

# 'THE CHANGED LIFE Women Religious in Transition A 20th



In the simple yet dignified setting of her office in the Diocesan Pastoral Center, Sister Muriel Curran, SSND, Bishop Matthew H. Clark's appointed vicar for religious, sits facing into the filtered sunlight of a late summer afternoon. She speaks, pauses a moment in quiet reflection, and goes on, searching for words that will adequately describe the monumental spirit of the changes wrought in the lives of women religious almost 20 years ago by Vatican Council II.

Such words are not easy to find, for the historic Decree on Renewal of Religious Life dramatically altered considerably more than the face the Catholic Church presents to the outside world. As we noted last week, 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."

In order to convey in a truly accurate light the penetrating nature of changes that transcend obvious differences in dress or custom, it becomes necessary to take an incisive look at what lies under the visible surface of renewal. Habits change or vary; wimples, coifs, and veils are modified or disappear altogether, but the very heart of the matter has little to do with these externals seen by parishioners in the pews.

Consider the following observation made by Father J.B. Libanio, SJ, of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where members of the Rochester community of Sisters of St. Joseph operate a mission that ministers to the poor: "In the 18th and 19th centuries, a new person emerged in the world, primarily as a result of the Industrial Revolution. In the Church, this new person appeared with the application of Vatican II. Before Vatican II, we (had) a pre-modern subject in the Church. The distance is greater between a religious who entered in 1950 and one who entered in 1980 than between one who entered in 1950 and one who entered in 1650."

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Sister Muriel Curran, SSND

That such an evolutionary leap should occur in a mere 30 years, after 300 years of relative stasis, is indicative of how truly staggering the underlying effects of renewal have been. The causes are multiple and widely varied, yet many observers would agree that the New World seems to have a corner on the more radical results. As Sister Beatrice Ganley, SSJ, has noted, "the American context" seems to involve a much less rigid orientation than "the European context" of much of the Church hierarchy.

"I think that today we're at a turning point in religious life," says Sister Muriel Curran. "The renewal has particularly affected women in the United States, because of their education, professionalism, wholehearted love, gospel witness, and the impact of a democratic society. All of those things have had an impact on bringing apostolic religious life to the fore ... It appears," she adds, "that what is happening currently in religious life will bring us into the 21st century."

The changes of renewal, as dramatic as they have been, are spawned by the very stability they appear outwardly to contradict. As Sister Muriel and others have pointed out, contemporary sisters are "active contemplatives" — an apparent paradox that our in-depth look at renewal will attempt to resolve.

"To have change, there has to be stability, maintenance of the basic structure," Sister Muriel explains. "Religious life is a living organism, a dynamic process, not static. At the beginning of my religious life, I'd have said it was more static, ordered, predictable. Now, we have to ask what are the essentials of what we are, what nourishes our religious life? What time are we going to pray together, gather regularly for community meetings? Like any living organism,

we are in an ongoing process of development, of becoming."

A deeper understanding of that process has been eloquently conveyed by such scholars of Vatican II as Marie Augusta Neal, SND de Namur, in her book "Catholic Sisters in Transition" (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984), and Kristin Wombacher, OP, in an article entitled "American Religious Life Since Vatican II: Changes and Continuity," published in an anthology entitled "Religious Life in the U.S. Church: The New Dialogue" (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

Sister Neal, a sociologist, initiated a study commissioned in 1965 by the Conference of Major Superiors of Women, to determine with what resources sisters could respond effectively to the upcoming Vatican II decree on renewal. The data she was able to compile by 1966 laid the groundwork for interpretive reports on an initial survey of 158,917 individual sisters from 437 responding congregations nationwide. In 1982, the 1966 report was replicated and extended, to become the final survey document in what has now become a 20-year study of renewal of Catholic sisterhoods.

Sister Neal tabulated responses on a variety of topics that included information on membership, entering and leaving trends, availability for apostolic works, administrators' perceptions of reasons for leaving, old and new ministries, lifestyles, ownership of buildings, professional preparation of sisters, evaluation of candidates for admission into religious communities, formation programs, participation in government, new apostolic perspectives, constitutions, and general characteristics of participating congregations.

Sister Wombacher's article offers an in-depth examination of the underlying psychological reasons for the evolution of religious life since Vatican II, and the bearing of such trends on changes in lifestyle, government, interdependence of members of religious communities, and sense of mission. Drawing parallels to the writings of such secular psychologists and sociologists as E.H. Erikson ("Identity: Youth and Crisis" and "The Life Cycle Completed") and Alvin Toffler ("The Third Wave"), Sister Wombacher explores the ways in which women religious have interpreted that portion of the decree on renewal that mandated adapting "the manner of living, praying and working" to "the physical and psychological conditions of today's religious and also ... to the needs of the apostolate, the requirements of a given culture, and the social and economic circumstances everywhere, but especially in missionary territory."

Sister Wombacher moves quickly through what she calls "adaptations" — such modifications in prayers, dress, and daily practices as shortening the format of prayer, "modest, meager allowances on a trial basis; talking to one another outside formal recreation, modified veil, raised hemlines, colored shirts, changes in schedule; and the excitement of going to K-Mart alone." Still, she allows, these minor external adaptations did manage to throw open the windows and make it possible for Pope John XXIII's spirit of *aggiornamento* to sweep through the lives of apostolic women formerly relegated to "the medieval cloister era."

Her thesis next takes up much more substantive issues concerning a process of individual maturation that Sister Wombacher identifies closely with Erikson's theories of human growth and development. Women

religious, according to Sister Wombacher, began to move steadily out of what she terms the "herd mentality" toward self-determination. At the same time, a concerted effort was made to develop intimacy and sharing among sisters formerly restricted by rigid rules of silence and strictures against "particular friendships." Attempts were also made to introduce a more personal level of faith-sharing into communal prayer, whether in the convent or in experimental residences of smaller groups.

"In time, though," she explains, "we turned from identity to mission statements. The concern here was with our service to others outside our congregations. Diversity in ministry was by now an accepted fact, and decisions about apostolates were mutually discerned rather than unilaterally appointed."

Throughout the process of this evolution, Sister Wombacher points out, women religious were progressing from what she terms "passive, compliant, and dependent" toward becoming "active, dynamic, and independent." The end result of such a process of maturation, she concludes, is "evolution" — from, as Richard McBrien describes it in his book, "Catholicism" (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1981), "a Church of cultured confinement ... to a genuine world



Part II of a Series  
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The Wombacher agent of change happened because like all group cultures is part of history, and evolutionary and the work again, women States, free maturing in independence themselves societal shifts Sister Muriel bearing such sisters in those below believe also messages elaborate. were in a situation habits, our profession more than a privileged c