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'WE'VE COME A LONG WAY, BABY!'

Sacramento Sisters Speak Out

By Sister Carol Anne O'Marie, Printed in the March 18, 1976 Issue of the *Catholic Herald*

Pope John opened the Church windows over a decade ago and shouted "Aggiornamento!" This "opening up" brought changes to religious life. We are too close to scrutinize them with the perspective of history; yet, far enough along for a pit stop to look. Why did they happen? What exactly has changed? How is this time of change effecting those religious women who are living through it?



Herald Photo 1976

Sr Mary Patrick, RSM, Entered Mercy Sisters' Novitiate at St Joseph, Sacramento and Taught Grammar School 41 years.

"They were the best of times and the worst of times," says Sister Kathleen Horgan. Sister Kathleen had nearly reached the ten year mark as a Sister of Mercy when the Vatican Fathers issued *Perfectae Caritatis*, a decree on religious life. In it they asked religious orders to examine 1) the spirit of their founder and, 2) the needs of the times.

On close examination, many active religious orders found that while the spirit of their founder was apostolic (open and mobile), their orders had in fact become monastic (centered and stable). Furthermore, they found themselves serving a world undergoing rapid change. The once-clear norms and

social roles of the church no longer served their original purposes. Parish life and parochial education were not the only shapers of the values and beliefs of American Catholics. Change was necessary. If active orders were to follow the injunction of *Perfectae Caritatis*, they must "demonasticize."

“The changes reinforced our freedom to respond in our apostolate to the social needs of people,” says Sister Walsh, a Sister of Social Service, a community founded in response to the social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*.

What the average lay person saw as new dress, new names, and more socializing for Sisters really was the outward sign of the complicated and painful process of “demonasticizing.” It reached into the nuts and bolts of community living.

Prior to *Perfectae Caritatis*, most active orders followed a monastic horarium (time schedule). Everyone rose at the same time, made mental prayer at the same time, ate at the same time, and went to bed at the same time.



Herald Photo

Rev. Mother Donahue (left), Sr. Maria de Porres, SND (center), and Mother Mary Clare IBVM (right) confer on a music program circa 1960

For some active orders, the school had become their center, much as the school had been the center for the monastery of the Middle Ages. Many orders adopted the monastic practices of “small permissions,” explicit commands for small matters, and corporal penances.

Each order wore a monastic habit with bandeau or coif, wimple, cincture, large rosary, and long skirts. Today, the external structure of active orders is much more flexible and gives personal freedom to the individual sister.

“No longer are we herded into the chapel for communal meditation,” says Sister Evelyn, Sister of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. “Each one is free to pray in the manner best suited to her, to be in touch with God in a personal way.”

Obedience has broadened to share decision-making and the obedience to one’s mission in the Church as sent by religious authority.

Discussions on religious dress often begins with “dress is not important” but somehow manages to get heated enough to prove dress is important.

What active religious wear is important because it is a symbol. However, the symbols that active orders have adopted run on a continuum from a simple ring or pin to a uniform dress and veil.

Sister Elizabeth Galbraith, a Sister of Our Lady of the Retreat in the Cenacle, feels that since she is no longer in a habit, “many lay people are turning for guidance in understanding and accepting their sexuality.”

“I wear a habit,” comments Sister Kathleen, “and it’s an important symbol of witness to me.” “However,” she adds, “I do not feel it is an essential part of religious life.”

No one living religious life today will be able to escape the Chinese curse, “May you live in a time of transition.” What has been the effect of this transition on those women who are living through it? “Change has meant good news and bad news,” says Sister Angela, a Sister of the Holy Family, who laughingly admits she was a late vocation. “It has been painful losing close friends and feeling divisions within community,” continues Sister Angela. (Communities of religious woman have lost 25 percent of their membership over the past ten years.) “However, she adds, “it is hopeful to see our acceptance of diversity and our willingness to respond to the needs of the wider community.”

“While external changes have been difficult for those who were accustomed to an unvarying pattern,” says Sister Claire Spellman, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, “most welcome the emergence of a warm, truly human and approachable woman.”

“Those of us who have chosen to stay in through ten years of turmoil have grown tremendously,” remarks Sister Sheral Marshall, a Sister of St Francis of Penance and Christian Charity, who serves as the diocesan director of vocations. “Most of the young women I’m dealing with,” she adds, “are more prayerful, more aware and more realistic about community than I was when I entered 11 years ago.”

“Changes have enabled us to emerge from the stereotype ideal of religious to responsible women making personal commitments, and mature decisions,” states Sister M. Noella, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

“Thank God, I’m pre-Vatican and post-Vatican,” says Sister Mary Vianney Buckley, a Sister of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary who was semi-cloistered for 17 years. “I had the best of both worlds.” “I’m glad to be alive,” she continues, “this time of transition and change makes me re-echo the words of Wordsworth, ‘bliss it was in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.’”