

Religious Life 50 Years after Vatican II: Who Have We Become? Panel Presentation by Patricia Derbyshire, scsl

As I thought about this topic and all the memories it brought to mind, I began to feel an excitement about this task. But where to begin? In discussion with others someone suggested why not look to the change in our *Constitutions*. Thus began a research project that reminded me of the courage of those Sisters who heard the call of Vatican II and acted on it. It was an inspiring review of our history. The following is an overview of our 1950 Rule Book and its update in 1960, before Vatican II, followed by a study of the texts during and after Vatican II including our last approved *Constitutions* of 2007.

Seek Perfection

In my formation years I do not recall seeing the official texts of the “before years”, but we were instructed in the details. In my research of the 1950 *Rule Book*, I was reminded of the focus “to seek for perfection;” the text format was “prescriptive.” In point form were detailed descriptions of rules, practices, prayers, piety, virtues, perfection, authority, obedience, dependence, precedence, detachment from human relationships and limited contact with the outside world.

Religious life was to be structured and regular. For growth in “perfection,” each sister was to examine herself on “conformation to the *Rule*” and to “distrust oneself.” To assist in the living of the *Rule* we had a *Customs Book*, which we all received, that had something to say about all sectors of our life. The goal? The “sanctification of the members” for the glory of God.

Since the *Rule Book* was only prescriptive, the grounding in spirituality and in the charism for our apostolate came from other writings of the Church or of the saints, from Scripture or spiritual authors, or from the life of our foundress.

A Change in Emphasis

The General Chapter of 1964 shows a marked change in emphasis with the opening retreat given in the spirit of Vatican II. The Chapter was conducted in a spirit of renewal and “aggiornamento” allowing for the renewal of monastic ideals in our tradition but in a spirit of adaptation.

This Chapter brought much excitement as we were called “to participate in the New Springtime of the Church” keeping the congregation abreast of the times in our Western culture. We were called to recognize the integrity of each Sister, to promote the maturity of each and to develop personal gifts for the good of the community and to respond to the needs of the Church.

These were days of learning and change as communication, responsibility, dialogue and consultation became common words to promote fruitful discussions in our communities. This included Returning to our Sources, deepening our knowledge of our foundress by studying her writings and conferences resulting in a better understanding of her spirit and “our” charism. We were also encouraged to have knowledge of religious sciences, scripture, and the world around us, thus promoting educational opportunities, and trips for study, leisure, and occasional home visits. There was a stronger focus on ministry

encouraging active participation in the liturgical renewal, becoming “parish minded” and involved in our local parishes.

The Book of Customs was to be retained with adaptations made so as to lessen the burdens of multiple devotions. It was not always necessary to be present for all common prayer when outside “ministry” was called for: we could adapt our horarium accordingly. During the next two years we began to see our religious life as living “in the world” for the sake of ministry.

Revision of Constitutions & Rules

In 1967-68 a special General Chapter was convened for the revision of *Constitutions & Rules* and the *Customs Book*. They were to be reformulated according to the “signs of the times.” This revision increased our awareness of the “human person”, her welfare and maturity: “The manner of living out one’s consecrated life will be different from that of her neighbours.” Faithfulness to living the vows focused not on “perfection” but on loving service in the whole Christ for “the Holy Spirit has given different charisms to each one for the needs of the Church.” The foundation for this revision was based on the Gospels, reflection on the life and desires of the Church, the spirit of our foundress and concern for the needs of the world today.

This *Constitution* was a document that included texts for the foundation of our life, for inspiration, for daily living of the vows and for sharing in the pastoral work of the Church: “We are the people of God.” It was a call to renewal based on the language of Vatican II. Each chapter began with a text from Scripture, from Vatican II documents, *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis*, or from writings of our foundress that encouraged being open to the “signs of the times.”

We studied our foundress’ life and writings so as to return to our sources and ensure that our spirituality was centered more positively and more effectively in the mystery of Christ. We were enabled to move out of our structured pattern of life and share in her vision. Our renewal was to be attuned to the life of today and tomorrow and “to broaden our knowledge of the modern world in our own land as well as in mission countries. Modern communication forms were made available to open us to the needs around us as well as to provide opportunities for relaxation.

It was recognized that the Sisters’ personal way of life and apostolate could vary according to her personal gifts and the needs of the Church. This included allowing choice in a personal confessor, finding a personal prayer rhythm while retaining special traditional prayers of the congregation and allowing optional practices to one’s personal piety. The Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist were now to be the “source and summit” of our life and centre of our communal prayer.

New Understanding of the Vows and Mission

Our “teaching mission in the Church” was to broaden its educational outlook. It was at this point that some Sisters moved from school education to other forms of education by becoming involved in parish ministry, adult education, retreat ministry and more. Also, hearing the call of *Populorum Progressio* resulted in opening a mission in Peru for the education of the poor.

Living the vows was no longer seen as “renunciation and discipline” but as the living of an integrated, well balanced wholesome life for the purpose of bringing the “good news of Christ” through our ministry and presence. Our life of poverty was to show itself as “love” and our concern for the poor was to be more attentive, more active and more generous. This included the struggle against injustice for the common good of all.

Words such as subsidiarity, participation, sharing, collegiality, consultation, dialogue and collaboration entered into our discussions and the practice of obedience. The superior of the community was no longer “mother” but an animator calling forth the gifts of all members, inviting “dialogue and co-responsibility” for an active and intelligent collaboration with each sister.

Community and ministry appointments were now preceded by “consultation.” The goal of government was no longer focused on obedience to the *Rule* but it was to foster close relations of love, respect, trust, acceptance and consideration of the common good. We were challenged to become a Christ-centered community of service where each was to fulfill her unique mission in our modern world. The congregation was to maintain an ecclesial outlook in our modern evolving society.

In our community life, we were called to be of one mind and heart by being in dialogue and collaboration to facilitate our community life of prayer, ministry, relaxation, vacations, and family visits.

Challenging Years

At this Chapter (1967-1968), the *Customs Book* and chapter of faults were abolished. We started living “according to what made common sense.” The traditional habit could be modified according to needs of sisters in their milieu. Regions and provinces could “experiment” on the wearing of a contemporary dress. I made my first profession in this “contemporary dress.”

The years that followed the Special General Chapter were years of “experimentation” and change. For some this was an exciting and freeing time, for others it was difficult and confusing. This made for lively discussions at times; it was a challenge to live maturely while facing our reasons for coming to religious life. Some made the choice to leave the congregation and there was a decrease in religious vocations.

“Together We Witness”

In 1970 we received an outline of *Guidelines and Norms*, not *Rules*, based on the work of the Special Chapter; in 1983, we received *Transitional Constitutions* and finally in 1985, the approved *Constitutions and Norms* entitled *Together We Witness*. Finally, the present *Constitutions and Norms* were revised and approved in 2007.

Where Are We Now? How Have We Changed?

Our teaching mission in the Church has broadened from teaching in schools to service with and to the People of God in numerous ways. This includes adult faith education/formation, catechetics, parish ministry, retreats and spiritual direction, prison ministry, First Nations ministry, social justice animation and action, pastoral care and support for poor and marginalized girls and women, in a word, “preferential option for the poor.”

The renewal that our congregation has experienced is also the story of the majority of congregations in the western world. Religious have taken initiatives to answer the needs around them according to their charism and traditions.

In Summary these Include:

- Promoting theological, scriptural, spiritual and professional education so that the members could be leaders, teachers, advocates, healers and witnesses to Christ in compassion and service.
- Promoting the human potential of all members so they could use their gifts for the life of the Church, world and Earth, bringing the Gospel of Jesus to the hurting, vulnerable, suffering and disadvantaged in our milieu.
- Deepening our life in Christ to embody his life, death & resurrection by living our lives according to the Gospel: *“Jesus did not see sin, but saw a humanity that was wounded, broken, confused, fearful, sick and lost. Jesus was moved by compassion for all who were in need; his passion was to bring healing to all.”* (author unknown)

Conclusion

The renewal of religious life these past 50 years has deeply changed us in our personal lives and in the life of our communities. It has also radically changed our engagement with the world and the Church. We recognized that we were called to live authentic lives based on the Gospel, not lives “searching for perfection”, but bringing the peace and healing of Christ to our brothers and sisters and to our Earth. The Vatican II renewal was pivotal in returning us to the inspiration and ministry of our founding charisms calling us to live as Jesus lived. We understand our call to see the woundedness around us and to respond as best we can, with the gifts we have, as individuals and as congregations.