

'THE CHANGED LIFE OF OUR TIME'

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

Part VII in a Series

By Teresa A. Parsons

*All the works of God
proceed slowly and
in pain, but then,
their roots are the
sturdier and their
flowering the better.*

Mother Theresa of Jesus Gerhardsinger may have intended those words to describe the development of the congregation of religious women she founded, the School Sisters of Notre Dame. But they apply equally to the challenge of renewal experienced by all religious congregations during the past 20 years.

They are also the words that Sister Norbert Gutacker, SSND, used to describe her own view of renewal.

In the 36 years since she professed her first vows, Sister Norbert has been a teacher and principal, a missionary and pastoral assistant. For most of that time, she has ministered to Hispanic people, but in a number of different cultural settings — Chile; Puerto Rico; Wilton, Conn.; and Rochester. The history of her religious life parallels that of her congregation in its continuous struggle to accept change and to adapt while at the same time holding to a consistent identity.

As one of two pastoral assistants working at St. Michael's Church in Rochester, Sister Norbert focuses her pastoral ministry in general on programs that bring all the ethnic components of the parish together. Specifically, she is responsible for baptismal preparation and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

"Anyone working in the city has to be able to deal with the cross-cultural nature of the people," Sister Norbert said. That includes reaching a first-hand realization of the hurt and rejection many Hispanic people have experienced in their relationship with the whole Church.

"Hispanics have developed differently in faith from the European tradition," she said. In part because of the scarcity of priests in many of their native lands, the people developed a home-centered catechesis heavily dependent upon the family and traditional devotions rather than on Sunday liturgy.

In the Hispanic view, sharing membership in a church community is a family relationship rather than one of acquaintance. Many times, the hurt and rejection Hispanics have suffered results from these differing expectations.

"I don't know how you can deal with it (their pain) unless you are the presence of Christ to them," Sister Norbert said. "We need to make the larger Church more welcoming to minorities." She noted, in fact, that Hispanics are the future majority of the Church.

Her background in mission work gave Sister Norbert a particularly strong basis from which to approach pastoral ministry among Hispanic people.

Shortly after professing her first vows and for the first 18 years of her religious life, Sister Norbert was assigned as a teacher to missions in Puerto Rico and later in Chile. One of her first struggles as a religious was to adapt to a culture radically different from her own. She found the process difficult, but enriching.

"I wondered at first why they did things so differently," she said. "But eventually, it makes you question your own values. You search deeper for why you do things as you do."

During those years, she moved away from a very task-oriented approach to life and ministry toward a more person-centered approach. She credits the warmth of the Puerto Rican people and their emphasis on the value of the individual with making her a warmer and more affectionate person.

"One of the gifts Hispanics have to offer is their great value and respect for the person within the community," Sister Norbert said.

In 1967, she was transferred to her

order's mission in Santiago, Chile, where she taught in a Jesuit boys' school. Her service there was during a time of transition in the Latin American Church. In response to Vatican II, the Church was re-evaluating its role in society and beginning to draw away from an historic association with the wealthy ruling class. Instead, priests and religious sought to return to gospel values by identifying and working with the poor.

"We were constantly questioning what we did and where we were in Chile," Sister Norbert said. As a result, her congregation gave up teaching in a school for wealthy young people to return to ministry among the poor.

Although she was involved in the congregational decision, Sister Norbert left the Chilean mission before any action was taken. In 1970, death and illness in her family brought her back to Rochester.

She found a country and a Church greatly altered from those she left nearly 20 years earlier. One of the most difficult adjustments was dealing with the materialism she confronted at every turn.

"Values here were so much in conflict with the things we'd been struggling with in the mission," she explained. "The abundance of material things — going into a supermarket and seeing not just one kind of cereal but a whole aisle of cereals; the values on television, especially the commercials and the things they were setting forth as making people happy. That made it very difficult to come back. And I still find that here."

Just as she was challenged to adapt to a new American culture, the School Sisters of Notre Dame and all religious congregations were challenged by Vatican II to return to their founding charisms and bring gospel values to life in the world.

International orders, including the School Sisters of Notre Dame, encountered renewal from a different perspective than most locally based congregations.

"We have always had to struggle for unity," Sister Norbert explained. "Between the American and German congregations, for example, there was a constant struggle. The German sisters were more conservative. In America, sisters were more anxious to keep up to date, to change with the times. But the struggle was part of the gift. It's part of our lives to bring the same gifts everywhere ... to serve all the people of the Church."

Established in 1833, the order grew from roots in rural Germany into 31 countries with 21 provinces. From the foundress and two companions, membership expanded to the current figure of 8,000.

Mother Theresa of Jesus brought the order to the United States in 1847 to serve German immigrants. Here and elsewhere in the world, she struggled to retain a central identity and rule for her order. In her day, the challenge to that effort came from the bishops of various dioceses, who sought to control local congregations.

In more recent history, that identity continues to be challenged by renewal and the order's multicultural scope.

Traditionally, the School Sisters of Notre Dame were a teaching order which emphasized ministry to women. "Our foundress' vision was of transforming society by working with women, that through women you could change the family, society and the world," Sister Norbert explained. But over the years, the crux of the order's ministry had turned to educating children.

With the new titles — like pastoral assistant — that renewal brought to their apostolic works, the sisters again sought their point of unity.

"We share a common vision even though our ways of service are different," Sister Norbert said, defining that vision as "enabling others to become."

"We had to ask what is basic to us as School Sisters of Notre Dame that we can provide throughout the world ... however



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Sister Norbert Gutacker, SSND, stands at the pulpit of St. Michael's Church with Father Vincent Panepinto, pastor, in the background. Thanks to the staff's emphasis on unity and cooperation in ministry, Sister Norbert believes that parish life at St. Michael's is headed for a new level of spiritual development.

that takes flesh in Africa or Guam or wherever."

For Sister Norbert, the return to gospel values widened the scope of ministry in education, but did not fundamentally alter her role.

"When I came back from the mission in Chile, I realized that the missions had come to us," she remembered. "And I felt a very great need for people to work with Hispanics. The population is growing so rapidly, and there are not many Church personnel for them. I felt I had a gift to share from my years of sharing their language and culture, that the Church very badly needed."

But she didn't move to St. Michael's or pastoral ministry right away. Again, it was a struggle to find her calling. In the meantime, Sister Norbert served in a series of teaching and pastoral ministries between 1970 and 1981.

One of the most difficult experiences for her was the closing of Holy Redeemer School, where she was principal for one year.

"To me, it was a place where children could learn to live together," she said, describing the balance of races as ideal. From that experience, Sister Norbert has realized a new determination to "do something" to help Hispanic and all inner-city youth succeed in the education system.

"There's no way these kids can get beyond the cycle of poverty, drugs and whatever else is going on here without a good education. We have got to support them somehow," she said.

Perhaps her biggest accomplishment during that time of searching was as the pastoral assistant — essentially pastor —

of a Hispanic parish in Wilton, Conn.

"I formed catechists," she preached, ran retreats. They had no one else," she said. "I think that to have someone from the Church working with them was crucial at that point. It kept them together."

"It was a very poor, high crime area and theirs was a very hard life. Yet they could always smile in the midst of such terrible suffering," she said. "It was then that there were times I very specifically wished I was a priest and could administer the sacraments."

She returned to Rochester in 1981 and for a year worked at both Holy Redeemer and St. Michael's. But relations between parishes and conflicts within the neighborhoods made the arrangement unworkable, and Sister Norbert finally went to St. Michael's.

She sees tremendous promise in the community, reaching a new maturity from a past of pain and conflict. It's especially appropriate to Sister Norbert and, no doubt, to the spirit of Mother Theresa of Jesus, that parish women are the ones moving forward, asking for spiritual growth and formation.

"I see St. Michael's as a sign of hope in the neighborhood. It's so important for us to be present here, to be a welcoming familiar presence," Sister Norbert said.

Her struggle now focuses on bringing together the chaotic and often conflicting strands of apostolic pastoral work and life in community, to stay true to her vision of ministry as a School Sister of Notre Dame.

"I would like to continue to grow in an apostolic spirituality, and to continue to be true to the Spirit, wherever that may lead me," she said.