

The Ministerial Future of Women Religious

Mary Christine Fellerhoff, C.S.A.

An experienced leader traces the development of the ministry of women religious over the last thirty years. She analyzes in particular implications of Vatican II and the feminist movement for new models of ministry.

Recognized for the establishment of the Catholic school and healthcare systems in the United States, women religious are still imaged as teachers and nurses by the general public. Where have all the sisters gone, and where are they likely to be found in the foreseeable future? Having experienced the dismantling of a stable past and living in a changing present, I would be foolish or dishonest to claim a clear blueprint for the ministerial future of women religious. Yet after thirty years of experimentation and experience, common threads are emerging, forming patterns of future development.

The ministerial future of women religious may be glimpsed through tracing some key influences on the ministry changes of the past thirty years, describing the current state of ministry among women religious, and suggesting threads shaping the future. A couple of caveats are in order. First, I write not as a theorist but as a participant in these changes and as an observer from the perspective of leadership in my own congregation and in the national office of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Second, I write as an apostolic woman religious. Changes in religious life, including ministry, may have different

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nuances in monastic, e.g., Benedictine or in evangelical, e.g., Franciscan congregations. All of them, however, have experienced fundamental changes.

Key Influences Impacting the Ministry of Women Religious

In the second half of the twentieth century, two happenings clearly affected the life and ministry of women religious: Vatican Council II and the feminist movement. I am suggesting neither a direct cause-effect relationship nor a master plan for change. I am suggesting that as the words and concepts of Vatican II and the experience of the women's movement sank deeply into their hearts and minds, women religious reflected on and lived the implications. In retrospect, we can see an impact on their ministerial life.

Vatican II

Five areas of the Council led to changes that continue to drive ministry today.

1) The *call to renew religious life* issued in the Council document *Perfectae Caritatis* left no aspect of life untouched. The "manner of life, of prayer and of work," including the "mode of government" (n. 3), the habit (n. 17), and ministry (n. 20) were to be evaluated. The criteria for adaptation in each case included the "needs of the apostolate." As women religious adapted to the "changed conditions of our time," they saw a need to change both the ministries and the manner of doing ministry.

2) The opening words of *Gaudium et Spes* signaled a new self-understanding of the *Church's relationship to the world*, a Church which shares "the joy and hope, the grief and anguish" of the men and women of our time (n. 1). As these words echoed in the souls of women religious, they changed. Sisters would no longer wait for people to come to them, but would follow Christ who sought the lost and forgotten.

3) Chapter IV of *Lumen Gentium* discusses the *role of the laity*, who share "in the salvific mission of the Church" and "through Baptism and Confirmation . . . are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself" (n. 33). No longer would women religious cling to insulated institutions. They began to share ministry with the laity in a more deliberate way as equal partners and to train them as leaders of ministry in their own right.

4) The Church's *commitment to the poor* gets frequent mention. A particular plea was addressed to religious: "You hear rising up, more pressing than ever . . . 'the cry of the poor'" (*Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 17). Religious congregations realized that the immigrant populations they once served had become middle- and sometimes upper-class. To fulfill the mission of Christ, some felt compelled to identify new ministries to, with and for the economically poor people. More-

over, *Perfectae Caritatis* told religious that the “cry of the poor” must “bar you from whatever would be a compromise with any form of social injustice” (n. 18).

5) Following Vatican II, the 1971 Synod of Bishops in *Justice in the World* declared *justice a Gospel imperative*: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel . . .” (n. 6). The social teachings of the Church, once a well-kept secret, were now brought front and center in ministry and activity.

As ministries changed, so did terminology. *Apostolates*, the term used prior to Vatican II and in the Council documents, changed to *mission* and *ministry*. Anneliese Sinnott, O.P., writes of this change in language: “Sometime before 1970 the language of ‘engaging in the apostolate’ gave way to ‘living out the mission through one’s ministry,’ and the meaning of ministry changed from church work to the work of the church” (Sinnott 1999, 99–100). This changed meaning multiplied the ministries in which women religious would engage, even to increasing numbers ministering outside Church structures.

Feminism

Concurrent with Vatican II, women were becoming more aware of their identity and history as women. The publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 is generally regarded as marking the beginning of the movement known as feminism. It is beyond my purpose to define feminism, still less to distinguish among its various brands. My purpose is to mention some of the concepts and phrases in popular consciousness influencing the ministry of women religious. Even though individuals responded to feminism on a continuum from full acceptance to resistance and rejection, many concepts that affected the thinking and lives of women continue to permeate society. Included among them are the equality of women and men, based on human dignity, leading to belief in a discipleship of equals; the validity of women’s experience and ways of knowing, often ignored in history; reevaluation of male experience as normative for the whole human race; and analysis of patriarchy as a system which devalues women and makes them subservient to male rule.

Many faithful and thoughtful women religious found in feminist thinking reinforcement of some of the principles of Vatican II: equality of persons through baptism and the common call to holiness, recognition of the role of the laity to which all women in the Church belong, the cry for justice to be extended to women as well as men. A new sense of solidarity with their sisters not in religious life gave women religious impetus for ministry to, with, and for women. Mission and Chapter statements began to include priority for ministry to women and the children they were raising, often alone. Awareness of the pervasive patriarchal system in the Church led many to discomfort with ministry in Church structures. The tension continues today as women religious struggle with what

has been called the “parochialization” of religious life to the detriment of the prophetic nature.

Ministry of Women Religious Today

The story of women religious today must recount both their changing ministries and the manner of doing ministry. Prior to Vatican II the story is about religious congregations and the institutions they started or staffed, often at the invitation of a bishop or pastor. The story of ministry today is the story of individual religious. The role of the congregation, in many cases, has changed from one of assigning each sister to one of mutual discernment in light of the congregational mission and the sister’s talents. The following examples are based on real individuals; the names and some facts are changed because they are representative of hundreds of others with similar story threads.

Changing Ministries

Education: Sisters Ann, Betty, and Candace began teaching in the 1950s in Catholic parish grade schools staffed by their congregation. Ann still teaches first graders in a parish school system with sisters as principal and as administrator, both from her community. Most of the other teachers are lay women and men. Ann has been honored for her personal ministry to the increasing immigrant population in the local community. Betty, after teaching grade school for a number of years, earned a doctoral degree in Scripture. Today she teaches in a theological school, educating priests, religious, and lay people for ministry. She is a recognized writer, scholar, and speaker. Candace, after serving as teacher and principal in a number of grade schools, spent several years in community service. Today she coordinates a literacy program. Sister DeLois, having been a teacher and principal for thirty-five years, now directs the religious education program in a remote rural parish. Sister Erika, professed in the nineties, currently teaches in a Catholic school with culturally diverse students. She has no expectation that another member of her congregation will either join or replace her.

As these examples indicate, women religious continue to minister as educators, fewer and fewer in traditional parish schools. Many congregations planned their departure from traditional settings over time, so that schools they left remained open with lay teachers and eventually lay administrators. Some sisters chose an “option for the poor” when the parish school closed as enrollments dropped and costs soared. As sisters gradually left the middle-class parishes where they found themselves in the sixties and seventies, they often chose to serve in poorer schools, in rural areas, among native populations or in culturally diverse areas, in religious education and RCIA programs, in adult literacy, or in colleges and seminaries. Even in retirement, some sisters tutor or serve as teachers’ aides.

Health Care: Sister Faith has been a nurse in a specialized area in hospitals operated by her congregation all forty-eight years of her religious life and continues to serve in one of them. She is one of a handful of her congregation still ministering in hospitals connected with the congregation. Sister Gloria began nursing in the late sixties, served in a clinic in Latin America for several years, earned her nurse practitioner license, and now practices in a clinic that serves primarily Hispanic women in the Southwest. After nursing in congregational hospitals, teaching in the nursing department of the congregation's college, Sister Harriet became interested in holistic health during a sabbatical. She is now a certified massage therapist. Professed in the fifties, Sister Imelda began as a nurse, served in Latin America, was involved in inner city justice activity, worked in a house for terminally ill AIDS patients, and is now in hospice ministry.

Sisters changed with the changing healthcare industry. Fewer continue to serve in the institutions, which are now largely staffed and administered by laity. Many have taken their nursing skills into clinics for the poor, hospice and AIDS ministry, nursing home and elder care, pastoral care, holistic health and wellness techniques, and healing touch therapies. As opportunities for women increased, sisters have become nurse practitioners and doctors to serve primarily in poor remote areas with little or substandard health care.

Social Services: A former teacher, Sister Jeroma served for ten years as administrator of a social service center in a southern city. A former nurse, Sister Kay administers a social service ministry in a large northern city. Sister Loyola, after teaching a few years, worked as a paralegal for poor, mostly Hispanic, people in the Southwest. Today she is getting her law degree primarily to help persons with immigration problems. After nearly twenty years of teaching, Sister Mika ministers in a home for unwed mothers. Sister Noella, a nurse, and Sister Olivia, a teacher, ministered in a L'Arche home. Noella now runs a wellness program for retired sisters in her congregation.

From traditional ministries sisters were drawn to ministries to marginalized people. They opened and worked in service centers; in food pantries and kitchens; and in homes for unwed mothers, recovering addicts, and persons with disabilities. A few have become foster parents. Sisters are involved in housing projects: participating in Habitat for Humanity, running transitional housing, and working in shelters for the homeless. As an Institute, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas conduct Mercy Housing and McCauley Institute. For more effective

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service, some have entered professional fields as lawyers, social workers, clinical counselors, and therapists.

Spirituality and Pastoral Work: A teacher in the seventies, Sister Pius has been a pastoral associate and is currently working in ecumenical and interfaith spirituality. Sisters Quentin and Rita, both nurses since profession, have served at different times in the capacity of mission effectiveness coordinators and in congregational leadership. Each is a spiritual director, both in private practice and in retreat centers. Sister Sally has taught, served in the congregation's formation program, earned a degree in liturgy, and now serves as liturgist in a parish. After several years of teaching, Sister Thomasina runs a spirituality and retreat center in a remodeled portion of the Motherhouse. Sister Urban, who began in teaching,

has been a hospital chaplain and is now chaplain in a federal prison. Sister Vivian, a former teacher and high school principal, is a full time artist, using arts as an entryway into the sacred.

Care of souls holds a natural appeal for sisters who have been formed in habits of prayer and whose lives are centered on the God-quest. Some engage in spiritual direction alongside other ministries. Sisters administer, as well as give spiritual direction and retreats in spirituality centers and sabbatical programs for religious. Some are spiritual directors for seminarians and priests. Others feel called to nurture lay spirituality as pastoral associates, liturgists, visitors of the sick and elderly, bereavement counselors, or ministers in other parish support roles. Some have become chaplains in hospitals and prisons. Sisters can also be found in diocesan offices as vicars or delegates for religious, vocation promoters, chancellors, or in other roles of pastoral

service in the diocese. A phenomenon of the last thirty years is the increasing number of sister-artists who use their musical and artistic talents to foster emotional, mental, and spiritual health.

A brief overview of ministries cannot cover every place or role in which women religious serve. While on occasion a pre-Vatican II woman religious might be found in some of the less traditional roles, she was the exception. Today women religious are everywhere that human need appears.

Changing Modes of Ministry

While sisters were expanding and changing ministries, they also changed the ways in which they did ministry. Prior to the 1970s, ministry was primarily serv-

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ice, the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. With the raising of social justice awareness, sisters added advocacy and systemic change to their vocabulary and their ministry. The most public example of their commitment to the social teachings of the Church through advocacy and systemic change are the establishment of NETWORK in 1971. NETWORK today is a national Catholic social justice lobby, known as one of the most effective for doing its homework on the issues. Through NETWORK at the national level, legislative arms of regional LCWR groups, area centers of justice and peace such as the 8th Day Center in Chicago, and congregational justice and peace offices, women religious use their moral voice to advocate for those whose voices have been excluded from the decision-making process. Committed to systemic change, they do the social analysis that has led many individuals and congregations to embrace the principles of feminism, ecological sustainability, and nonviolence.

As direct service ministries were enhanced by advocacy and systemic change efforts, so corporate or institutional ministries changed as well. With fewer sisters and increasing numbers of laity involved in the hospitals and schools, congregations shared not only the ministry but also the managing and administration of those ministries with their lay colleagues. A new word was coined: sponsorship. In place of owning, running, and staffing institutions, congregations were now said to “sponsor” them. Sponsorship is understood as a relationship of influence. Through its sponsorship, a congregation maintains the institution’s Catholic identity, oversees its mission and values, and shares its charism with lay colleagues. Initially used to describe the relationship of the congregation to its health-care and educational (especially higher education) institutions, sponsorship is sometimes used now to include new ministries initiated by sisters individually or in groups. One example is the Casa Esperanza Project in Chicago. Sponsored by the Society of Helpers, it was established in 1992 to provide up to two years of housing and supportive services for homeless women and their children as they make the transition to independent living.

Recent years have seen an increase in collaborative ministries begun and conducted by more than one congregation, each providing financial support, resources, and/or personnel. At the spring 2001 meeting of LCWR Region 3, a report was given on planning by five women’s congregations to provide affordable housing with support services in the Northern New Jersey area. In a 1998

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report to the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, officers of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) and LCWR described Mother Seton Academy, a collaborative project since 1993 of four congregations of women and two of men, as “a tuition-free alternative middle school in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural neighborhood in East Baltimore, Md.” In 1995 the forty religious congregations in LCWR Region 8 initiated Project IRENE (Illinois Religious Engaging in Nonviolent Endeavors) as a systemic change effort addressing legislation to curb violence affecting women and children in Illinois. In 1994 LCWR Region 9 (Wisconsin) congregations collaborated in establishing Leaves of Learning, an after-school and summer tutorial program for students at risk in the Milwaukee area. Northwest women religious collaborate in an Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center (Seattle) and a Women’s Intercommunity AIDS Resource (Portland, Or.).

Ministerial Future of Women Religious

Although no clear tapestry of a ministerial future of women religious can be woven, we anticipate that some of the present threads will remain. Sponsorship ministries will continue to evolve, and collaborative efforts with other religious congregations and with lay colleagues, associates, and volunteers are increasing. Changes will continue as women religious read the signs of the times in each generation and respond where the need is greatest, leaving ministries where they are no longer needed or where others can serve. A 1992 study of women’s ministries reported the top five priorities for new ministries to be: ministry addressing needs of women; housing; ministry focusing on children; AIDS/ARC ministry; and ministry responsive to specific educational needs. Close behind were ministries to the elderly and health/care for the poor (Munley 1992, 128–29). An update of the same study, soon to be published, confirms the earlier findings with AIDS now subsumed in healthcare and the addition of advocacy, multiculturalism, and ecospirituality. Like many of the previous examples, Rose Court Community, a Dominican project in San Francisco, providing affordable housing and childcare in a community atmosphere, combines several of these priorities.

The ministerial future of women religious will become clearer as they respond to challenges and questions confronting them in living out mission and ministry today. Many of these concerns were raised in a series of three interdisciplinary, intercultural dialogues on mission conducted by the Center for the Study of Religious Life from November 1999 through February 2000. A booklet published by the Center, *Dialogue on Mission: What Mission Confronts Religious Life Today?*, summarizes the dialogue. Three current realities have a potentially significant impact on future ministry.

1) Dialogue participants recognized the increasing *diversity and multiculturalism* in the United States and its impact on mission: “It is critical to the mission and future of religious life to know people of various cultures, be familiar with their perspectives and customs, and enter into dialogue with them” (Center 2000, 18). Recommendations to leaders focus on their providing resources and opportunities for members to become “culturally competent” (Center 2000, 19). Women religious are deliberately choosing to be in multicultural ministries. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Boston recently opened Casserley House in Roslindale, Mass., as a ministry of presence and service in a culturally mixed neighborhood. Will women religious become culturally competent enough both to minister in multiculturally diverse groups and to attract and sustain some young women from those groups in religious life and ministry?

2) *Vita Consecrata* affirmed the *prophetic character of religious life* (n. 84). Dialogue participants heard panelist Sandra Schneiders reflect that by their vows religious are enabled “to be where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God. From this vantage point religious are called to be a prophetic witness in the church” (Center 2000, 24–25). Comments by participants call for religious to “be at the margins within the institutional church and in other institutions” and to “create an alternative to a world economy that depends on consumption, competition, conquest, and individualism” (Center 2000, 25). Prophets have a twofold role: to critique what is and to give hope. If religious congregations evaluated each ministry as to its prophetic quality, would some ministries fail to qualify?

3) Since Vatican II a new *theology of mission* has evolved, a theology described in the concluding reflection in the Center booklet. Earlier we noted the change of language from “apostolate” to mission and ministry. In a recent presentation to the United States Catholic Mission Association, Peter Phan describes a pre-Vatican II theology and traces the development of the new theology of mission. The old and new theologies are distinguished by how they prioritize four key terms. Phan says, “If a rather simplistic summary be permitted, the old theology prioritizes these four realities in this descending order of importance: church, proclamation, mission, reign of God. The new way prioritizes them in just the opposite order: reign of God, mission, proclamation, and church” (Phan, 1–2). After presenting the implications of the new theology,

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Phan concludes: “. . . there is little doubt that if the mission of the Church is to flourish in this new millennium, it must tread the path that the new theology of mission has outlined” (Phan, 7). In the turmoil and change following Vatican II, women religious were educated for new ministries, earning masters and doctoral degrees in professional fields. As they became versed in the language, principles, and techniques of justice work, their theological training did not always keep pace. To what extent does the reign of God, rather than power and ideology, inspire passion for ministry?

Women religious wrestle with the implications of multiculturalism, the prophetic nature of religious life, and new understandings of mission. How they integrate those implications into their ministries will, I believe, profoundly affect their ministerial future.

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