

'THE CHANGED LIFE OF OUR TIME'

Women Religious in Transition:

A 20th Anniversary Retrospective of Renewal

Part VII in a Series

Sister Jamesine Riley's 'jurisprudent' focus on renewal

By Emily Morrison

The concept of "jurisprudence" bears more than a semantic relationship to the prudence with which Sister Jamesine Riley, SSJ, has tackled both a radical change in ministry and the papal mandate of renewal that reached its 20th anniversary this past week.

On Monday, October 28, Vatican Council II came within one year of attaining its legal majority. Next May, Sister Jamesine will attain hers, in a manner of speaking, when she receives her Juris-Doctor degree from SUNY Buffalo, one of the most esteemed schools of law and jurisprudence in the country.

Like the congregation she entered in 1952, Sister Jamesine has approached renewal with dignity and the natural reserve born of an intelligent appraisal of procedural considerations. "Personally, I'm happy with the way our congregation went through renewal," she observes. "We went at it rather slowly — perhaps too slowly for some — and prudently, according to the approach of the major superior at the time. I think it's been a steady movement for us, but with no great leaps that we'd have to look back on and be sorry for."

For Sister Jamesine, who takes quite seriously the Vatican II directive to live the consecrated life according to gospel values, that prudence has made her ever mindful of how her ministry can best serve others. Her career focus has been characteristically oriented toward service to the public, in a way that reflects both her personal values and the traditional ones of her religious community. A member of the Buffalo Public Interest Law Program, she plans to devote her law practice to clients who can't afford legal representation in matters of civil law. Always attentive to how her contribution can embody the interests of her congregation as well as the common people who have traditionally been the SSJs' spiritual "constituents," Sister Jamesine Riley finds a return to gospel values in the very system that sometimes appears to have largely ignored them.

"When people pose the question, 'How can a religious practice law?' I think I'm always patient with it," said Sister Jamesine during a recent interview at St. Thomas More convent, her residence during the long weekends she spends in Rochester, studying law and Spanish, and shouldering her share of the responsibilities of religious community life. "To me, this is a very gospel-oriented ministry. One of the basic things that Jesus tried to teach was justice. So I don't have any conflict with that. This is what

Jesus was about, and we're supposed to be about what Jesus was about."

As to the question of what renewal has been about, Sister Jamesine's thoughtful answers could serve as the very effective introduction to a textbook on "suppressing obsolete laws," in the words of the venerable decree. Her approach, however, has always been one of great respect for tradition, prayer, scholarship and the considered opinions of her superiors and colleagues.

"The major emphasis for me is that the renewal hasn't been purely external, but that there's been a deepened realization of the importance of our prayer life, the importance of community life and ministry," Sister Jamesine begins. "That whole area of ministry has been difficult for people to accept — that we're no longer solely in the teaching ministries."

For Sister Jamesine, as for many other women religious of this era, the teaching ministries formed the broad foundation on which she has built an ever evolving sense of the ministry best suited to her talents as well as to the spiritual community she serves. She was appointed to be an elementary school teacher in 1954, and taught grades one through eight until her promotion in 1961 to principal, a position she held through 1968. "I was very, very happy in education," she recalls. "In fact, I've never regretted any ministry I've been involved in." From 1968-1975, she served as regional superior and a member of the central administration of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester. She became superior general in 1975, and served two four-year terms as spiritual and administrative leader of her congregation.

"Near the close of my second term, I

becoming a paralegal," she goes on. "So I consulted a lawyer who had worked with me all of the eight years I'd been superior general ... His question was, 'Jamesine, why aren't you going for a full-blown law degree?' 'Jack,' I replied, 'I'm 49 years old.'"

Her "legal counsel" advised Sister Jamesine that, as a paralegal, she'd never be able to accomplish the ideals she envisioned. "So I went back to talk with other members of my administration," she relates. "They were very encouraging. The only negative comment I heard during that entire period was, 'Don't you want to take some time off first?'"

Taking time off is undoubtedly anathema to anyone as dedicated to service and the pursuit of spiritual maturation as Sister Jamesine, for whom education and growth appear to be an



to listen to her opinion. The whole process, to me, is an obedience process — but it's a much more difficult process, because it puts a lot more of the responsibility on us."

John Peter Medaille, who provided spiritual guidance during the 17th century to the original Sisters of St. Joseph, said that sisters should do "whatever woman is capable of doing," Sister Jamesine relates. "As part of that," she adds, "whatever she is capable of doing for the Church is a given. Yet in today's society, what *isn't* a woman capable of? We weren't born religious; we were born human beings, women. We have to be true to our own personhood first. If I'm not in touch with who I am as a person, then I'm going to have a very difficult time figuring out how I can be true to my membership in a congregation, and how I am a part of it."

The individual talents and predilections that make her human are apparently perceived by Sister Jamesine as gifts she can use for the greater good. As to the relative importance of her future law career in the vaster scheme of spiritual affairs, Sister Jamesine is adamant. "I am first of all a woman religious and a member of the Church, so I see all things I do in the future as within that context," she asserts. "I will not be a lawyer who happens to be a woman religious, but a woman religious who happens to be a lawyer. My dream is eventually, two or three years down the road, to end up down in the city someplace, maybe with a storefront — a legal clinic. Before I can get into that, I'll need to work in a setting in which I can get some broad experience in civil law."

Her future clients will probably be people whose incomes fall somewhere just above the poverty line. "People who get into trouble with the law have a constitutional right to legal representation," she explains. "If you have a civil problem and are not on public assistance, you have no constitutional right. Obviously, it goes without saying that you couldn't afford an attorney on a minimum-paying job. So we are left with a large number of people who don't have recourse to a system of justice. My interest is in those people who cannot get into the system now. I know that this is idealistic; I know it's probably naive, but it's important to be able to dream."

"Now, I'm not so naive as to not realize that there are ethical questions that are going to arise for me, within the legal system's existing code of ethics," Sister Jamesine cautions. "I see those (ethics) as

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had to think about what I would do next," recalls Sister Jamesine, who, like Harry Truman and every U.S. president who followed him, was perhaps secretly relieved to learn that such positions of leadership are restricted to no more than two elective terms, whether by general chapter or constitutional amendment. "I thought of some of the more traditional things — becoming a parish assistant, or counseling — but nothing seemed right to me," she continues. "I had always been interested in the law, even when I was a youngster. I've always been concerned about people who can't get fair representation in this country. Whenever I picked up a newspaper, it seemed I was reading about people involved in civil matters, who can't get justice through our present system."

"Being the age I am, I first considered

ongoing evolutionary process. Indeed, as she points out, the very process of a choice of ministry — a choice renewal made possible — is as important to her as the inevitable result.

Since renewal gradually relaxed the governmental strictures of the administration of religious orders, rules and policy are changed and members elected through a governmental process known as the general chapter. "The superior general doesn't any longer send out rules and directives," says Sister Jamesine. "Originally, in pre-Vatican II days, the Reverend Mother and members of her council pretty much made all the decisions that needed to be made about the lives of congregation members. I remember when the major superior could sit at her desk and make all the changes in ministry in a little black book."

The current procedure, she notes, is "terribly extended and terribly complicated. It allows the individual sister to express whatever she believes her gifts and talents are, and to dialogue with her superior, and mutually try to balance her gifts and talents with the needs of the Church. It's mutually beneficial, because her superior might have a better idea of what those needs are."

"From the perspective of a lot of people, there's no obedience left," observes Sister Jamesine. "What I'm saying is that we have a great deal of obedience left. The obedience is in trying to work it out so that the best each sister has to offer is given to the people who need to be served ... The obedience is not as visible. The obedience is in the process of listening to the Spirit in our own hearts, and what the Spirit is saying about our change in ministry, and taking that to our superior — then, afterward, being willing