

Local News

Rewriting constitutions renews orders' sense of mission

By Lee Strong

In their "Message to Humanity" issued at the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, the council Fathers said: "In this assembly, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we wish to inquire how we ought to renew ourselves, so that we may be found increasingly faithful to the Gospel of Christ."

Paralleling this call for renewal and self-examination in the entire Church, the council issued a directive that religious orders — or "institutes of consecrated life" — examine their manner of living, praying and working, and adapt "to the physical and psychological conditions of today's religious and . . . to the needs of the apostolate, the requirements of a given culture, and the social and economic circumstances anywhere, but especially in missionary territories" (Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life).

In the light of these standards, religious orders were instructed to re-examine the ways in which they are governed and in particular to re-evaluate their constitutions, directories, custom books, and books of prayers and ceremonies, in order to bring them into harmony with the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

This revision continues today. On October 15, 1987, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester became the most recent order in the diocese to receive approval of their constitution from the Vatican Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes (CRIS), the curial office that oversees religious congregations.

From initial deliberations to final approval, the process of revising a constitution may take many years. For the Sisters of St. Joseph, the revision process began at their 1969/70 chapter, or meeting of regional delegates. The meeting produced interim constitutional guidelines — *Values in Faith* — which were later revised at the 1972 chapter. Revision of the guidelines continued until 1980, when the order began the formal process of rewriting the constitution, using *Values in Faith* as a guide.

The resulting constitution and complementary document were unanimously approved by the order at the 1983 chapter, and the documents were then submitted to CRIS. Between 1983 and 1987, the order further revised the constitution in response to questions and suggestions from CRIS and, in 1987, the constitution was approved.

The revision process the Sisters of St. Joseph underwent is similar to that experienced by other orders, according to Sister Muriel Curran, SSND, diocesan vicar for religious. The process is slow and involved, she noted, because constitutions represent more than just a code of rules.

"A constitution is an expression of the word of God," Sister Curran observed. "It articulates a call to live the Gospel in a certain way." CRIS's approval of a constitution, therefore, is a confirmation that the order's understanding of its nature and way of life meets the Church's approval.

In revising their constitutions, orders must be aware of the signs of the times and re-examine their own roots, both in terms of the Gospel and in terms of their founders' visions, Sister Curran said. "They must get in touch with the charism (of their founders) and bring that charism into today."



Bonnie Trafolet/Courier-Journal

Religious orders throughout the world have revised their constitutions in response to the Vatican II call for renewal.

When rewriting their constitution, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, in conjunction with other St. Joseph branches, sent a delegation to France to research the order's early roots. According to Sister Elizabeth Anne LeValley, superior general of the Rochester congregation, researchers discovered that the order's original concept as expressed by its early leaders echoed the sentiments Vatican II articulated about religious life in general.

"We found letters and documents saying we are to change with the signs of the times," Sister LeValley said. In these early documents, the sisters were instructed to "quarter the city" — that is, to visit each of the areas of any city in which they serve to "find out what the needs are and to meet those needs."

In the United States, the St. Joseph sisters have been identified with teaching and hospital work, but in light of the order's early leaders, the new constitution says the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester will undertake any works of mercy and justice of which they are capable, including education, health care, social

work, pastoral ministry and foreign missions. Sister LeValley noted that the process of self-examination necessary for revising the constitution has led to renewal within the order itself. "This has given us a certain stability from which we can jump off," she remarked.

Further, the length of the examination process allowed the order to make changes gradually, Sister LeValley said. "We allowed enough time for experiments to take place, so that when the time came to write the constitution, it was much more of a lived experience," she noted.

The Religious of the Cenacle likewise experienced a renewal through rewriting their

constitution. Following a period of revision and self-evaluation that began in 1968, the order submitted the document to CRIS in September, 1981. It was approved on May 22, 1982 — Pentecost, a fitting date since "cenacle" refers to the upper room in which Jesus' followers met in prayer before the first Pentecost.

According to Sister Barbara Heanue, coordinator of the order's Rochester house, the process forced the order to clarify its identity as a congregation.

"Vatican II said you must be either an active or a contemplative order," Sister Heanue explained. "Up to that time, we were in the

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Diocesan Appointments



Bishop Matthew H. Clark has announced the following appointment:
Father James A. Schwartz from sabbatical at the C.G. Jung Institut in Kusnacht, Switzerland, to coordinator of training and follow-up at the Center for Human Development, P.O. Box 4557, Washington, D.C. 20017, effective March 21, 1988.

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