

# 'THE CHANGED LIFE OF OUR TIME'

## Women Religious in Transition:

### A 20th Anniversary Retrospective of Renewal Part III of a Series

By Teresa A. Parsons

One of the deepest attractions Janet and Judith Ann Kenrick felt for the Sisters of Mercy — besides their common Irish background — was the charism of the congregation's founder, Catherine McAuley. So when Vatican Council II called for congregations of religious to return to the founding charisms of their orders, both sisters welcomed the renewal.

The Sisters of Mercy were known as "the walking sisters" in 19th century Ireland because, rather than waiting for the poor to come to them in cloister, they went out into the streets, to their homes and to the hospitals. In fact, McAuley began as a lay woman organizing something akin to a settlement house. She resisted developing an order because she believed that the Church law which kept women religious in the cloister limited their practice of the works of mercy. But as the women her mission attracted began to pray together and live in community, the bishop of Dublin ordered that she must either found a religious community or disband.

Catherine McAuley has been described as a risk-taker, and the Kenricks believe her congregation has perpetuated that quality. For if post-Vatican II renewal has been exciting and refreshing, all of its manifestations have also represented greater challenge and accountability. "The Sisters of Mercy have always been very forward-looking," Sister Judith Ann said. "They've always been ready to take that next step in renewal — they're risk-takers. And that takes courage for a religious congregation."

The changing parameters of pastoral ministry for religious mirror the ideals of renewal by more thoroughly integrating sisters into the life of the Church. The Kenrick sisters are both members of pastoral teams and, in theory, have many of the same aims. But the cultures into which they are integrating are in real distance much more than a few thousand miles apart.

Since 1966, Sister Janet Kenrick has been with the Sisters of Mercy mission in Santiago, Chile. For most of that time, she has been a pastoral minister with permission to baptize, anoint the sick and dying, marry couples and celebrate Sunday liturgies (with previously consecrated hosts). These privileges have been granted by the local Church in Chile because, quite simply, there are few priests and many people. Not only are they privileges for religious, but for some trained lay people as well.

The parish of San Jorge, where Sister Janet now works part-time in ministry and part-time in formation, counts 4,500 Catholic households. But each household typically includes two or three related families, so the number of Catholics in the parish is roughly 80,000. San Jorge has a central church and a number of satellite chapels surrounding it, but only one priest, who died recently. In concrete terms, that has meant each chapel will celebrate full Sunday Mass about once a month.

Such freedom to minister remains a dream for religious in most areas of the United States. Last year, Sister Judith Ann Kenrick left behind more than 25 years as a teacher and principal and became pastoral assistant for Our Lady of Lourdes parish in Elmira. She visits the sick and home-bound, acts as liaison between parish staff and the parish's social ministry committee, assists with the sacramental programs and helps parishioners organize groups for prayer, study and discussion, or just to socialize.

Her job may seem limited compared to the demands of pastoral ministry in Chile, but when she described her ministry as "entering into the joys and sorrows of the



Sisters Judith Ann and Janet Kenrick, R.S.M.

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people I serve with," Sister Janet nodded. Both agreed that renewal has brought them a greater share in the life of the Church, albeit in very different ways.

That shared life has been reflected in the daily lives of the sisters — in where they live and what they talk about. Until recently, religious communities in Chile had been located outside the areas in which the sisters worked with the poor. Renewal has prompted small communities of sisters to move into the same neighborhoods where they work and to adopt a simpler way of life.

"We live right among the people and try and share life with the people that are around us," Sister Janet said. "It's much more of a human relationship. They'll stop by for a cup of tea, or I'll stop by their houses and have a cup. Lots of times, the kids will just come over ... we'll talk about their boyfriends or their youth ministry, troubles with their parents or how they're so frustrated because they can't find a job. And they always want to know about me too — 'How was it to leave your family? How's your mother? Tell them I said hello when you write.'"

Although Sister Judith Ann has always lived in a traditional convent setting, that setting has also become more open and welcoming. "We try to offer hospitality to people, invite them into our home," she said. And when she goes into other people's homes, she finds more give-and-take, a greater concern. "They ask, 'How are you? what are you having for dinner?'" Sister Judith Ann said. "I think it's made us more effective. It's saying we are human beings and we are part of the same struggles and challenges they are."

Even the fact that they have a choice of ministries illustrates the gift and challenge of renewal. The Kenricks entered the Sisters of Mercy only two years apart, in 1958 and 1960. Janet Kenrick thought she might have a vocation to religious life even before eighth grade, when one of her teachers, a Sister of St. Joseph, suggested she think about the possibility.

On the other hand, Sister Judith Ann didn't consider religious life consciously until senior year in high school.

"At that point, it was something that felt frightening and strange to me. And I thought that if I went away to college, I'd forget it," she said. "But instead of forgetting it, the desire became greater."

"In those days, you became either a teacher or a nurse. The order assigned you," she said. "So I began teaching in elementary school, and I thought that's probably what I'd do for the rest of my life."

"I was interested in the missions from the beginning," Sister Janet said, recalling that she wrote to Maryknoll at one time and dreamed of going to China. "That was one reason I questioned the Sisters of Mercy — they weren't missionaries."

Although she entered the Sisters of Mercy novitiate, and so was also at least theoretically prepared to be a teacher for the rest of her life, Vatican Council II was already in progress. She vividly remembers the excitement of that time, and perhaps that was what kept her dream alive.

Visits from Maryknoll Sisters during her novitiate period and hearing about their mission work also fed her desire. "I was always very keenly interested and wanted to talk to them afterward," Sister Janet said. "Deep down in my heart, although I went through school for teaching, I wanted to go into mission work. But I didn't know that that would ever happen."

When she was accepted by the congregation as a member of its mission team to Santiago, Sister Janet had already adopted the modified habit, as had the rest of her congregation. She traveled to Mexico in 1966 for training and learned that habits for religious were outlawed. Accordingly, she adopted secular garb.

During her training, she learned that although habits were worn by some religious in Chile, they were a hindrance

to work with the poor. Historically, religious in habits were associated with the country's aristocratic landowners or "padrones" and thus with oppression. "The people in Chile never saw me in a habit," Sister Janet said.

The external changes of renewal have been more at issue in Sister Judith Ann's life. She was principal at Our Lady Queen of Peace school in Brighton at the time of the change and recalls widespread acceptance for the congregation's decision. Nevertheless, she still encounters people who harken back to the "good old days, when you could tell who was who."

In response, Sister Janet joked: "People can always tell I'm a sister by my holy face."

Renewal directed a return to gospel values in the lives of religious. For Sister Judith Ann and many American Catholics, that directive has been translated into social ministry work — a kind of "war on poverty." Consequently, she helps her parish's social ministry committee identify and organize projects that respond to community problems. In Elmira, that often means confronting the damage caused by unemployment. Awareness has been promoted within the whole congregation by the Mercy Justice Commission.

For Sister Janet and the Church of Latin America, gospel values are translated as an obligation "to see Christ in the faces of the oppressed," to continue to dissociate themselves from the aristocracy and better relate to the poor.

As religious life continues to evolve with renewal, Sister Judith Ann hopes to see more ministries open to women. "I'd look for greater participation in the sacraments, baptism or anointing of the sick," she said.

"Not ordination?" her sister joked. Despite how renewal has affected their plans and expectations, both the Kenricks still base their lives on the same foundation.

"We respond to God's call," Sister Janet said. "The faithfulness to that call hasn't changed."