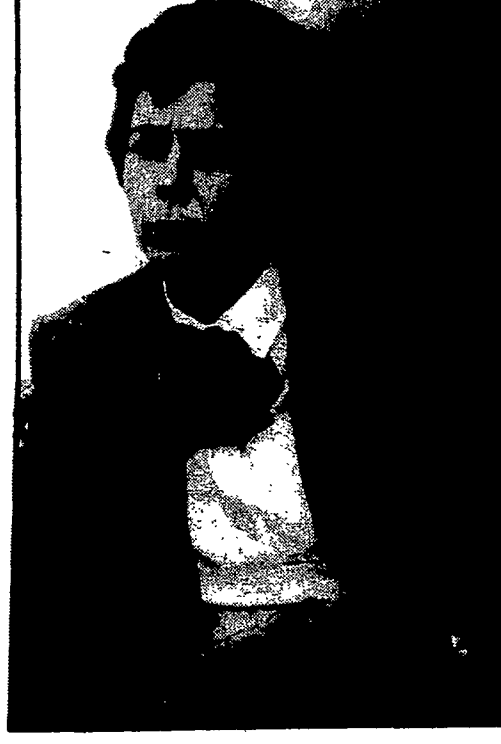


'THE CHANGED LIFE OF OUR TIME'

Women Religious in Transition: A 20th Anniversary Retrospective of Renewal

Part V of a Series



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Principal finds renewal in the classroom rejuvenating

By Teresa A. Parsons

If there's a single most memorable person to a Catholic grammar school alumnus, it's probably the principal. In the past, she's been seen as a distant, awe-inspiring figure in long robes whose primary contact seemed to be with the student body — literally and with a vengeance. Whether they loved her or feared her, or felt something in between, few people forgot her.

Sister Ann Collins' personality as principal of St. Ambrose School is perhaps best illustrated by her experience with a seventh grader who transferred from an inner-city school.

The girl was having a great deal of trouble letting down her defenses. Especially difficult for her was a nickname bestowed on her by her classmates. She came to Sister Ann to complain about the situation, and Sister responded "You know they're laughing up their sleeves at you. Why don't you pretend to like the name?"

The next day, standing in the bus line outside, Sister Ann was unexpectedly enveloped in a bear hug. "It really worked!" the girl exclaimed. "I said 'Hey I really like that name' and it worked. I had the best day!"

As a religious woman in one of the "traditional occupations" — teaching — Sister Ann's experience of renewal has been a more subtle, internal process than that of some of her counterparts in other ministries. But despite the lack of attention paid to them, such traditional ministries have experienced changes that are equally far-reaching.

"I'm not a movement person," she said. "It probably sounds like I've been out of it, but I really don't recall being aware of a lot of the changes. Some people remember the date we went to this modified habit or that, but I don't."

On second thought, however, she acknowledged that if her ministry hasn't changed in name, it certainly has in content. "As a principal, you're dealing with a lot more than curriculum now," she said. "You're a long-range planner, a fund developer, an administrator and counselor."

As family structures change and in many cases break down, the pain and confusion that children feel need to be dealt with at school, she said.

For instance, she recalled a second-grader last year who arrived at school "dissolved in tears" after a fight at home. "Mommy wanted to know who daddy was sleeping with," she confided to her teacher.

"I wouldn't have understood something

like that until I was in high school," Sister Ann said.

Likewise, parents often turn to her for help and advice with their problems, both school-related and personal. As a principal, she may not have any answers for them, but as a sister, she needs to minister to them even if only by listening.

"I've begun to see how much more there is to being a sister than just being a good teacher or principal," she said.

Though she may not make the connection, through Catholic education Sister Ann is actually carrying out renewal's edict for a return to gospel values by bringing Jesus' message to a new generation.

"It has been very important to be competitive with public schools over the past 20 years," she explained. "But I think what we're getting back to and what is my personal philosophy of Catholic schools is that we've also got to be Catholic ... to provide an atmosphere of faith commitment, to know Jesus and know him in others ... to be free to have an awareness of the sufferings of others."

Renewal also followed Sister Ann into the classroom by rejuvenating her personal prayer life. As a result, she is more comfortable sharing faith with the children. "We still teach prayers, but we also ask them to pray more often, rather than always reciting," she said.

Looking back, she described the changes as gradual and gentle. "I grew into it, finding out that it's important to be an individual and to bring that to my ministry," she said.

"I don't think it changed my idea of what it meant to be a sister. I may have begun to understand what it meant to be me — who I was and what I had to contribute."

At her first teaching assignment, Sister Ann remembers living under a strict curfew and being forbidden to visit people in their homes unless someone was deathly ill. Then she moved to St. Paul's in Oswego, where she spent six years teaching junior high school children in the late 1960s. The small town warmth combined with a greater freedom to become close to people meant that Sister Ann became very much part of the community's life. For the first time, she was able to visit people's homes socially and enjoy close friendships.

But at the time, she didn't associate her experience with the larger renewal movement.

"It wasn't a terribly reflective time for me," Sister Ann said. "I just became very close to the people and very involved in my work."

While the cloistered life may be far behind Sister Ann, it's not beyond the reach of her memory. As a novice during the very early days of Vatican II and some of the first stirrings of change, she doesn't remember it as a radical time.

As late as 1962, when she entered the Sisters of St. Joseph novitiate along with 35 other women in her "band" or class, she was not allowed to watch television, read the newspaper, drive cars or use the telephone without permission. The novices lived, worked and prayed together in a strictly regimented routine governing virtually every moment of their waking hours.

"I guess it was to make us feel removed from the world," she said of those kinds of restrictions. "But I don't remember feeling rebellious or put upon. Of course I had a lot of questions and concerns about the way things were, but I never thought of leaving the convent. I just kept my goals in mind — deepening my love of God and service to others. I guess I thought during that time I was getting ready," she said.

If she denies feeling rebellious, Sister Ann does acknowledge that she's always resented being told what she ought to do.

There was the checklist, for example. Each novice was required to keep a chart of daily activities and turn it in to the novice director each week. Before retiring in the evening, Sister Ann said, the novices would proceed together to the study room where each had her own lift-top desk with the checklist pasted on the inside.

The desk lids would go up, almost in unison, she remembered, and each novice would check off her daily requirements. This began to bother Sister Ann, who decided one day to stop completing the checklist. At the end of the week, when she failed to hand one in, she was predictably called to see the novice director.

She remembers entering the room and kneeling before the director, who asked why she hadn't submitted a list. She replied that it simply seemed ridiculous not to trust a 19 year old to do what she was told. One imagines an interminable silence that followed.

"I admire your honesty," the director finally said, and that was the end of checklists for Sister Ann.

That and similar incidents were evidence of growing difficulties novice directors and others in authoritarian positions had in holding to what must have seemed unreasonable traditions.

"I think it was really doing a violence to them, saying you will train novices this way," Sister Ann said.

She has always chosen to live in a convent, and has no more than an occasional desire to change her living arrangements. In her experience, the community lifestyle of a convent has become more open, and prayer and other daily activities has become less regimented. "We don't have to all go to the same Mass any more, for instance," she said.

"Sometimes I think 'Oh wouldn't it be nice to have my own apartment,'" she said, but so far, the convenience and richness of wisdom and experience she finds in the convent community have held her.

"They're beautiful sisters here," she said. "There's one sister, 87-years-old, who's over here every morning helping and teaching."

As chairwoman of the Sisters of St. Joseph's representative body for the past two years, Sister Ann has taken part in the changes in congregational governance. In the process, she has gained a deeper awareness of her congregation's identity.

"I feel closer to the community. I feel more like I count and that what I think about things is important to the others," she said. The body is a consultative group to the congregation's central administration and so is asked to consider a variety of issues and situations, from living arrangements to future directions of ministry to property use.

It's easy to overlook the fact that such a body's very existence is a product of renewal.

Typically, Sister Ann doesn't spend much time speculating on where renewal will lead. She does wonder about the future of religious congregations, given the scarcity of women choosing religious life. Of the 35 women with whom she entered novitiate, she was one of only eight who celebrated their 25th anniversary this year.

"Sometimes I wonder if maybe it wasn't more appealing to young women when it was more mysterious and unknown, but I don't know why," she said.

Personally, she doesn't foresee seeking another ministry. "I think I'll probably always be an educator," she said. "I always see room to grow, to do more things better. Today there seem to be more children with special needs and we need to have programs here for them."

One line of her congregation's constitution that's especially meaningful to Sister Ann defines her willingness to change in her life as a religious woman: "... that as a Sister of St. Joseph, we move always forward." "I just love that," she said.