



# NUNS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By Sister Prudence Allen, RSM  
NC News Service

Do people of this modern age of information risk drowning in a sea of data? John Naisbitt posed questions like that in his best-selling book titled "Megatrends," an examination of ways we all are affected by the contemporary age of electronic information.

Naisbitt pointed to a need he sees today for leaders who can point the way beyond simple information to genuine knowledge. As a university professor and a member of a women's religious order, I can relate to that.

For I consider it important to help my students find rudders they can use to steer as they attempt to evaluate the enormous mass of information directed their way in a technological society.

And as I consider the future of women's religious orders, one of the many questions I ask is this: How will Sisters become leaders in a highly technological world?

Why would a woman choose to enter a religious order today?

For many, it is an opportunity to follow a specific kind of consecrated life in a community of adults. The vows Sisters take — chastity, poverty, obedience — bind them in a special way to Christ and to each other.

For Sisters, life in a community is crucial to growth. In the context of community life, persons challenge each other to keep on

developing spiritually and professionally. They pray together. They support and encourage each other.

It was in the "Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life" that Vatican Council II challenged religious communities to adjust "to the changed conditions of the times."

The document urged members of religious orders not only to sharpen their ties with their founders, but to adjust to changed conditions in society, serving the needs of people in a particular time and in particular places.

Some help for doing this might be found in several contemporary books which try to predict the shape of the future world. An example: Naisbitt's "Megatrends."

After studying thousands of newspapers, Naisbitt identified a range of new influences transforming our lives.

Moreover, Naisbitt thinks that a religious revival is linked to this period of transition, at least in North America. And he believes this offers a unique opportunity for leadership.

What is needed, he suggests, is "a clear sense, a clear conception, a clear vision of the road ahead."

Just think of the need for that kind of vision in the area of health care, for example. Modern medical wonders often leave people bewildered. As they face major decisions about the care of loved

ones, they may feel they are equipped with much information but little real knowledge.

In an age of information, will professionally trained Sisters provide more and more leadership for people caught up in difficult medical situations?

Naisbitt's book is about the shift from an industrial to an information-based society. He believes this is as radical a shift for society as the earlier shift from an agricultural to an industrial-based society.

Because of dangerous work environments found in many factories at the start of the industrial age, many workers were injured on the job. Many suffered from the work conditions. So religious orders stepped in, providing medical care for workers and their families.

Similarly, when the world enters the 21st century it probably will not be surprising to see Sisters who not only are grounded in a solid religious formation, but are experts in computer technology as well.

Naisbitt writes: "We must learn to balance the material wonders of technology with the spiritual demands of our human nature." Perhaps inadvertently, his insight casts light on a role for Sisters in the 21st century.

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

## A little

By Katharine Bird  
NC News Service

When it comes to directing retreats for the homeless and the poor "our aim is to address people where they are — to be open and hospitable," said Ursuline Sister Elinor Shea.

"We provide an oasis, an atmosphere of peace" for people used to crowded conditions and a hectic pace of life, she added.

Sister Shea was talking about her work at The Little Portion, a retreat house opened in 1982 during the 800th anniversary of the birth of St. Francis of Assisi. It is in the South Bronx, an economically depressed area of New York City.

Sister Shea explained that the retreats are offered without charge to the poor to complement other efforts for the hungry and homeless. "We work most directly with people in the area, as well as those who minister to them," she said.

Volunteers cook and clean at The Little Portion so that the guests have time to "experience God's care for them," Sister Shea said.

The poor, she commented, "often have a rich deep faith in God and God's providence" that they share with the staff persons at the retreat house.

## Models

By Father John Castelot  
NC News Service

For almost three centuries the first Christians lived as small, close-knit groups. They were able — in fact they were forced — to meet in each other's homes for worship and mutual support. They knew each other, loved each other, saw to each other's spiritual and material needs.

And they put themselves at the disposal of the group. Thus Paul could remind his converts at Corinth:

"To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good...The body is one and has many members, but all the members, many though they are, are one body; and so it is with Christ...If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members share his joy." (1 Cor. 12:7, 12, 26-27).

This cohesiveness made for a vital experience of Christian living within the group. It also exerted a powerful influence on those outside the group, who could not help noticing the love, the joy