

'THE CHANGED LIFE

Women Religious in Tra

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The cloistered life is far behind them now, relegated for many apostolic religious congregations to a distant past gradually altered by the passing centuries, even before the watershed of the Second Vatican Council. Since then, their dress has changed, their lifestyles have, sometimes almost imperceptibly, relaxed.

The women religious of the last quarter of the 20th century live out their vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience in a modern world. The effects on their once regimented way of life are multiple, yet the causes can be narrowed down, by most accounts, to one: *renewal*, that controversial edict promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965.

"Renewal of the religious life," proclaimed the decree, "includes: return to the sources of Christian life, return to the original spirit of the institutes, and their adaptation to the changed life of our time — The manner of living, praying and working should be adapted: to the modern physical and psychological circumstances of the community members, and, to the necessities of apostolate, culture, and social and economic circumstances. Let constitutions, custom books, prayers, etc., be re-edited, suppressing obsolete laws."

That women religious have taken the particulars of this momentous decree fully to heart is evident on a far more meaningful level than the purely superficial. "A lot has happened, as far as religious life is concerned, in the last 15 years," says Sister Muriel Curran, vicar for religious in the Diocese of Rochester and a School Sister of Notre Dame. "Most of what the people in the pews see is external. Since the renewal, we've moved from that almost monastic cloister to a position of greater visibility in the community."

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The deceptively simple directives of Vatican II — living the consecrated life according to gospel values, returning to the founding charisms of their orders, and rejuvenating their faith lives according to the signs of the times — have altered considerably more than habits, of either dress or custom. Deeply ingrained traditions, rules, methods of government, and collective as well as individual apprehensions of mission have all basked in the heady air of what Pope John XXIII referred to as "spiritual springtime." The once purely contemplative, dependent, and closeted atmosphere of religious life will never be quite the same again.

For apostolic communities, both of women and men religious, the call to renewal was a universal challenge interpreted in various ways, according to the orientation of various orders. "Renewal itself is internal to each congregation," explains Sister Muriel, whose job as Vicar for Religious entails assisting Bishop Clark in his pastoral care and concern for all men and women religious in the diocese, according to a directive to all U.S. bishops issued several years ago by Pope John Paul II.

Although a number of apostolic women's communities in the diocese of Rochester have observed the renewal over the past 20 years,

Sister Muriel cites the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Sisters of Mercy as the most influential local communities. Certainly more numerous than their counterparts in other orders, these sisters have, in Sister Muriel's estimation, "pointed the direction" for others equally dedicated.

"Truly I think they were the cutting edge — committed, dedicated to a quality of life," she offers. "They balance well a seriousness with

which they take renewal and a commitment to the Church."

Returning to the spiritual origins of such committed communities often involved taking a serious look at individual histories either distorted or crystallized by the passage of time. As Sister Beatrice Ganley, SSJ, describes it, "Each congregation is... unique, in a sense, because of its history." There are, however, common threads, and the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph reveals a number of parallels to that of other communities.

"The directions from the Vatican suggested that religious try to renew their congregations," explains Sister Beatrice, director of public relations for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester. "In order to do that, we felt a need to go back to our roots. In the beginning, when our community was formed, there were not as many restrictions."

The congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph originated in the middle of the 17th century in LePuy en Valay, France. Francoise Eyraud and five other women, with the spiritual guidance of John Peter Medaille, SJ, and the pastoral support of Bishop Henri de Maupas, formed a religious institute whose nature was active rather than contemplative. These sisters and their followers were committed to serving all without distinction, and were open to undertaking any work that their times demanded and of which they were capable.

"In the 17th century, women did not live

become more or less established. We were wearing the habit; we had letters of approval from the king," says Sister Beatrice.

The community reemerged under the guidance of Sister St. John Fontbonne, four of whose Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet later left France to join the American missionary movement, settling in Canandaigua in 1854. In 1868, the Diocese of Rochester was founded. With the support of Bishop Bernard McQuaid, the congregation grew and its members became the bulwark of a parochial school system then in its infancy.

Our narrowing down to education was a divergence," says Sister Beatrice, who adds that Bishop McQuaid chose the SSJs for this work, ironically, because they had traditionally been open to participating in a wide variety of ministries. Although the order became primarily a teaching community, it retained its diverse nature in part by continuing the nursing ministry begun when members staffed an orphanage located where St. Mary's Hospital now stands. Some members branched out into social work, while others founded a mission in Selma, Alabama, in the 1940s.

alone," Sister Beatrice points out. "Only the daughters of the upper class people had entered the religious life previously. Just as women would have dowries in order to be married, they had to have dowries to enter a religious order. All were cloistered. Some orders ran schools for upper-class children, but never left the convent."

The six French women who founded the Sisters of St. Joseph were not only members of the lower classes, but several of them were illiterate, and all left the convent daily to work among the people of the parishes. "Some worked with the poor, with prostitutes, in prisons," says Sister Beatrice. "This was unheard-of, to be uncloistered, not of the upper classes. Our roots are very much among the common people."

These first Sisters of St. Joseph lived simply in small communities, working often as lacemakers, makers of ribbons, or watchers by the bedsides of the dying. They wore no specific sign to distinguish them from the women they served. "Wearing of monastic garb was not part of our history," says Sister Beatrice. "Yet we started dressing like French widows of the 17th century." What was later mandated the official SSJ habit had its simple origins as "widows' weeds," the mourning garb of the sisters comforted in their daily work.

"There's always been a tension between movements within the Church that are considered revolutionary and the more conservative hierarchy of the Church," asserts Sister Beatrice. "This explains why we ended up looking like 17th-century women in the 19th century."

A good deal of the order's history was obscured by the onset of the French Revolution, when a number of the sisters were persecuted or martyred, and many primary documents were destroyed. "By the time of the Revolution, we had



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Story by Emily Morrison; Photo