

LIFE OF OUR TIME'

in Transition: A 20th Anniversary Retrospective of Renewal

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During the 1950s, according to Sister Beatrice, a period of ferment began among women religious. The Sister Formation Movement, during which sisters underwent professional preparation for entering their assigned ministries, led to an influx of new ideas that spawned "desires to do less traditional things."

Just before Vatican II, Belgian Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens published a book entitled "The Nun in the World," described by Sister Beatrice as espousing "lots of visionary things that don't sound so visionary now." Still, Cardinal Suenens' manuscript was like an invigorating breath of Pope John XXIII's "springtime" air to thousands of women religious. Many had chafed for years under restrictions, curfews, and rigid rules born of centuries of what the cardinal described as outmoded notions no longer appropriate to apostolic religious communities in a modern world.

Once Vatican II directed religious communities to return to the original spirit of their institutes, many Sisters of St. Joseph made pilgrimages of sorts to France, where they translated original documents to seek affirmation for what they wanted to become, says Sister Beatrice.

Adaptation became as important a concept as renewal, and this led to gradual modification of apparel.

"On these humid days," said Sister Beatrice one August day in the SSJ Motherhouse, "you can imagine that wearing yards of serge and starched linen wouldn't be terribly comfortable. The habit changed gradually. First we eliminated the rosary beads that hung at our sides, and the linen around the face, and then we shortened the habit." Black skirts and white blouses followed, as well as street clothing worn on vacation.

In 1970, when the Sisters of St. Joseph were wearing a modified habit and still discussing whether to go into completely non-distinguishable dress, Sister Beatrice says she encountered a man on a city bus who confronted her on the issue of her altered looks. "Please don't change," he pleaded, adding that he and others felt sisters should not abandon the symbolic aspects of the traditional habit. "Other sisters came home with stories about people who approved, who felt more comfortable with our new dress," says Sister Beatrice.

The official position on such matters, she adds, was "as varied as the number of bishops in the Church." Many, she says, are surprised that things have changed as much as they have. A number of bishops still believe that women religious should be distinguished by a sign that sets them apart from other women.

This, she feels, underscores the difference between the European and American traditions. "The attitude that women are submissive and do what they're told is more commonly an assumption in Europe than in America," she offers. Such traditions as arranged marriages and the medieval notion that a woman must be either married or cloistered (protected, as Michael Novak wrote in "The New Nuns," a 1967 anthology, by "either a man or a wall") were rather summarily dispatched by New World democracy. Yet "that more rigid orientation" of the European context, says Sister Beatrice, is still shared by the pope and many in the Church hierarchy.

"We're not that different from the rest of society," Sister Beatrice maintains. "All women are going through the experience of breaking out and doing new things and then being restricted by whoever the establishment is, whether men or women. I think women have often held themselves back, as well."

The renewal progressed at approximately the same rate for other communities, which simultaneously went through such upheavals with varying degrees of rapidity and success. There was opposition as well as support from

orientation to the signs of the times.

Restrictions on living arrangements have frequently been relaxed to allow modern sisters to more fully enact their vow of poverty and live closer to the people to whom they minister. Rules of silence and methods of internal government have been sometimes radically altered, and the practice of routine assignment of ministries has been largely abandoned in favor of a freer choice.

Rochester's Sisters of Mercy have readily embraced the definitive charism of foundress Catherine McAuley, who vowed "to extend God's love and mercy to the poor, the sick, and the ignorant." This return to gospel values has encouraged Sisters of Mercy to significantly expand their sense of mission, particularly to oppressed Third World countries. "With the new freedom came a new responsibility," explains Sister Elaine Kolesnik, director of public relations for the Rochester Sisters of Mercy.

The Mercy ministry in Chile is paralleled by a similar St. Joseph mission in Brazil, and a School Sister of Notre Dame ministry elsewhere in Latin America. In the words of an anonymous SSJ correspondent from Brazil, the 1971 synod on "Justice in the World" caused "the other in the I-thou relationship" to assume "a specific face: the face of the poor and oppressed."

This divergent sense of mission in the modern world is directly descended from the directive of Vatican II. "We all share in affecting that vision of how the Church is calling us all to share in the spiritual life of the community," says Sister Elaine. A shared sense of shaping the direction taken by the renewal has led, she says, to a far more-democratic and less-centralized congregational government than the pre-Vatican II "pyramid" model, which vested sole authority in the major superior.

"The Church is the people of God," says Sister Elaine, who is currently involved in a major effort to rewrite the Mercy constitution. "Instead of seeing ourselves as participants in the apostolate of the hierarchy, we're all involved in carrying on the life of the Church, called to minister to each other."

As one Sister of Mercy expressed her opinion of the upheaval that has fomented such a variety of changes in the life of women religious: "In the light of Vatican II, we all have a role in shaping the Church — and part of that role may be in dissent."

Sister Elaine believes that the renewal is hardly over, even 20 years after the revolutionary edict changed religious life forever. "We are still in a period of radical transition," she concludes. "Vatican II only ended 20 years ago. In the words

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

individual members. "Some communities split; some members left, because it wasn't what they expected. Life was no longer stable and predictable," says Sister Beatrice. "For those of us for whom it seemed to answer something that was stirring within us, the change was fine. For those who were (already) satisfied, they couldn't see any reason for it, or understand what all the fuss was about."

Although membership in women's communities has rather sharply declined in modern times, and not nearly as many young women are answering the call to a religious vocation, many communities are actively seeking to make changes that might encourage such vocations. Beyond the superficial aspect of dress are many less-visible differences in

of Sister Jeanne Marie Kearse, our superior general, you can't go back.

"This is what the Lord is calling us to," Sister Elaine affirms, "and who knows where it will end?"

Next week, read Part II of this series overview, a discussion with Sister Muriel Curran, SSND, (diocesan vicar for religious) of the effects of renewal on rules, personal autonomy and interdependence, the altered sense of mission, and the internal structures of communities of women religious. The series will examine the changing ministries and living arrangements of individual sisters in the diocese.



Part I of a Series Morrison; Photo-illustration by Jeff Goulding

