

SIXTH STAGE SISTERS

PREPARATORY GROUNDWORK

For several years I have been hearing gloomy comments from some sincere analysts of Catholic sisterhoods. They say that we are gathered here today at the bedside of a dying organism, trying to prolong its inevitable death through surgical pruning, transplanting, spraying, fertilization, irrigation, fumigation, and sundry other new life support systems. They advise that the systems be turned off and the patient be allowed to die with dignity.

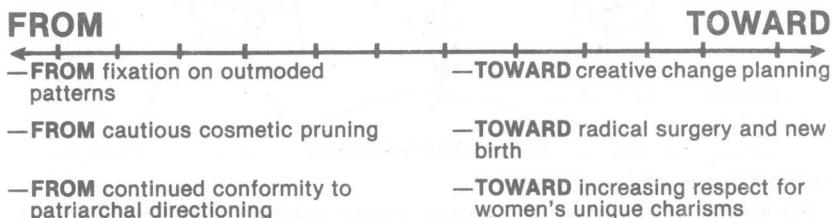
Others concerned with the current state of sisterhoods have taken note of the significant loss of membership, dynamism, attractiveness and influence. They, too, perceive a certain malaise or wilt, and the presence of malignant accretions. However, their prognosis differs. Additional poking and probing around the roots have revealed some definite signs of new life under the dead leaves of winter. Indications are that new-style sisterhoods are emerging. Some are new-born from the seeds of fall. The majority are re-born, —fresh growth on old stalks—, traditional congregations determined to survive into the 21st Century through pruning that is more than merely cosmetic, determined to remove those cultural accretions in no way essential for the beauty of the consecrated life, determined to achieve a true metamorphosis from pyramid to circle structure, a transformation from bureaucracy to authentic community and to Kohlberg's sixth and highest stage of moral maturation.

TARGETS OF THIS STUDY

It is with definite signs of vital movement in sisterhoods that these pages will be concerned. The soggy leaves of winter will be lifted away to allow a synoptic overview of the tender green shoots arising, and of the directions of change visibly transforming traditional sisterhoods or characterizing the newly emerging ones. In no way is the following analysis considered definitive. Nor is it an all-inclusive appraisal of conditions in all sisterhoods. Rather, it is an in-depth viewing of pre-Vatican II patterns of "religious life" compared and contrasted with new forms being expressed two decades after the Council. Based upon present trends of change, this study will suggest or preview what might be expected in the new and renewing sisterhoods of the 21st Century. My goals in brief are:

- To provide renewing sisterhoods, the newly emerging ones, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, and world bishops with a common frame of reference or a catalyst for communication on changing sisterhood patterns
- To open for first-time viewing some detailed information about newborn, Vatican II-oriented sisterhoods, using as a concrete case study one which is probably the largest and best-known group: the Sisters For Christian Community
- To stimulate intra-sisterhood and inter-sisterhood discussions about new lifestyles and models for renewal, in order that the validity and effectiveness of specific change-directions may be better understood, evaluated, adopted, or discarded

- To explore the nature of **SIXTH STAGE SISTERS**, explaining their call to be counter-elitist Christians in respectful but determined confrontation with dominative patterns or persons within the Church and world society
- To present the above psychosociological data and its analysis in a casual, conversational style with diagrams and charts, —brevity techniques which allow us to share a mass of material in minimum time and space
- To facilitate increased awareness of the need for continued cooperative interchange, so that all sisterhoods may move concurrently along the left-to-right directional change continuums . . .



By using the continuum framework throughout this study, the wide diversity among sisterhoods and individual sisters can be scanned quickly. By using the continuum design, a more holistic and accurate view of contemporary sisterhoods can be presented almost at-a-glance. True, totally inclusive coverage and complete objectivity are impossible goals. It is also inevitable that some of the views presented here will take on the flavor of my own values and perspectives, will reflect my experience of thirty years in a rather typical, traditional, western province of a roughly 3000-member American-Canadian group, the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary; followed by thirteen years as co-foundress, co-catalyst, and pioneer of a wholly new expression of the consecrated life, the Sisters For Christian Community. Because of my prolonged participant observation in both the renewing and the new-style sisterhoods, because of the pooling of insights of hundreds of my associates in both orientations, the models of change to be discussed in these pages are not hypothetical possibilities still to be explored, but are based upon concrete patterns of change already implanted in some of the new and some of the renewing groups of "religious" or "consecrated" women. Even the familiar terminology "religious" and "consecrated" has been on the drawing board of change, as will be presently examined.

NOMENCLATURE DILEMMA

In the 1975 draft of the new canon law, the term "consecrated life" replaced "religious life" as a designation more specific and inclusive of secular institutes and other new expressions of Christian Community. In attempting to remove one ambiguity, however, the term could produce another. If, generically speaking, all Christian life is "religious life", then that expression is admittedly poor for specifying the precise nature of Catholic sisterhoods, brotherhoods, and certain congregations of priests. The proposed expression, if adopted, could be equally redundant once the theology of the laity in Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* percolates up to a higher level of consciousness among Christians. In this document the often-eclipsed nature of baptism as the "consecration" of each neophyte to Christ is elaborated:

The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood.

Lumen Gentium, II, 10

If all Christians are consecrated by baptism as a priestly people and are called to perfection through the evangelical counsels, any further consecration seems superfluous. In this light the "religious life" and the "consecrated life," and even the "priestly life" lack scriptural bases for being conceived of as unique and separate states not shared by all the People of God, since to be the People of God means to be religious, consecrated, and priestly. Just as terminology is changing, so are our understandings of the essential meaning of Christ-commitment in forms of special community witness.

THE FUTURESHP CONFERENCE

A national Futureshop Conference that convened in Bethesda, Maryland, in 1975, gathered together knowledgeable persons from various traditional congregations and new communities to ferret out future trends that have been developing quietly within sisterhoods like winter wheat under snow. Their sharings indicated that culture cataclysms, and renewal planning have moved some sisterhoods toward more spontaneous prayer forms, collegial community structure, shared decision-making, and new ministries. But the data delivered at Futureshop also exposed numerous congregational casualties. The convener of the conference, Passionist Cassian Yuhaus, had made wide observations on sisterhoods as data collector and director of CARA, the American Bishops' research center. He concluded that sisterhoods are moving in three rather discrete directions:

- TOWARD** wholly new patterns of Christ-commitment
- TOWARD** renewal of traditional patterns
- TOWARD** structural death

In briefest summary, he envisioned the following options or categories of sisterhood:

1. **EMERGING COMMUNITIES** (180-200 new groups, mostly non-canonical)
 - beginning —risking —creating
 - exploring —innovating —celebrating
2. **RENEWING CONGREGATIONS** (many of the traditional groups)
 - continuing —reorganizing —integrating —democratizing
 - adapting —developing —optimizing —diversifying
3. **DIMINISHING CONGREGATIONS** (4-7-10 traditional groups in each major city)
 - hanging on —languishing —affiliating —fossilizing
 - resisting change —lamenting —amalgamating —dying

A knotty and perplexing question emerges from the Yuhaus data; **WHO IS WHICH?** The emerging new communities have arrived on the scene as silently as flowers along a back fence. They are not instantly recognizable except by their new names. Some have no group names at all. Their mission within Christian community and outside of it is less visible because they express the Vatican II ideal of **PENETRATION** of the total culture in contrast to **CONCENTRATION** in the Catholic subculture. But which are the renewing sisterhoods as opposed to the diminishing ones? What constitutes genuine renewal; what is facade or ritual renewal?

In the process of this sociological analysis, Yuhaus' three categories of sisterhood will be used as convenient abstractions or **IDEAL TYPES**. On the **FROM-TOWARD CONTINUUMS** the three groupings will be seen shading into one another in a left-to-right progression. This study will refer to these three groupings as it discusses some of the questions uppermost in the minds of women determined to assume fuller responsibility for the future of sisterhoods within the Church:

- What shoals must all three sisterhood categories avoid?
- What life-rafts are within reach of each structurally?
- How might sisterhoods collaborate for mutual strengthening?
- What are the hallmarks of the **DIMINISHING** congregations?
- Is renewal in the 1980's too late for them?
- Are the **RENEWING** groups addressing the correct survival issues?
- Do the **RENEWING** groups retain entrenched malignant bureaucratic living structures?
- Do leaders any longer know **WHERE** to lead their sisters even if trained in the techniques of leadership?
- If the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes disavows the renewal charisms of Sisters as expressed in their new constitutions, what then?
- Have the **NEW COMMUNITIES** established their foundations radically enough on Vatican II theology and ecclesiology?

- In avoiding excess structuring, are the **NEW COMMUNITIES** viable?
- Are the non-canonical sisterhoods authentic forms of the consecrated life?
- Can “official forms” and “authentic forms” be equated?

WILL THE REAL SISTERS PLEASE STAND UP?

As indicated previously, the Sisters For Christian Community, (origin 1970, membership circa 500) are the largest, best known, most visible and articulate of the new communities. They will be used consistently throughout these pages as an example of the **EMERGING COMMUNITIES** at the extreme right end of each change continuum. But, because they are also non-canonical, the question may arise as to their religious authenticity. Some may ask if there is a margin of cultural change beyond which a group may not venture if it wishes to be identified as a Roman Catholic sisterhood. While some sisters are concerned over the validity of the new groups, others are concerned over the intransigence to change in older groups that would maintain life patterns long after their vitality is spent and their witness value has become almost meaningless to the host culture. Members of the Consortium Perfectae Caritatis express, by their very alliance, deep concern over the prolongation of the ancient patterns of “religious life” as the truly authentic ones. With comparable conviction some of the new and some of the renewing groups recall that the only words attributed to God in the book of revelation are: “Lo, I make all things new.” (Apoc. 21,5)

The Sisters For Christian Community maintain that their expressions of Christ-commitment are not so much creative innovations as the rediscovering or refocusing on scriptural understandings consonant with traditions of the Primitive Church. They also express close affinity with the newer theological insights presented during the past few decades by a plurality of biblical and ecclesiological scholars in Europe and America. The Sisters For Christian Community have made paramount the authority of the New Testament, theological scholarship, and community consensus, while radically pruning away cultural beliefs and devotional practices accumulated through the past centuries and sacralized gradually as part of the essence of “religious life.” The Sisters For Christian Community have reorganized some religious priorities. They have carefully eschewed biblical and canonical fundamentalism. In Sisters For Christian Community, for example, the poverty of spirit which originally challenged them to exchange personal homes for traditional convents, and personal incomes for dependence on all-providing, all-deciding religious corporations, now challenges them in their new community to stretch beyond the familiar, traditional understanding of the vows. Poverty in the Sisters For Christian Community invites members to forego the security of a motherhouse, a retirement center, financial incorporation, and the comfortable status of canonical approval. Poverty to these new-style sisters is a cleansing force, an eradication of contemporary forms of idolatry, a renunciation of **ELITISM**. It is a denuding insight stripping away the importance of familiar social structures, religious life styles, cherished causes, and once-envisioned goals. Poverty is the emptiness and openness demanded of critic and prophet. Poverty is a readiness, a giving of self, an availability to others, a resilience in the face of cataclysmic culture change; poverty is not at all a financial statement.

There are many ways of expressing Gospel values. One can only marvel at their rich variety, and wonder how differently sisters will be witnessing in the future **CHURCH RADIANT**. Will a continuing pluralism of patterns characterize the sisterhoods which survive into the 21st Century? Will all Christ-committed women unite in a single world-wide grouping of **SIXTH STAGE SISTERS**, —women with global consciousness who dare confrontation with all authoritarian, sexist and person-negating patterns antithetical to Christ's teachings, women who operate as simple catalysts for Christian community wherever they live and work? No spiritual crystal ball proposes the answers. All we can do in these up-coming pages, discussions, and diagrams is to show the directions **FROM** which the sisterhoods are coming, and those **TOWARD** which they are traveling. Where the culture change rationale is explicit, it will be indicated.

Culture is, by its very nature, a group's product, —a design for living, a blueprint for a people's survival. We cannot successfully wear the ready-made patterns of another people of another era. They simply lack fit. Each generation must retool the common heritage and adapt to on-going, ever-changing needs.

Hence, culture patterns are as varied as the unique parts of the total physical and social environment to which they are adapting. Devices for survival on a lake-shore are non-functional for a desert. A hunting people's culture-kit becomes maladaptive when migration and overkill deplete the game. Because social environment changes even more rapidly than natural habitats, women and men, the culture makers, must be persistent producers. No society or sisterhood subsociety can survive without constant culture change.

Eduardo Cardinal Pironio, Prefect, and Augustin Mayer, O.S.B., Secretary for the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, in a document dated August 12, 1980, affirm the same:

The Spirit, who is constantly raising up new forms and institutions of the consecrated life in response to the needs of the times, also animates those already in existence and renews their capacity to come to grips with changed ecclesial and social contexts.

(See *The Pope Speaks*, Vol. 26, Nov. 2, 1981, p. 106)

RESEARCH METHOD

Although this book will be a sociological study based upon participant observation and experience, it does not purport to be a statistical or quantitative study indicating where the majorities and minorities range along the change-continuums to be presented. Rather, the poles of each change-continuum will be reduced to sociological **IDEAL TYPES**, or sisterhoods in the abstract, that attempt to contrast mid-century sisterhood-orientation with Post Vatican II developments and Lawrence Kohlberg's sixth stage of moral maturation.

Perhaps no sister or sisterhood is presently at either extreme on the continuums of **CHANGELESSNESS-CHANGE**. If one prefers to analyze in terms of actual groups, however, one might be justified in thinking that the sisterhoods represented in the Consortium Perfectae Caritatis more closely approximate the **IDEAL TYPE** of changeless sisterhood, while the Sisters For Christian Community, a unity of new-style sisters, typifies the opposite end of the continuums. However that might be, as pilgrim persons journeying somewhere along the continuum pathways, each reader will recognize familiar landmarks or goals as they emerge for discussion.

Although my purpose is to describe and analyze the psychosociological phenomena of internal and external changes in world sisterhoods during the past few decades, and to plot the changes along multiple continuums in order to facilitate their brief but comprehensive examination, I will sometimes evaluate these change directions. Social scientists have long ago abandoned the assumption that it is either desirable or possible for a researcher to be wholly value-free. Nor do I claim any detachment from the consequences of this exposition. Firm is my hope that this information, as organized, will catalyze increased cooperation, communication, and understanding among the persons and groups convinced of the importance of the various continuum positions. My deepening awareness of the continuing polarization within sisterhoods has been augmented by my unique background as both a traditional and new-style sister, by my decades of involvement as a sister-sociologist, writer, lecturer, and resource person at dozens of Chapters for Renewal throughout the United States and Canada. The intense polarization which I have seen in sisterhoods pleads for the remediation sometimes made possible through congregational and community cross-fertilization. Germinal ideas shared in dialogue, can optimize a group's capacity for change. Openly discussing the topics of this book can release personal and group tensions and revitalize determined exploration by sisters themselves relative to issues only those living the life are qualified to resolve adequately.

It is apparent to many that those who are willing to dialogue in openness to the Holy Spirit are truly on the move, engrossed in meaningful internal change, sharing with one another to a degree never before anticipated. They are experiencing together a spiritual journeying without precedent; are feeling the chinook winds of sudden spring. Sisters are uniting in common cause, convinced that the survival of a "religious life" remnant into the 21st Century, or the emergence of wholly new expressions of the consecrated life are contingent upon our mutual bonding in love and cooperation. Those so bonded are moving . . .

FROM

TOWARD

- FROM cultural parthenogenesis
- FROM homogeneity and conformity
- FROM legislating, legalizing, and closing off renewal
- FROM negating women as inferior to men and incapable of self-determination

- TOWARD cross-fertilization
- TOWARD heterogeneity and experimentation
- TOWARD continuously listening, loving, and learning together
- TOWARD affirming and promoting women's natural wisdom and spiritual charisms

Since Christians have different gifts (cf. Rom. 12:16), each one must collaborate in the works of the gospel according to his own opportunity, ability, charismatic gifts, and call to service (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10). Hence all alike, those who sow and those who reap (cf. Jn. 4:37), those who plant and those who irrigate, must be united (cf. 1 Cor. 3:8). Thus, "in a free and orderly fashion cooperating toward the common goal" (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 18), they can spend their forces harmoniously for the upbuilding of the Church.

Vatican II, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, 28)

GROUNDWORK CONCLUSIONS

This book, then, can be seen as a travelogue of almost one million specially bonded women through roughly two decades of our journeying together. In some ways it is like a pictographic map showing the circuitous routes over which we have ventured together through the dark valley of the shadow of death, and of our hilltop assents as well. It is the story of our winter and of this **SUDDEN SPRING**.

This book is a lamp raised to illumine the roads over which we are currently traveling as we strive to blaze new trails for a new generation of **WOMEN-IN-CHRIST**.

So I invite you, as fellow journeyers, to join in the analysis of these thoughts, to become personally involved with their flow, to continually interact with their unfolding, to critique my perspectives, and to take note of the various valid positions that might be interjected into subsequent discussions on the changing understanding of the consecrated life. I welcome sisterly and brotherly exchanges.

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