

# 'THE CHANGED LIFE OF OUR TIME'

## Women Religious in Transition:

### A 20th Anniversary Retrospective of Renewal

Part X of a Series

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the final installment of our series "The Changed Life of Our Time," which has profiled the lives of women religious through the period of renewal prompted by Vatican Council II.

By Emily Morrison

The silence, at times, seemed deafening to Sister Anita Rourke, barely past her novitiate at the time of the sweeping changes in religious life heralded by Vatican Council II. Now coordinator and superior general of Rochester's Sisters of the Cenacle, Sister Anita entered the Cenacle community as a long century of relative silence was drawing to a close.

The Cenacle Retreat House still regularly opens its doors some 21 years later, to offer solace and spiritual guidance to a harried world. This year, the community that was born out of quiet and prayerful reflection celebrates the centenary of the death of its foundress — an anniversary of spiritual rebirth that coincides with the 20th anniversary of the renewal of religious life.

"The quality of our life was shaped by the silence we observed," says Sister Anita of a religious community that was still semi-cloistered at the time she entered in 1964. "We were allowed personal conversation twice a day, after the noon meal and the evening meal. At the end of the day there was the grand silence."

Sitting expectantly in a wicker chair in the Cenacle's conservatory, you can't help but be affected by the tranquil late afternoon light that filters in through latticed transoms and greenery. The elegant East Avenue mansion, designed by prominent Rochester architect J. Foster Warner and bequeathed to the order by Nora Conway Todd in 1948, seems permeated still by a pervasive calm almost as grand as the resounding silence the sisters abandoned some 20 years ago.

"There was a real beauty to your living, almost a monastic ritual," says Sister Helen Harber, who comes downstairs this particular November afternoon to join Sister Anita and Sister Barbara Kingston in the conservatory, a large, airy room that doubles as the "smoking room" during the series of weekend retreats the Cenacle offers on a year-round basis.

"We ate in silence," says Sister Helen, who entered the Cenacle community in 1949. "It was very formal, and very sustaining. There was a real peace and comfort in it, especially for the retreatants, who might at first view the silence as some sort of penance — until they relaxed into the rhythm of it."

"My sense is that even the nature of our ministry would draw women who were more inclined (than others) to be reflective," observes Sister Anita. "There's a phrase attributed to Mary — 'a solitude of the heart.' I think the idea is that silence would enhance it, but wouldn't be an end in itself."

"God knows," she adds, "I was terrified by the silence at first. Every morsel that you chewed sounded like celery. It was amazing, thought, how much you could communicate in silence."

That remembered ritual of silence, the measured consideration by which these sisters continue to carefully weigh each word, communicate so much more even now than the continuous and idle chatter with which so many of us fill the clattering void around us — a din perhaps created not so much by noise pollution as by the dearth of genuine spirituality in a modern world.

For the Cenacle sisters, spirituality and prayerful reflection are a way of life inculcated during the time of their foundress, St. Therese Couderc, who borrowed the word "cenacle" from the Latin *cenaculum*, meaning "supper room" — "derived from the place where Jesus had his final meal, the Passover meal," says Sister Anita. "In the Bible, it's called 'the upper room.'"

"I think we've appropriated the name



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Cenacle Sisters Barbara Kingston, Anita Rourke and Helen Harber pause a moment by a stained glass window that depicts the Seven Gifts of the Spirit.

because, by tradition, that's the place where the disciples waited and prayed together with the Holy Spirit, with Mary," adds Sister Helen. "It was the first place of retreat."

The first "cenacle" was established by Sister Therese Couderc in La Louvesc, France, as a suitable hostel for female pilgrims en route to the shrine of St. John Francis Regis. Shortly after she was named first superior of the tiny new congregation by Father Stephen Terme, Mother Therese suggested that the women take part in religious exercises and reflection while in residence at the house at La Louvesc. The custom persisted, and the ministry of Cenacles the world over was established.

Like members of many other religious communities, the Cenacle sisters have found inspiration in Vatican II for a renewed search for the gospel values and founding charisms of their orders. For Anita Rourke and her sisters, this mission entailed returning to the insights of the community's foundress.

"It meant reinterpreting, clearing away some of the accretions," says Sister Helen. "We've come almost full circle, from the days when we were cloistered."

At the time of Vatican II, Sister Anita points out, the Cenacle sisters observed the full divine office, chanting matins "morning, noon, evening and night" — much as monastic orders still do. The observation of monastic ritual, however,

was hardly prescribed by the foundress, according to Sister Anita.

"That came in during the late 19th century, when there was a strong Benedictine influence," she relates. "We had one major superior who was in for 49 years."

"Another phase of the contemplative aspect of our lives was the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament all day," says Sister Helen, who adds that the sisters were forbidden to leave the Cenacle house unless they needed to see a doctor or go out into the parishes to teach religion classes that predated CCD.

By the time Sister Anita entered the Cenacle in 1964, religious communities stood poised at the brink of an entirely new spiritual direction. "Every single week there was a change," says Sister Anita.

"We were gradually exposed to the possibility of what (renewal) might be like," observes Sister Helen, who recalls with some amusement the alterations in such visible signs of the times as the wearing of the interim habit. "We all went through the 'early thrift shop' era," she admits.

The days of the cloister were numbered as well for this apostolic order whose ministry still remains closer to home than that of many other religious communities. Outside visits to family were permitted during the early Vatican II years, and several of the sisters spent

summers working among the poor on the lower east side of Manhattan. "I do think the changes happened fast, and relatively easily," says Sister Helen. "I don't recall any great tension."

"I think we were prepared well, especially for the liturgical changes," Sister Anita points out. "When I entered in 1964, I was certainly a faithful daughter of the Church. I often wonder how I would be today as a Catholic if I hadn't entered at that time, because I feel that there were so many advantages, in the way of explanations and teachings about the documents. The way renewal came through to me was not in terms of great loss, but returning to the roots established in the very beginning."

Sister Barbara Kingston entered the community twice, in 1966 and 1968. "My first couple of years were similar to what's already been described," she relates. "The pendulum had swung the other way by 1968. Our liturgical office had gone from the full office to just morning and evening prayer. We would go out to attend school, which was very unusual."

Courses of study involved the community's espousal of the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, spiritual direction, the history of the congregation, and retreat work. Some sisters sought master's degrees in religious education, theology, spirituality and pastoral counseling — those disciplines whose spiritual emphasis might augment the community's traditional ministry of retreat work.

Even the nature of the retreats the Cenacle offers has changed subtly according to the signs of the times. The opening of the retreat experience to men was a direct result of Vatican II, and retreats are currently offered to the separated and divorced, recovering alcoholics, singles, married couples who wish to renew their vows, mothers of young children (for whom babysitting is provided), working people, and "busy, involved women, single or married, juggling several responsibilities," who are offered the opportunity to seek respite in a "Runaway Weekend for Women."

"The word *retreat* is really an umbrella," Sister Anita explains. "There are many different forms that fall under it." Variations include duration, theme, and group composition. "Retreats can be individual or group; they can be preached or guided (for small groups that assemble in a conference format, then break up so that each member can receive individual direction afterward) — or even directed (one-on-one). They certainly vary as to the amount of quiet time versus dialogue, and how much sharing is involved. Even the forms vary," she adds. Certain retreats feature liturgical dance or other art forms, and even inner healing. "The umbrella has broadened, but there's still a spiritual thrust in whatever we do."

"I see retreats as especially significant since Vatican II, for the average Catholic, because of the responsibility each one has for his own decisions," says Sister Helen. "There is a spiritual direction, but in the end, it's up to the individual to decide. It's a matter of coming to a sense of your own personal authority, which is God-given." "Essentially, the retreats follow the whole direction renewal has taken, because renewal begins in the heart," Sister Helen concludes. "All of the changes, if they had been accomplished simply for the sake of change or concentrated on externals, would not have accomplished the deep renewal that touches hearts — and then bears fruit."

For the sisters of the Cenacle, on the centenary of their foundress' transition into everlasting life, renewal continues to grow and prosper. Ripened from seeds planted in a time of ferment, such fruit remains a moveable feast of the spirit. Its progeny, if all continues according to divine plan, may sustain the spiritual lives of women religious well into the coming centuries of change.