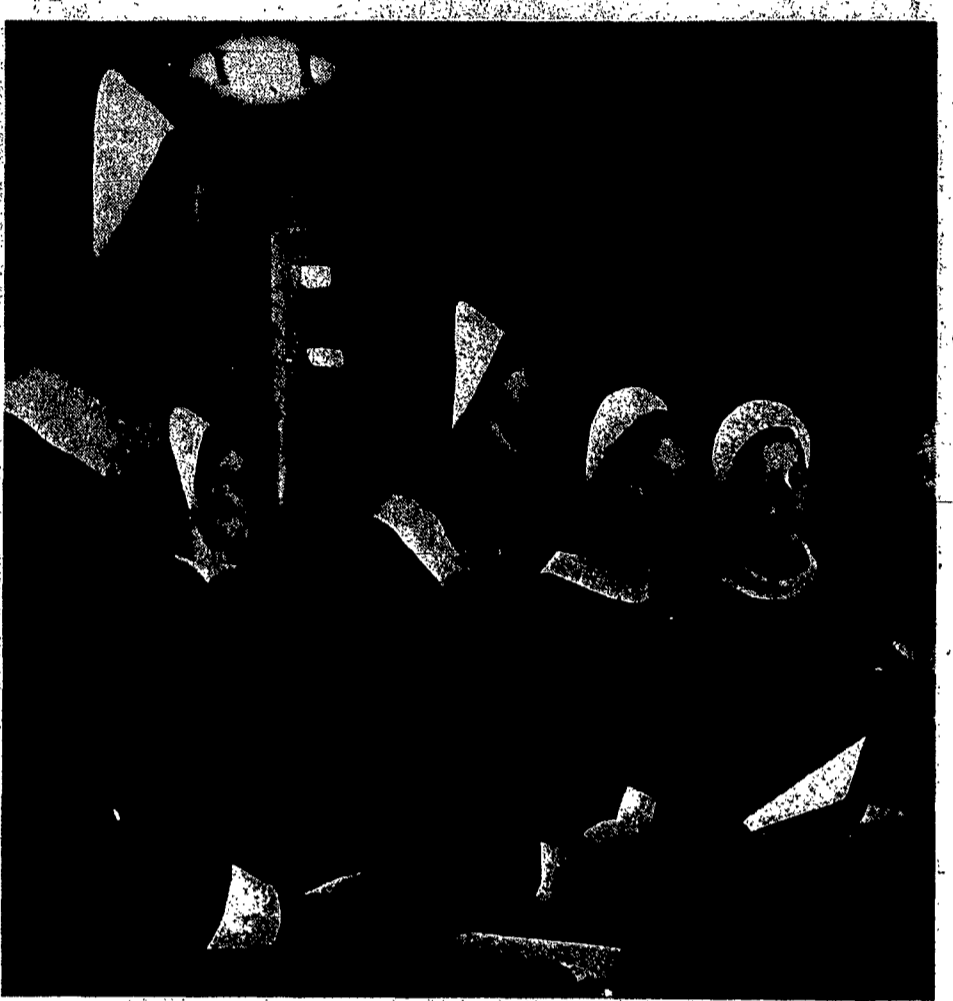
Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy, in Dublin, Ireland in 1831, was a woman of great vision, and indeed, an inspiration for her own time and for our time. Her basic philosophy of service was to see the needs of the people she served wherever she was, and to adapt her work as well as possible to meet those needs.

The Chapter, inspired by her words and her life, reaffirmed their determination through consecrated service to the Church, to keep Christ alive in the contemporary world by leading lives marked by (a) complete commitment; (b) relevance to the times; (c) availability; (d) identification with others' needs; (e) flexibility; (f) generosity and love.

EXPERIMENTATION:

Education—The Sisters have the privilege of asking to study and to determine the field of endeavor that they wish to pursue. Further, Sisters already degreed may ask to attend in-service classes and summer workshops. This is determined both by questionnaires and interviews.

Works—As in the case of education, the Sisters also have the right to ask to pursue a particular kind of work, to be moved to a different location, to be relieved of a specific work or assignment—this again through questionnaires and interviews.



Sisters Jean Marie (foreground), Daine James, Josephine De Lillo, Kathline Kolb and Elizabeth Milliken (rear) were part of a singing group in a recent ecumenical program at Christ Clarion Church, Pittsford.

Example: A number of Sisters are now in works that are needed for these times—works that were not undertaken previously. In addition, Sisters are doing the kind of work for which they were trained before joining the Congregation; e.g. teaching physical education, operating an inner-city storefront etc.

SPIRITUAL LIFE

GUIDELINES:

The spiritual growth of each Sister in the Congregation is of primary concern, since her spirituality is the very essence of her being in a religious congregation, and is the motivating factor for all of the rest of her life. The Chapter recognized the need for each Sister to pray individually and personally. They also recognized the need for some specific norms to be used by the various communities in their experimenting with new methods of praying separately and together.

EXPERIMENTATION:

Individual community groups and individual sisters themselves have

been completely free in working out the best times and places to pray both in community together and privately. A Sister is expected to make some kind of retreat, but she may go where she wishes; she may make a full six days at one time, or a day or two at a time, and this, alone, or with other Sisters or even with lay people. Her celebration of the Eucharist may be with her religious Sisters, with her parish community or with friends in a home.

She may pray the Divine Office with a formal group in chapel, or with a small group in an ordinary room, or on occasion, by herself. Her choice of spiritual reading, confessor, meditation time are her own. Superiors, and community groups are continually making opportunities available to suit the desires and needs of every Sister.

Example: The Summer of 1969, a group of eight Sisters experimented for six weeks in a contemplative-type atmosphere on a large estate overlooking Seneca Lake. The property and house were recently given to the Sisters of Mercy to be used for just such experimentation.

SISTERS OF MERCY—Personnel and Works

Total number of Sisters	432
Postulants and Novices	19
Semi-retired, retired or infirm	34
Teaching (Elementary, High School, College, or Tutoring)	253
Medical (Nursing, Administering or Related work)	26
CCD or Home Visitation Work	7
Foreign Missions (Chile)	6
Home Missions (Rochester Poverty Areas)	6
Diocesan Appointments	4
Congregation Administration or Sister Formation	15
Fulltime Study (Professed Sisters)	24
House supervision or Cooking in Convents	12
Specialized Fields	12
On Leave of Absence	4

Institutions	
Elementary Schools	31
(Rochester 18; Auburn 1; Bath 1; Clyde 1; Corning 2; Elmira 5; Hornell 1; Newark 1; Owego 1)	
High Schools	3
(Rochester 2; Elmira 1)	
Hospitals	1
(Hornell)	
Motherhouse Infirmary School of Nursing	1
(Hornell)	
School of X-Ray Technology	1
(Hornell)	
Missions	3
(Chile 1; Joseph Avenue 1; Mt. Carmel Parish 1)	
Diocesan Education Office	1
Diocesan Family Center	1
Kings Preparatory Special Education	1
(McAuley Reading Laboratory, Speech Clinic and Testing Center)	

MOTHER M. BRIDE Superior General	
Specialized Fields	
OEO Headstart Program	
Monroe County Health Department, Public Health Nurse	
Newman Club Work, Cornell University	
R.I.T. Instructor in English	
Mercy College, Pittsburg, Instructor in English	
Highland Hospital, Nursing Instructor	
Strong Memorial Hospital, Speech Therapist	
Diocesan Board of Urban Ministry	
Urban-Suburban Transfer Plan, Component Part of Project UNIQUE Reading Specialist	
Monroe County Science Curriculum Coordinator	
Atlanta University Multi-Purpose Training Center, Senior Training Officer	
Staff, Psycho-therapist, Steuben County Mental Health Clinic	



Sister Helen Marie, licensed radio operator, coordinates radio and written contacts with the Mercy Sisters in Santiago, Chile. Two happy recipients of her messages are Sisters Janet Korn (left) and Mary Jane Nelson (who is now working for the Urban Ministry in Rochester).

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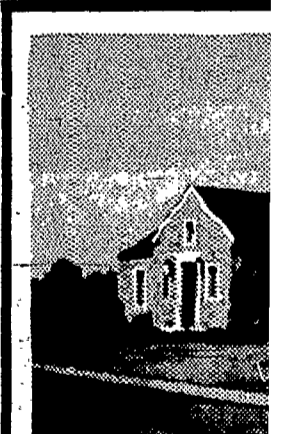
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