

New-fashioned Sisters

By Sister Prudence Allen, RSM
NC News Service

Nearly 20 years after the Second Vatican Council called for the renewal of religious orders, many women Religious have taken significant steps into new areas of professional life.

The renewal of religious orders meant constantly returning to the sources of Christian life, studying the intentions of the religious order's founders and adapting this to "the changed conditions of our time," according to Vatican II.

This call back to the order's foundations and forward into the needs of today's world has released many members of women's religious orders into previously undreamed of fields of study and work.

Women Religious who are educators often complete a doctoral degree in their particular field — whether this is creative drama, mathematics, computer science, or special education.

And that includes nuns in contemplative monasteries, who can be found today with advanced degrees in animal science, horticulture, music, classics and art. This training enables their communities to carry forward centuries-old traditions that link farming, scholarship and the prayer of the church.

Today Sisters in health-care are becoming physicians with specialities in psychiatry or surgery. In addition, the nursing vocation is being developed to its

full academic potential when Sisters complete master's degrees or doctorates in nursing-home administration, health-care organization or speech pathology.

And Sisters are moving into entirely new fields of professional work by becoming lawyers, bank managers, even morticians.

This movement of women Religious into the highest professional training completely shatters the stereotypes which grew up around nuns over the years. Often Sisters were thought to be undereducated for their work.

However, beginning in the 1940s in the United States, a movement for the education of Sisters was organized. Some 20 years later, in its Constitution on the Church, Vatican II encouraged all Catholics who work in the marketplace to aim toward professional excellence.

Professional excellence enables women Religious to better fulfill their call to rebuild the earth by extending God's creative activity. At the same time, the thrust toward professional excellence demands significant adjustments by Sisters themselves and by others.

For Sisters, these opportunities open up a whole new range of possibilities for growth. Interestingly, this development holds possibilities for complementary relations in professional areas with laity and priests.

At the same time it also brings new challenges. For example, with highly developed skills the woman Religious has to guard against slipping into a more isolated and egocentric life. Burn-out becomes a risk for Religious as it is for others.

In speaking with women Religious who face these challenges, it becomes clear that they find it important to link developments in their professional lives with an equally intense renewal of their life as a community.

Renewal of the life they live together as Religious means giving a central place to the Mass — the shared daily Eucharist — and to prayer.

Community life links prayer and work. It enables Sisters to remain consecrated women as they respond inwardly and outwardly to Christ's call to rebuild the earth.

Vibrant community life becomes the wellspring out of which the professional lives of women Religious flow.

(Sister Allen teaches philosophy at Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.)

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in genuine self-esteem."

The educator related a true story to illustrate how this can work. She told of an older woman whose position as provincial superior of her religious order brought her into contact with many clergy and the bishop in her diocese.

They regarded this sister highly, Sister Collins said, because of her resourcefulness and her talent, especially in human relationships. She also had a gift for handling difficult situations delicately.

The sister's term of office ended when she was 60 years old. But, instead of retiring or taking an easier position in the community, she decided to strike off in a brand new direction, Sister Collins said. With the strong encouragement of her associates among the clergy, the older woman returned to school and ultimately earned a degree in canon law.

Today she is engrossed in a new career working as a canon lawyer in an archdiocese, Sister Collins said.

—The sister is quite aware of the large role played by her associates in helping her to recognize her talents, Sister Collins commented.

—And now the sister is in a position "to enhance the dignity of others by encouraging them to use their gifts."

What does it mean to talk about human dignity? For Benedictine Sister Mary Collins, a theologian, human dignity means "acknowledging the value and worth of each person."

It involves coming to recognize that each individual has some measure of truth and some wisdom, some gifts and potential to be developed over a lifetime, she said during a recent interview.

An awareness of human dignity leads people to continually expand their horizons, Sister Collins indicated. Recently she relinquished her position on the faculty at The Catholic University of America to become a founding member of Holy Wisdom Monastery, a new Benedictine foundation for women in the Raleigh, N.C., diocese.

Awareness of human dignity has another dimension which sometimes is overlooked, Sister Collins commented. Christians can't simply advance their own careers and develop their own talents at the expense of other people's rights. Christians need to cultivate a "mutual recognition of human worth," she insisted.

One way Christians do this, she continued, is by "creating a social climate for people to explore their potentials and gifts." Sister Collins is convinced that many individuals need the encouragement of others to "gain

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1. The life of a woman of the church today is often complex and generous, writes Dolores Leckey. What does she mean?

2. Special emphasis is placed these days on the value in the personal gifts — the talents, the contributions — of all the members of the Christian community. Why?

3. So much is heard today about the personal dignity of all the members of the human family. What is meant when church leaders speak about human "dignity"?

4. What career directions are some women Religious taking today, 20 years after Vatican Council II, as Mercy Sister Prudence Allen points out?

SECOND HELPINGS

The church's ministry to women who are poor, women "often hidden — on the other side of town, in apartments or poor housing, on winding rural roads and in countless forms of isolation," is among concerns discussed by Bishop Matthew Clark of Rochester, N.Y., in a pastoral letter on women in the church titled "The Fire in the Thornbush." For the church, Bishop Clark suggests, recognizing the gifts of women is a means of fostering the church's unity. This can be accomplished in a spirit of reconciliation. Instead of choosing opposing sides, he hopes people will be "eager to understand one another" and that disagreements will be "seen in the wider context of values shared." (The Diocese of Rochester, Bishop's Office, 1150 Buffalo Rd., Rochester, N.Y. 14624. Single copy, no charge. Inquire for rates on multiple copies.)

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herself has been of help to many, including myself."

The little we know of Phoebe suggests that she may well have been a bearer of a message sent by Paul to some community or communities he founded.

And we know she was actively involved in the church's work of service. She was among those in the early church who were to make sure that the poor were fed and clothed, and that the community's money was distributed to those in need.

You might say she had an important work of social service to fulfill on behalf of the church, a work the early church valued highly.

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