

LIFE OF OUR TIME'

Transition: A 20th Anniversary Retrospective of Renewal

Church."

The Second Vatican Council, Sister Wombacher cautions, "was not the real initial agent of change. The Second Vatican Council happened because the Roman Catholic Church, like all groups, people, institutions, nations and cultures is part of the world, part of creation history, and therefore subject to the same evolutionary process ... My point is, the Church and the world travel the same path ... And so, again, women and men religious of the United States, freed from an archaic life style and maturing into more active, dynamic, independent, generative adults, found themselves also in the midst of a worldwide societal shift."

Sister Muriel Curran, questioned about the bearing such theories have on the real lives of sisters in the 1980s, both generally and among those belonging to her own order, concurs. "I believe also that there have been conflicting messages given off by the religious," she elaborates. "It's part of the human condition. We were in a situation that really set us apart — our habits, our living situation, our (traditional) profession of teaching, of relating to children more than adults. I'd say that put us in a privileged class, at times. We desire to take

seriously the gospel of Jesus, to love one another as He loved us, to be of service to each other, and to take seriously the call that He gives to His disciples in the 21st chapter of John ('Feed my lambs, feed my sheep')."

The world, according to Sister Muriel, is shrinking. "Our foundresses," she points out, "communicated by letter." Transportation and communications have been revolutionized by modern technology in a way that can't help but have nearly as profound an effect on the contemporary sense of mission as the prescribed return to gospel values.

"We have become more aware of social issues, justice issues," Sister Muriel affirms, "but that has to come out of a contemplative mode or manner, a faith direction. Other than that, we tend to be totally activists. The dimension I would bring to the contemplative bent is applying the gospel values to our social awareness. I think a true contemplative has to get into the skin of our brothers and sisters in Ethiopia, in South Africa. Then, how to respond? I feel helpless, but even the helplessness can be effective. It's never losing that concern for fellow humans. This is true of all of us, whether religious or not — although those of us who are religious have publicly professed our willingness to do that."

This interrelatedness of contemplation and activism has been noted by several other observers of the effects of renewal, including Sister Marie Augusta Neal, Sister Kristin Wombacher, and Jean Marie Tillard, who commented in 1977, during an address to the Inter-American Conferences in Canada, "The main line of religious renewal in North America is the renewal emphasizing prayer and spiritual encounter with God." According to Sister Wombacher, Tillard contrasts this observation with another on the spiritual renewal he perceives as being characteristic of South America, which has a different history, different cultural context and therefore a different spirituality — which is much more focused on the fact that "God is on the side of the poor."

"God's evolutionary plan is to become fully human at a global level," comments Sister Wombacher. Sister Marie Augusta Neal, author of "Catholic Sisters in Transition," would surely agree that the two apparently divergent experiences can be successfully united into a common sense of mission that brings the global dimension into the equation.

World countries to chaplaincies in prisons, universities, and health organizations. Some are lawyers, doctors, writers, and artists, while others continue to devote their lives to the more traditional yet still vital ministries of education and nursing. A few live in such experimental accommodations as the SSJs' Medaille House, where women religious share living quarters with lay women committed to similar values. Many live in private, rented houses in poorer sections of the diocese, in order to be closer to those to whom they minister and to more effectively live out their vow of poverty.

"I live in an ordinary house," says Sister Muriel. "Two other sisters rent it with me, and I know that's difficult for many lay Catholics. What does that mean in relation to poverty? With regard to our salary, you have to live very simply ... Today as we work through renewal, it's important for women religious to come together, to share life — to be enlivened, so they can truly share in their ministries. In that situation, it always involves working together, in order for the gifts of the individual to be respected and to be at the service of the Church."

The future of religious communities depends, in a very real sense, on how successful community members are at fostering and nurturing this precious sense of community. As Sister Muriel points out (and Sister Marie Augusta Neal's figures illustrate), there has been a definite decline in the number of women entering religious orders, in great measure because few young women could see the relevance of the formerly antiquated structure of religious life to the modern world.

"You have a decrease in the numbers of women in religious life, people leaving religious life at a greater rate than ever before," notes Sister Muriel. "At the same time, you're responding to a broader context in ministry than ever before, with religious women going into other fields. Somewhere in our rules it reads that we should be serving where others choose not to. We go into fields as a response to a call. If we are pilgrims in the true sense, answering the prophetic call of the religious, then the laity will replace us."

As for the response of lay people in general to the much-altered lifestyles of women religious, Sister Muriel has witnessed understanding and rejection, misapprehension and affirmation. Yet, as Sister Kristin Wombacher so eloquently

'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.'

J.B. Libanio, SJ

"It is in the Church and in the signs of the times that new priorities have become manifest. In a world of adequate resources but inadequate use of them, their mission to the poor has very different demands from those it had in a world of manifestly scarce resources and too many people.

"One of our clearest models," she continues, "is one archbishop, Oscar Romero, and four women: Maura Clark, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan (executed by a death squad in El Salvador). All dimensions of the Church are found in this fivesome and their martyred witness challenges us today. They represent one of the earliest and one of the most recent congregations of religious women, the Ursulines and the Maryknoll Sisters, and the new vocation of lay volunteer. Where our religious callings send us remains a mystery, where our Church moves us does also. In that contemplative apostolic perspective, we are currently facing a new future."

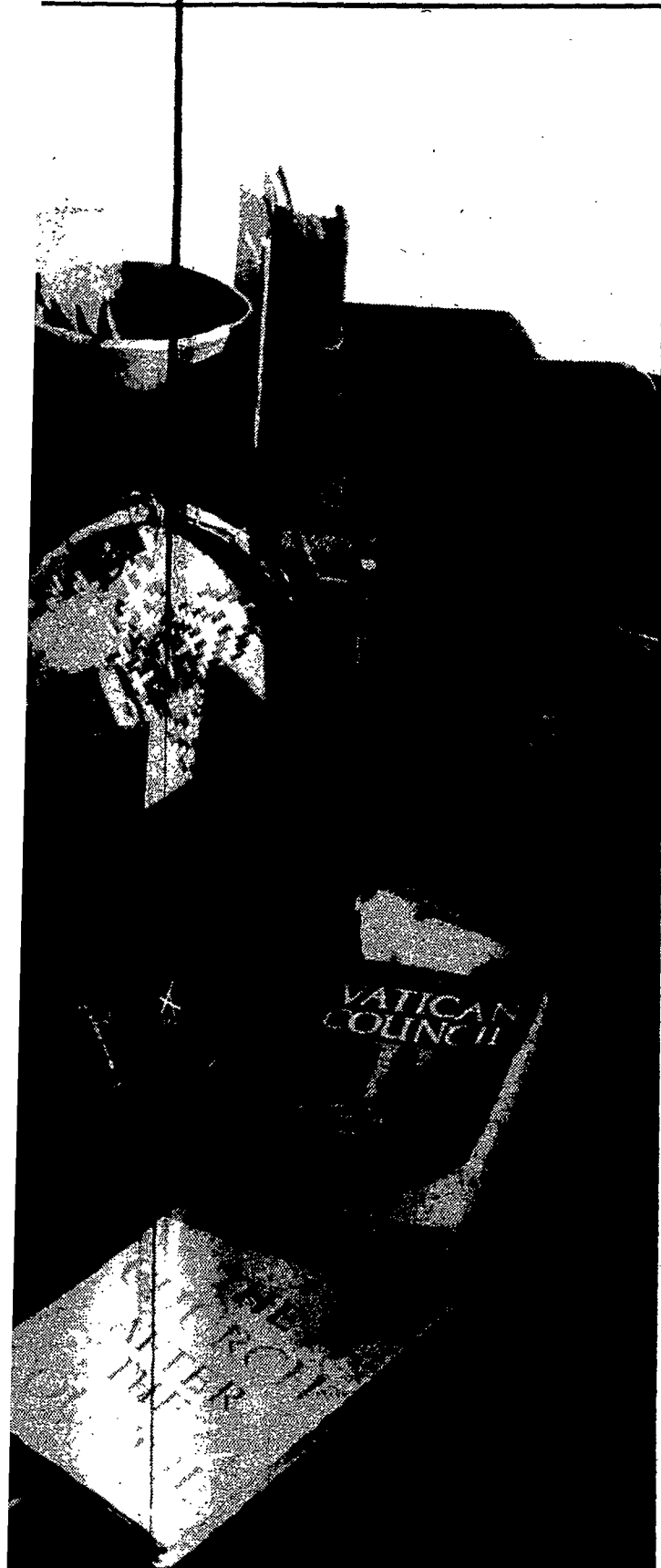
Women religious of the Diocese of Rochester are facing that future in a variety of ways. Ministries vary, from mission work in Third

argues in her treatise on renewed spiritual life, "I don't know of anyone's trying to do away with God's call, vows, community, public witness, faithfulness to founding gift and sound tradition, personal and communal prayer, asceticism, special relationship to the Church. However, while the same pieces remain, they can be rearranged differently and hence take on different functions, like ... redesigning rooms in a house."

That house, above all, continues to keep its doors open to those who want to walk along a similar path of compassion and understanding — at least in the 20 years since Vatican II tore down the cloister walls for apostolic congregations, and let in the fresh air of Pope John's "spiritual springtime."

"We would hope people would trust us in the decisions we've had to make, that they would walk with us as we continue our search for authentic living as women religious, as 'gospel women,' in today's society," Sister Muriel concludes. "And that is a challenge."

"It's through our weakness that Jesus will be glorified," she muses, gazing out the open window of her Pastoral Center office. "It hasn't been an easy road."



Part II of a Series
n; Photo-illustration by Jeff Goulding