

Changes in SSJ chapter reflect congregation's character

By Teresa A. Parsons

"Chapter is a moment of reverence toward our Creator God, a moment of letting go and trusting, a moment of believing in our God's steadfast love"

That's one way to describe the process in which the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester engage every fourth year, as they choose members of their central administration and develop goals and directives to guide them during the next four years.

Another way to describe chapter is to picture 40-odd sister/delegates and nearly as many observers closeted in an airless conference room on a blistering hot July day, laboring toward consensus on six statements that will somehow express the fruits of a week-and-a-half of discussions and presentations, and more than a year of preparation.

What emerged from the congregation's most recent chapter sessions, which concluded on Saturday, July 11, reflected in many ways the character of the congregation itself. Some statements pointed in directions some sisters considered bold and even radical. Other decrees were relatively staid and predictable.

Sister Mary John Van Atta, a member of the chapter's coordinating committee, ascribed a certain dissatisfaction with wording of statements to the richness of the chapter process itself. "There was a sense that these are representative concepts that we think the congregation as a whole is ready to move on," she

gathered behind closed doors, voted on legislative issues and published the results — a set of chapter decrees — in a book that remained on the shelf more often than not.

Some of the decrees those books contain have had far-reaching consequences — among them decisions regarding religious dress and the founding of a novitiate at the congregation's mission in Brazil.

In the past, however, the decrees were developed and implemented by an authoritarian structure. Even as recently as four years ago, chapter sessions retained much of that authoritative style. Delegates were usually seated at tables in the center of the room. When observers were permitted, their chairs were scattered around the perimeter. Discussion among delegates was limited, and non-delegates were never allowed to participate.

This year, however, delegates and non-delegates sat together and participated without distinction in the discussion. Non-delegates were able to indicate their support or lack of support for various proposals through informal votes known as "leanings." In fact, delegates and observers were only distinguishable during formal votes.

Delegates and the congregation as a whole also determined the most recent chapter agenda to a greater extent than ever before. After a series of cluster meetings, chapter days and other information-gathering sessions that concluded in February, 1987, the chapter's agen-

anything."

But Sister Van Atta believed the time was right for the changes to occur. "There were hints of restlessness, a lack of satisfaction in the last couple of chapters that were indicative of wanting the chapters to be more meaningful in the lives of congregation members," she said. "(This chapter) was a very conscious choice to allow part of this teaching moment to be directed toward the affect side of experience rather than the intellectual."

Delegates devoted the beginning of the formal chapter sessions late last month to storytelling. Seven sisters — each selected to represent a different age group — reflected briefly on their memories of the congregation, the Church and the world during the time when each was in her mid-30s.

Sister Van Atta described the presentations as a kind of living history. One sister recalled with pride the congregation's efforts to assist the poor during the Great Depression. At the same time, she regretted that the sisters had remained relatively comfortable in the midst of great suffering — feeding the hungry, for instance, but seldom going hungry themselves.

Not only Rochester's Sisters of St. Joseph, but the entire Catholic Church in the United States came to identify strongly with prevailing cultural values in the years between 1910 and 1940, according to Sister Marie Augusta Neal, SND. A professor of sociology at Emmanuel College in Boston and a visiting professor of sociology and religion at the Harvard University Divinity School, Sister Neal presented a mid-week series of talks to chapter participants.

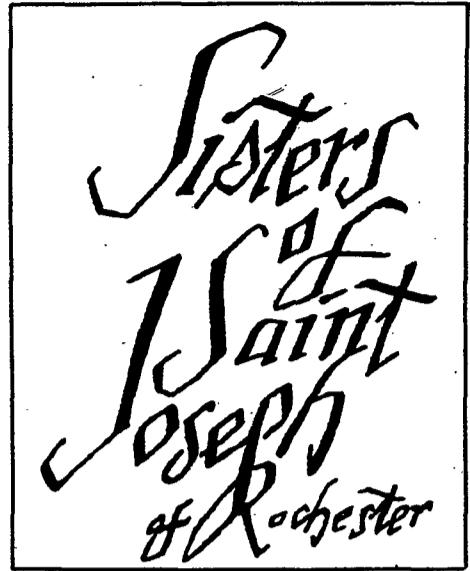
Among the significant reforms of the Second Vatican Council, Sister Neal noted, was the re-identification of the Church with an option for the poor, "to clearly stand with the poor as they reach out to take what is rightfully theirs."

"The remaining question was, 'What does the Gospel mandate the non-poor to do?'" she said. "The answer is to relinquish what the poor need to survive."

Catholic schools are one example of how the Church in the United States has failed to identify with the poor by following a cultural trend. Prior to 1950, Sister Neal observed, parochial schools provided European immigrants with an avenue toward upward mobility.

But today's parishes and dioceses are not providing the same opportunities to a "new" generation of ethnics — actually Native Americans, black and Hispanics who predated the waves of Irish, Italian and Eastern European immigrants on the American continent.

"When we upwardly mobilized, we weren't supposed to take the Church and its advantages with us," Sister Neal said. "The non-poor



react by holding onto our things, our resources, as if we had a right to them, as if we had earned them and they are ours . . . The non-poor are always willing to help the poor with handouts, but once the poor organize to claim what is rightfully theirs, the non-poor won't help," she continued.

Sister Neal challenged the chapter and through them the congregation to let go of their resources — and more. Since 1966, as the numbers of vowed religious have declined, many of their traditional roles have been assumed by lay men and women.

"Some of us think that has only occurred because there are fewer priests and sisters, and (the laity) are simply filling in," Sister Neal said. "That is not at all the case. The Church has affirmed their baptismal vows . . . and they are accepting it. The style of the Church's life in the future may be different, but the call of the Church will remain the same."

Sister Neal also observed that the Sisters of St. Joseph and other apostolic congregations of women religious have long clung to a contemplative brand of spirituality borrowed from their cloistered counterparts. Before congregations of apostolic women can claim their own spiritual identity, she said, they need to recognize and relinquish what is not authentically theirs.

As Sister Neal watched the delegates press wearily but relentlessly toward a consensus and the chapter's conclusion last week, she remarked that those final gritty moments were by far the truest indication of the congregation's character.

"They aren't afraid of each other, yet they respect each other," she remarked. "That didn't just happen overnight."

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Sister Mary John Van Atta, SSJ

said. "I think (the directives) represented with validity where the congregation is right now."

The chapter's basic format and very specific purposes have changed little in the past 20 years. The most recent chapter began early in 1986 with workshops on spiritual discernment, prayer and reflection in preparation for the election of delegates in March, 1986. Thirty-five delegates were elected by the congregation at large and one delegate represented its Brazilian members. Members of the central administration and the former superior general serve as ex-officio members.

The spirit of the process, however, is more variable. Twenty years ago, chapter delegates

da was defined. Instead of considering constitutional amendments or other legislative issues, the chapter would concentrate on discerning broader directions and issues. Specifically, members had said they wanted delegates to examine the meaning of membership at the individual and corporate level, and the implications of their identity as apostolic women religious.

Most participants in this year's chapter regarded the changes as a giant leap, although not all agreed that the direction was forward.

"At some points, I think it made some people uncomfortable," said Sister Ann Collins, who chaired the coordinating committee. "They didn't feel we were accomplishing

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