

CATHOLIC WOMEN CONFRONT THE PROCESS OF RENEWAL

Juli Loesch **A**S A RADICAL alternative lifestyle, the religious Orders of the Roman Catholic Church have an amazing track record. In 1980, for instance, the women and men living under The Rule of Benedict, the oldest code of decentralist cooperative living in the West, will celebrate their 1,500th anniversary. (I remember giggling when some friends from Movement for a New Society boasted that their commune had hung together for "five long years"!) Longevity isn't the only—or the most important—sign of success for social organizations; but surely those interested in "intentional communities" have much to learn from such a long-standing and vigorous collective experience.

At present there are over 125,000 Catholic women in religious orders (sisters and nuns) in the U.S. alone. These women have influenced—for good or ill—every generation of Americans and the institutional structures of the nation since its founding. Daughters of hard-working immigrants, they founded and administered schools and hospitals, working for subsistence wages. These sisters are the basic labor force, the backbone of social services of the American Catholic Church.

When such a large workforce transforms its own lifestyle and internal politics, we might expect that transformation to have some impact on society. Yet the enormous changes made by these religious women in the last ten years, when noticed at all by outsiders, have largely been misunderstood and trivialized ("I guess ol' Sister Mary Rosary just decided to kick the habit, ha ha.")

It's not generally realized that these 125,000 American women deliberately took apart their own collective lifestyle, debated it, re-evaluated it, and then put it back together in the late '60s and early '70s. During a decade of phenomenal political and cultural change, this re-founding of the great religious orders may have broad significance for society as a whole.

Climb Along the Cutting Edge (Paulist Press, 1977), an analysis of the sisters' "revolution" written by five Benedictines, describes how renewal hit the 2,200 members of the Federation of St. Scholastica. It is a microcosm of the pain and process of change in every U.S. community of women religious, Benedictine or not.

When convents were founded in the U.S. in the 19th century they were poor—and served the needs of poor immigrants, especially the children and the sick. Delegates to the Chapters of Renewal (the self-government meetings from 1966-74 that brought in the changes) still had this working-class orientation. Of their fathers, 52 percent were blue collar workers or small farmers, and 65 percent had less than four years of high school education. Of their mothers, 83 percent worked at home full-time, and 66 percent had less than four years of high school. The sister-delegates came mostly from large families: 67 percent had grown up with four or more brothers and sisters; 16 percent with eight or more.

The delegates' own educational level was quite high. Due to their training as Catholic school teachers and health workers, only 5 percent held less than a Bachelor's degree. Practically all had full-time jobs, with salaries, even for hospital administrators and college pres-

idents, ranging between \$1,500 and \$3,000 a year—paid directly to the convent.

Having voluntarily chosen poverty for religious reasons, the sisters weren't bothered by the pay scale. But there were increasing tensions between the work they were expected to do, and the restrictive lifestyle that had been mandated for them since medieval times. Encouraged by changes in the Catholic Church following Vatican Council II (1962-65), they began asking for more voice in the decisions affecting their lives.

Some may assume that this demand came from the younger sisters, perhaps a bit more rebellious, more secular, less obedient. However, the Benedictines' study shows that this was not the case. Not one delegate elected to the Renewal Chapters had been a sister for less than ten years. Forty-five percent had been Benedictines for 11-25 years; 4-percent for more than 50 years. They were women who, when polled, found pre-Vatican II religious life stable (96 percent), meaningful (77 percent), joyful, satisfying, and effective (70 percent).

On the other hand, these same delegates found pre-Vatican II religious life restrictive (90 percent), introverted (77 percent), and even regressive (70 percent). For many, apparently, the price of peace was conformity; the effectiveness was measured by old goals; the happiness came with severe limits on personal development.

They also suffered from role conflict. In the convent they were expected to be docile and childlike in their submission to authority. In their work they were expected to be mature, competent professionals. They were often put into dilemmas that produced guilt: e.g., should they work with student committees after school hours (and miss choral prayer back at the convent) and so be "good teachers"? Or should they go straight to the convent and be "good religious"?

This role conflict, especially for intelligent, highly-motivated women, is one of the most difficult stress situations of the human condition. To be considered (or to consider yourself) an irresponsible teacher or a lukewarm religious affected self-esteem as well as social value.

A glance at the typical day in a Benedictine convent of the 1950s and most of the '60s shows why conflict could be chronic:

- 4:50 AM Rising Bell
- 5:10 Choral morning prayers (i.e. chanted in Latin) and meditation
- 6:30 Mass, followed by more choral prayer
- 7:45 Breakfast (eaten in silence)
- 8:30- Work (at home or at school)
- 11:30 Examination of Conscience
- 12:00 Lunch (silent, except for

table reading) followed by choral prayer

- 1:00- Work (at home or at school)
- 4:30 PM
- 4:45 Matins (choral prayer) and spiritual reading
- 6:00 Supper (silent except for table reading), kitchen chores
- 7:00 Recreation (all seated in the common recreation room)
- 8:00 More choral prayer, followed by the Great Silence
- 9:00 Lights out for those who were neither students nor teachers
- 10:00 Lights out for students and teachers

When you consider that no deviation from this schedule, however tiny, was allowed without express permission from the Superior, you get a notion of how regimented this lifestyle really was.

Yet the ancient tradition carried with it into the last half of the 20th century the seeds of its own change. In the 6th century AD, Benedict of Nursia incorporated into his Rule a definite theme of participatory government and decentralism (in church language, "collegiality" and "subsidiarity").

Government was to be neither autocratic nor democratic, but "cenobitic," basic decisions being made through a communal "discernment" process under a prioress (Superior) whose prime function is to unite the community. Each priory is autonomous, self-supporting, and self-governing. These themes, suppressed in 19th century European religious houses, were reclaimed and strongly reaffirmed during Renewal.

The five traditional Benedictine vows (poverty, chastity, obedience, stability and conversion of life) accepted as tools for spiritual freedom to help the individual "seek God," were also reconsidered in ways that seem radically new, but are actually so old that they merely look new.

"Poverty" was defined as emancipation from an alienated, consumeristic lifestyle; the refusal to eat the fruits of oppression. To many sisters it also implies a call to live with and be a part of the poorer classes, sharing material and spiritual goods with those in need. "Live simply, so that others may simply live."

"Chastity" was reaffirmed as a commitment to supportive relationships with other women, recognizing the need for affection and intimacy. A celibate love

for God and for other people is not seen as being superior to sexual love, but as a free choice for the sake of a shared community life that is expected to endure until death.

"Obedience" was redefined in an egalitarian way, stressing responsible input into decision-making. When a policy is established, the sister then accepts it with a sincere openness to its truth and value.

"Stability" is a commitment to enter a kind of "family" where people help each other live holy, integrated lives over the long haul. It is a "stay-put-ness" for the sake of knowing each other over long periods of time, working as reliable partners for long-term goals, while being faithful to the needs of those who can have no mobility (such as the sick and infirm of the community.)

"Conversion of life" is now seen as a lifelong process of rebirth and growth away from the shallow, violent, and alienating habits of materialist culture, and towards a fuller development of personal gifts for all.

A dozen years ago, the well-trained Sister was dependent, grave, sober, frugal, reserved and docile. All of these are quite obviously the marks of a model wife by some cultural standards. Most contemporary religious women reject that they are the necessary marks of holiness or wholeness in a mature adult human being.

The process of renewal empowered the Sisters to be agents of systematic—and systemic—change in their own lives. And since the personal is political, a growing number of Catholic sisters see themselves as agents of change in the larger society.

Recent headlines dramatize this fact: *First Woman Religious Elected to Arizona State Legislature.*

Mother Superior Chairs Committee for Prison Reform.

Sister Named Director of Vermont Human Services Agency.

Nuns Jailed in Anti-Nuclear Protest.

Sisters Face Federal Charges for Aiding and Counseling Mexican Aliens.

These women are not isolated activists, but members of closely-knit, supportive households explicitly oriented toward social change and liberation. Prayer and contemplation, which are still central values in the religious orders, are seen to interpenetrate the world of action. The insights and the visions for



the future that are developed in prayer, draw the sister into action on behalf of justice and for the transformation of the world.

The next decade may see more North American religious women and men, like so many of their Latin American counterparts, moving into positions of direct

confrontation with oppressive political and social "powers that be." As Benedictine leader Joan Chittister, OSB, observes, "Our values may have placed us on the cutting edge of history."

Juli Loesch is a member of PAX, a Christian center for non-violence in Erie, Pa.

IN THESE TIMES

Editorial

Dissent raises issues for Soviets

The recent trials of dissidents in the Soviet Union raise three distinct issues: the lack of democracy in the Soviet Union, the relation between socialism and democracy, and the U.S.-Soviet relations as they affect the prospects for world peace.

The trials illustrate that for all the reforms since Stalin, the Soviet political system is not democratic. All the defendants were charged with and convicted of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. (Shcharansky was, in addition, charged with and convicted of treasonable espionage.) Unlike trials during the Stalin era, the defendants were not forced to confess guilt, and the state followed certain prescribed legal norms.

But it is precisely those norms, provided for in the Soviet constitution and criminal code, that violate democratic principles. They sanction deformed and inadequate protections of due process for citizens and they authorize the state to define permissible speech. Soviet law permits punishment of citizens for their opinions and for expressing them in a national or international forum.

It vests sovereignty in a party elite rather than in the people. No such system of law can be squared with political democracy. The anti-semitic overtones of the campaign against the dissidents are also in fundamental conflict with principles of democracy, no less of socialism.

Socialists of all kinds in the West—and growing numbers of them in the East and the non-aligned nations—have come to understand that without political liberty for the people, strict limitations on the powers of the state, and renunciation of a one-party political monopoly, there can be no genuine workers' democracy under socialism, and no socialist movement capable of winning majoritarian



Soviets cannot claim to lead international socialist movement while trampling on democracy.

popular allegiance under capitalism in the West.

Socialist (including communist) criticism of and protest against Soviet undemocratic institutions and practices, such as have occurred throughout Western Europe, are therefore obligatory in the cause of forging the bonds between democracy and socialism and hence in strengthening the socialist movements within the various nations and internationally. Such leftist protest, unlike that of the U.S. government, is as concerned for the rights of communist, socialist, and workers dissidents in the Soviet Union and East Europe (and

other socialist countries) as for the rights of those who may oppose socialism.

The Soviet Communists, on the other hand, cannot claim leadership of an international socialist movement while at the same time opposing and trampling upon principles of democracy considered basic to the socialist cause by fellow socialists in other countries.

The Carter administration's use of the Human Rights club in freezing detente and heating up the old cold war tensions delivers more blows against partisans of democracy in the Soviet Union than against the Soviet elite. Its motivation is

also suspect. The state of democracy in the Soviet Union is no different now than during the recent period of detente. Why is Carter now making this issue a barrier against sustaining the momentum of detente? Why does he not make it the same barrier to cooperative relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, and other pro-capitalist tyrannies?

Is he taking the path of another cold war crusade, so dangerous to world peace, that liberal Democrats seem incorrigibly to stir up whenever they enter the White House? Must the nation always be forced to choose between Republican reaction and martial Democratic adventures?

And if President Carter is so devoutly dedicated to Human Rights everywhere, why doesn't he, for one example, direct his Department of Justice to intervene on behalf of the Wilmington 10 in North Carolina? And why doesn't he stand by and commend his UN ambassador Andrew Young when he suggests that the U.S. should honestly acknowledge and deal with the blemishes on its own record of democracy and when he reminds us that in supporting human rights Americans should avoid self-righteous hypocrisy, smug complacency and chauvinistic belligerence?

Concern for democracy in the Soviet Union is legitimate and important. The need to develop and strengthen the bonds between democracy and socialism is urgent and compelling. No less so is the cause of world peace and hence of improved relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. We should not permit the first two to be pitted against the Third. That way lies not human rights, democracy and peace in the world (or in the U.S.), but the tyranny and destruction that come with national chauvinism, arms races, and war.

Fraser walks out on consensus politics

In a recent editorial (July 5) we said that the old game of "business unionism" is over and that recognition of the need for a new departure in American politics is emerging within the ranks and leadership of the labor movement.

The latest evidence of this is UAW president Douglas A. Fraser's statements upon his resignation from the semi-official Labor-Management Group. Composed of eight members each from business and labor, and headed by former Labor Secretary John T. Dunlop, the group, like similar arrangements since the end of World War II, is designed to sustain a labor-capital consensus in advising President Carter on policy matters.

Fraser said he resigned to strip away the facade of agreement covering the reality of deepening conflict between the corporations and labor. Though the AFL-CIO has not yet followed Fraser in his walk off the Dunlop committee, many of their leaders are indicating publicly that they share his view.

The "last straw" was the death of the labor law reform bill in the Senate, which may well have put the final nail in the consensus' coffin. Labor leaders expected that already unionized large corporations would at least remain neutral on the bill, which provides for moderate procedural changes in rules governing organizing and representation elections. Far from it. Large corporations, including those with representatives on the Dunlop committee, like General Motors and United States Steel, joined the offensive in a "multi-million-dollar lobbying campaign" (*Business Week*, July 31) that culminated in the Senate filibuster in June killing the bill.

The falling-out over labor law reform

comes on the heels of a string of labor setbacks in a time of Democratic control of the White House and Congress: defeat of the common site picketing bill; gutting of the Humphrey-Hawkins employment bill; a paltry increase in the minimum wage; the hamstringing of OSHA inspection of

CIO strategist told the press that "we are going to have to reassess whether our goals should be sought legislatively, or instead if we should seek them through the courts and...aggressive confrontations in organizing drives and across the bargaining table."

Business leaders have chosen to wage one-sided class war against working people.

health and safety hazards; business oriented energy legislation making its way through Congress; tax breaks for business and the rich and little or none for working people; cutbacks in public employment and in real income for public employees; mounting business and government propaganda blaming unions for inflation.

In view of all this, Fraser has drawn the conclusion that "leaders of the business community, with few exceptions, have chosen to wage a one-sided class war today in this country—a war against working people, the unemployed, the poor, the minorities, the very young, and the very old, and even many in the middle class of our society." Perhaps of greater significance, he went public with a conclusion that in the past would more likely have remained private.

AFL-CIO leaders, too, are going public with talk of painful reassessments of their political strategy, which may be taken up at the federation's executive council meeting in Chicago Aug. 7. One AFL-

Fraser told a press conference soon after quitting the Dunlop committee that "for the first time in years," union leaders are seriously contemplating a labor party as an alternative to the two major parties. While he himself is not yet prepared to take such a step, he said the UAW would work to "reforge links" with other anti-corporate movements among blacks and other minorities, the poor, women's organizations, church groups, etc., for broad political and economic action. Even short of a labor party, such coalition politics points toward moving from narrow-interest unionism to social unionism.

In a similar mood, Machinists president William Winpisinger has stated on public television (to the indignant consternation of consensus-monger Ben Wattenberg) that it was time for American labor to shift its political outlook from seeking consensus within the corporate system to building a movement for democratic socialism as in the best interests of working people.

That such talk is coming from labor's leadership, including from many among its old guard (a recent speech by AFL-CIO's Lane Kirkland about deepening class fissures is another case in point), is all the more significant. Whether or not they mean what they say is at this point less important than that they feel compelled to say it.

The old consensus vital to the old business unionism is a thing of the past: It can no longer "deliver the goods" counted on by labor leaders to keep them solidly planted upon their base. That is because the condition for the consensus—an expanding economy that could yield "more" without redistributing wealth and power—is a thing of the past. Labor leaders realize that if they do not adjust (or at least appear to adjust) to the new conditions of class conflict and political organization, they too will become a thing of the past.

It is for the socialist left, within and without the labor movement, to understand the present ferment in labor as symptomatic of a new stage in the nation's political history, and help build the bridge from the "old consensus" to a new departure of a labor-based popular socialist movement—whether or not labor's present leaders are willing to cross that bridge now that they've come to it.

That will mean that we socialists must rid ourselves of doctrinaire ways of thinking and sectarian styles of behavior in forthrightly articulating a program of democratic socialism suited to the interests and experiences of the majority of Americans. Fraser has taken a walk—let us see that it continues to the bridge and over it.