

Features

First female vicar created inclusive climate among religious

By Teresa A. Parsons

Sister Muriel Curran, SSND, once described herself as a "woman of few words."

But during her seven-year tenure as diocesan vicar for religious, Sister Curran generated action aplenty.

She spearheaded the diocesan response to what has emerged as a national crisis in funding for retired religious, while at the same time presiding over a study of the delicate issue of just compensation for women religious employed by the diocese and diocesan parishes.

She helped to elicit positive responses from religious congregations whom she convened in listening and dialogue sessions to respond to the Pontifical Commission on Religious Life, appointed by Pope John Paul II to study the decline of vocations to religious life in the United States and to encourage U.S. bishops to offer special pastoral services to religious congregations in their dioceses.

She organized diocesan clergy and religious in retreats and other gatherings that have been widely credited with improving relations between the two groups and among religious congregations.

She convened a federation of spiritual directors that has helped to create awareness of local needs and opportunities for spiritual direction.

All of which should perhaps have been expected from someone who broke new ground simply by virtue of her appointment as the first female vicar for religious in the Diocese of Rochester.

Sister Curran has announced that at the end of July she will leave her diocesan post to seek an undetermined new assignment. She hopes to relocate in the vicinity of the School Sisters of Notre Dame motherhouse in Baltimore, Md. "It seems like a good point to make a change," she said.

Monsignor Gerald Krieg, who has served with Sister Curran as part-time co-vicar for religious, in addition to his duties as full-time pastor of St. Stephen's, Geneva, has also resigned his position.

In place of the co-vicars, Bishop Matthew H. Clark has appointed Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Dolores Banick, who will begin her new ministry in mid-August. Sister Banick is currently coordinator of adult religious formation for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C.

The vicar for religious represents the bishop to members of religious congregations throughout the diocese.

The selection process by which Sister Banick was chosen offers one measure of the progress marked during Sister Curran's term as vicar. This time around, Sister Curran noted, a religious brother voluntarily participated on the search committee, along with a Basilian priest, a diocesan priest and members of three congregations of women religious.

By contrast, nearly a decade of discussion and debate over the vicar's post among members of the Diocesan Sisters Council (DSC) preceded Bishop Clark's 1981 appointment of Sister Curran and Monsignor Krieg as the first diocesan co-vicars for religious. And although a religious brother helped to revise the vicar's job description and interview candidates for the post, he had been drafted to do so.

In particular, the original search committee sought candidates who would provide renewal services and spiritual counseling, serve as a liaison between the bishop and religious in the diocese, and foster communication between religious congregations.

"(Sister Curran) has been very sensitive to women's issues, which was a dream we also had," explained Sister Barbara Moore, RSM, one of the committee's members. "She was in



Maurice Tierney (above) and other diocesan staff members gathered earlier this month to honor Sister Muriel Curran, SSND, and Monsignor Gerald Krieg, who have both resigned as Bishop Matthew H. Clark's co-vicars for religious.

a tough position to lobby for the rights of women, being the bishop's vicar, but she has walked that line fairly."

"She has carved out of rock a new understanding of the role of the vicar for religious," added Sister Eileen Conheady, SSJ, current vice president of the Sisters' Council and a member of the task force who sought Sister Curran's successor.

Sister Conheady recalled the time during which the Sisters' Council debated the vicar's position as one of transition for women in the Church — and women religious in particular. "Women were struggling for a different role in the Church from what they had before, and the idea that a woman could represent the bishop was a difficult one for some people to accept," she said.

Despite the fact that, ironically, some women religious were among those most opposed in principle to a female vicar, Sister Curran was barely conscious of any disapproval. "From the time I came, there was such a warm climate of acceptance that I really didn't feel the other," she said.

Helping to pave Sister Curran's way among diocesan clergy as well as male and female religious was what Monsignor Krieg regarded as his primary contribution to the team. He also credited the team format with mirroring the concept of mutuality in ministry, which the vicars tried to promote. "Religious are much closer together in their awareness of their common vocation," he observed. "Now, when events are called for religious, we get a good response from men as well as women."

Representatives of men's religious congregations attribute their newfound sense of inclusion to Sister Curran's sensitivity and her pastoral skills.

"I think Muriel has done a fantastic job of connecting religious congregations with one another and with the Church of Rochester,"

said Brother Edward Boyer, CSC. "Her greatest gift has been her presence. Whether there was something going on locally, or something going on in the Southern Tier, she would be there.

"She is just a tremendously pastoral person," he added.

While completing her clinical pastoral education in Thunder Bay, Canada, Sister Curran agreed to accept the post in the Diocese of Rochester. A native of Cambridge, Mass., she has earned a bachelor's degree in education from the College of Notre Dame, Baltimore, a master's in religious education from Boston College, and a master's in theology from the Toronto School of Theology at Regis College.

Monsignor Krieg, who earned a degree in canon law from The Catholic University of America, served in the diocesan Tribunal from 1960 to 1973. Since 1983, Monsignor Krieg has also served as pastor of St. Stephen's Parish in Geneva. Previously, he was pastor at St. Mary of the Assumption Church in Scottsville.

Despite the depth of dialogue surrounding their appointments, neither the co-vicars nor the search committee who designed their job description foresaw the two major challenges

religious congregations would face in the 1980s.

Sister Curran recalled that Pope John Paul II's 1984 letter establishing the three-member Pontifical Commission on Religious Life came "out of nowhere" and was greeted with surprise and mistrust by many members of religious congregations. She credited San Francisco Archbishop John Quinn's leadership, along with that of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), for defusing tensions on the national level.

At the diocesan level, she noticed a similar transition. "First there were listening sessions (between Bishop Clark and local religious), then there were dialogue sessions," Sister Curran recalled. "There was that kind of movement from 'talking at' to 'talking with.'"

She observed a similar "deepening of the bonding between men and women religious" as a result of the dialogue prompted by the commission. "I remember one sister telling me after one of the dialogue sessions, 'It is so refreshing to sit down with men religious. We have so much in common, and we've never done it before,'" Sister Curran said. "I believe that the more we stand together on common ground — and the common ground for men and women religious is the common life — the more we are able to witness publically to that."

During Sister Curran's tenure, the crisis in funding for retired religious also gained widespread recognition. A national study released in May, 1986, revealed that the debt for retirement costs of male and female religious had reached \$2.5 billion.

Locally, the Women Religious Compensation Committee (WRCC), which Sister Curran convened in 1984, reported a shortfall of more than \$1 million among the diocese's two largest religious orders, the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of St. Joseph.

The committee, which presented its report to Bishop Clark in October, 1986, recommended that the current compensation system for religious — which consisted of a cash stipend plus varying provisions for housing and transportation — gradually be replaced by remuneration based on the value of services rendered. At the same time, the report called on religious congregations to assume their own transportation costs by a target date of July, 1988, and by the following July to assume their own housing costs as well.

Although Sister Curran will move on just at the point when years of study and planning are being translated into action, her decision was not prompted by a search for "greener pastures."

"I hope I move to pastures as green," she said.

The Diocesan Sisters Council invites all religious to a reception for Sister Curran and Monsignor Krieg on Sunday, June 26, from 2-4 p.m. at the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse, 1437 Blossom Road.

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