

Paradigm Shifts in a Women's Religious Institute: The Sisters of Charity, Halifax, 1950-1979

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Introduction

The philosopher and science historian Thomas Kuhn first introduced the concept “paradigm shift” in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published more than thirty years ago.¹ New developments in science, in his view, demanded a shift in conceptualization. Einstein's new theory of relativity emerged, for example, as a framework to explain realities which were not easily explained by Newtonian physics. Thus, a paradigm shift is defined as a revolutionary new way of thinking about old problems.

Today, the phrase “paradigm shift” is used widely to define a broad model, a framework, a way of thinking or a scheme for understanding reality in its multifarious forms.² Historians refer to six paradigm shifts in the twentieth century history of Christianity, the most recent of which was brought about by the documents of Vatican II and the World Council of Churches. This new development in theology in the context of dramatic changes in society at large occasioned by two world wars, a depression, a knowledge explosion and a number of liberation movements demanded major paradigm shifts in all sectors of society. Religious institutes were no exception.

Paradigm Shifts and the Sisters of Charity

The common paradigm within which most Roman Catholic apostolic religious orders of men and women throughout the world operated prior to Vatican II was a traditional model informed by the enactments of the Council of Trent in 1545 and Vatican Council I in 1869 and regulated by a

¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962).

² Don Tapscott and Art Caston, *Paradigm Shift: the New Promise of Information Technology* (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993), p. xii; see also Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy Personal and Social Transformation in the 80's* (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1980).

hierarchical, paternalistic Church. Though founded in the nineteenth century by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Baltimore, Maryland, the American Sisters of Charity share the same historical context inasmuch as they trace their roots to St. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in seventeenth-century France.³ The Halifax branch of Mother Seton's foundation is an offshoot of the New York branch whose Motherhouse is Mount Saint Vincent-on-the-Hudson, New York.⁴

The town of Halifax was preparing for its hundredth birthday when the first band of Sisters of Charity arrived from New York in 1849 to take over the one parochial school located in the cathedral parish of St. Mary. Four Sisters – Mary Cornelia Finney, Mary Vincent Conklin, Mary Rose MacAleer and Sister Mary Basilia McCann – came in response to Archbishop William Walsh's appeal for sisters to serve in his diocese.⁵ Because of the hardship of travel in those days and the need for more local recruits to serve the area, in less than seven years the Halifax sisters became a separate community with their own novitiate.⁶ Congregational historian Sister Maura Power recorded the achievement in this way:

On February the seventeenth, 1856, His Holiness Pope Pius IX granted the petition presented by Archbishop Walsh and graciously approved the diocesan community and its good works of teaching, visiting the sick, caring for orphans, and all others. He commended it for 'having already proved a great advantage to Religion in Halifax.' The sisters welcomed this apostolic sanction as a seal on their works of the day and a benediction on those of the future. His Holiness also bestowed on the new mother house all the indulgences and privileges granted that of Mount Saint Vincent-on-the-Hudson, New York.⁷

The Rule adopted by the group was based on the one Elizabeth Seton

³ Joseph I. Dirvin, *Mrs. Seton: Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), p. 303.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁵ J. Brian Hanington, *Every Popish Person: The Story of Roman Catholicism in Nova Scotia and the Church of Halifax, 1604-1984* (Toronto: Scanner Art and Service, Inc., 1984), pp. 72, 102.

⁶ The novitiate is "the period of initial formation in religious institutes. The purpose of this time is to allow both the individual and the institute to more deeply examine the candidate's vocation to the institute, to allow an experience of the life of the institute and formation in its spirit and to evaluate the candidate's suitability." Hite, Holland, Ward, *A Handbook on Canons 573-746*, p. 335. The term is also used in reference to the quarters in which the novices are housed. In the congregation of the Sisters of Charity, Halifax, the novitiate is of two years duration, the first of which is designated "the canonical year."

⁷ Sister Maura [Power], *The Sisters of Charity*, Halifax (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1956), p. 8.

received from Archbishop Carroll of Baltimore which, in turn, had been derived from the original seventeenth century Rule of Vincent de Paul and called “Constitution of the Sisters of Charity in the Archdiocese of Halifax.”⁸

The first article of the Halifax *Constitution* summarizes succinctly the object of the Institute:

The Sisters of Charity in the Archdiocese of Halifax known by the name of Sisters of Mount Saint Vincent, Halifax, are the Daughters of St. Vincent de Paul. Their institute is similar to that of the Sisters of Charity in France, with this difference: 1st. That the education which the Sisters of Charity were there bound to give, only to poor children, will be extended here to all female children, in whatever stations of life they may be, for which the Sisters will receive a sufficient compensation, and out of which they will endeavour to save as much as they can to educate gratuitously poor Orphan Children. 2nd. That there will also be adopted such modifications of the Rules, as the difference of habits, customs, and manners of this country may require. The Reverend Superior General after mature deliberation with the Council, has framed the Constitution, and obtained the approbation of the Archbishop of Halifax.

The second article of the same *Constitution* describes the government of the Congregation:

There shall be a Central Government from which shall emanate, all the other establishments, and all orders sent abroad: – it shall be composed of the Superior General of the Sisters of Mount Saint Vincent, of the Mother, and her Council.

The governing board of the New York foundation had appointed four sisters to act as the governing Council for the new congregation at the time of separation in 1856.⁹ The officials were known as mother, assistant, treasurer, and procuratrix; the superior general – usually a priest – was appointed by the archbishop.

Although the Rule of 1856 governed the community until the turn of the century, a problem did arise in the third quarter of the twentieth century regarding the jurisdiction of the superior general. The incumbent mother, Mary Francis Maguire, did not hesitate to undertake a defensive strategy when the archbishop attempted to meddle with the internal affairs of the

⁸ *Constitution of the Sisters of Charity in the Archdiocese of Halifax*, Chapter II, Article 1, June 13, 1857.

⁹ Sister Maura, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

institute and to deprive individual sisters of their rights as human persons.¹⁰ Her strong stance paid off. By April 1880 the Holy Father Leo XIII, on the recommendation of the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, issued a decree freeing the Sisters of Charity from the hardships to which they were subjected under the then Archbishop of Halifax. It read in part that the Sovereign Pontiff “has decreed to take from the Archbishop of Halifax whatever jurisdiction he had over the Sisters of Charity of Halifax in the same diocese and to place them under his own immediate care.”¹¹ For exercising this jurisdiction he nominated as Apostolic Delegate John Cameron Bishop of Arichat.¹² It was not until two decades later that the Sacred Congregation for Religious in Rome recognized members of institutes with simple vows as religious and, “through the concept of papal approval, introduced a method for limiting the authority of local bishops over congregations with houses in several dioceses.”¹³ Before church law was codified in 1917, ecclesiastical laws were promulgated through the official publication of the Holy See, the “Acta Apostolicae Sedis.” In 1901 the so-called *Normae* relating to religious assigned to the “General Chapter” of religious institutes the tasks of major decision making and the election of administrators within the congregations.¹⁴ The incumbent mother general of the Sisters of Charity, Halifax, – Mother Mary Berchmans Walsh – initiated the lengthy process of adapting the constitutions of the congregation to the requirements of the instructions – *Normae* – for religious.¹⁵ Once this had

¹⁰ See Sister Francis d’Assisi [McCarthy], “A Valiant Mother: Mother M. Francis MaGuire, 1832-1905” in *Two Mothers* (Halifax, NS: Mount Saint Vincent, 1971), Chapter IX, pp. 88-91.

¹¹ Copy of the Decree cited in Sister Francis d’Assisi’s book *Two Mothers*, pp. 96-97.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹³ Catherine M. Harmer, “Chapters Present and Future,” *Review for Religious* (January-February, 1994), p. 122.

¹⁴ The general chapter is the representative assembly of sisters and the highest authority in the congregation when in session. In the new Code of Canon Law (1983), canon 631 contains the major elements of a general chapter: “holds supreme authority according to the norm of the constitutions”; represents “the entire institute”; functions to “protect the patrimony of the institute... and to promote suitable renewal”; elects “the supreme moderator”; treats “major business matters” and publishes “norms which all are bound to obey.”

¹⁵ Sister Francis d’Assisi [McCarthy], “Notes on the History of the Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Halifax,” July 1968, p. 3. With the guidance of Reverend A. J. Elder Mullen, S.J., the existing Constitution was revised to conform to the norms for religious. This revision was submitted to the Sacred Congregation for Religious together with a petition for papal approval of the community by Mother M. Berchmans; see also “A Papal Institute Evolves,” in Sister Maria Berchmans MacInnis, *Keep Her Memory Bright. A Memoir: Mother Mary Berchmans Walsh, 1858-1938* (Halifax, NS: Mount Saint

been completed, with the help of able advisors the revised constitutions were submitted to the Sacred Congregation charged with the affairs of religious who first approved it by way of trial for five years on May 7, 1908.¹⁶

A significant change effected by the new constitutions was Rule 174 which stated “The highest authority over the entire institute shall be exercised ordinarily by the Mother General and her Council of four Assistants; extraordinarily by the General Chapter.” Thus, the role of the priest who had been appointed by the archbishop as superior general was abolished and the “General Chapter” became the significant agent in the governance of the Congregation.

The first General Chapter of the Institute was held at the motherhouse on August 16, 1908, with Archbishop Edward J. McCarthy presiding as papal delegate. The forty-two delegates, chosen in conformity with directives previously sent to each local community, had assembled and proceeded with the business of electing the governing body of the institute for the next six years.¹⁷ Thus a new epoch in community history was launched; henceforth, the sisters would be in charge of their own destiny.

The change in administration of the congregation, however, brought little change in the daily life of the sisters. The Rule of enclosure stated:

Although they do not live enclosed, that state not being compatible with the objects of their Institute, nevertheless, they should comport themselves in all their intercourse with the world with as much recollection, purity of heart and body and detachment from creatures, as cloistered nuns in the retirement of their religious houses.¹⁸

Chapter XVIII of the constitutions regulated the Order of the Day from “rising at the first sound of the morning bell” to retiring “at the time prescribed.” There were rules governing every aspect of life – prayers, recreation, correspondence, meals, silence, dress, social contacts among themselves and with externs, and so on. Further details relating to each of these topics were minutely laid out in a directory called “Praiseworthy Customs.”¹⁹

Vincent, 1971), Chapter III, pp. 57-74.

¹⁶ Ibid., See also copy of the “Decree” date May 7, 1908, reprinted in *Constitutions of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul*, 1964, p. viii.

¹⁷ Archives, Mount Saint Vincent Motherhouse, (hereafter Archives, MSVM) Mother M. Berchmans Walsh, Circular Letter # 20, June 1908; see also Sister Maura, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-55; 57-58; and Sister Maria Berchmans, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-74.

¹⁸ Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Halifax, Nova Scotia, *Constitution* (mimeographed), 1913, Chapter XI, Rule 71.

¹⁹ Sister Maria Berchmans MacInnis, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

On June 24, 1913, when the *Constitution* received definitive approval from the Sacred Congregation of Religious, the Halifax foundation became a Pontifical Institute, that is, an institute approved by the Holy See.²⁰ The newly-acquired papal status meant that the congregation was no longer restricted to the jurisdiction of the Halifax archbishop but became part of the wider church community under the jurisdiction of Rome. When Archbishop Edward J. McCarthy of Halifax received the official word of papal approval from Rome, he conveyed the news to all the convents in a circular letter which concluded, ‘I take the present opportunity to congratulate the community on winning the highest recognition which Holy Church can bestow.’²¹ It should be noted that some religious congregations remained as diocesan institutes under the jurisdiction of a diocesan bishop. For the Sisters of Charity, Halifax, however, papal approval of their constitutions was seen as a great blessing which ensured a greater stability and sense of security within the Church.²² For the next fifty years the Sisters of Charity, Halifax, carried on their ministry within this ecclesiastical context.

A record of the congregation’s achievements appeared shortly after it had celebrated its centennial. Sister Maura Power, in her work *The Sisters of Charity, Halifax*, published in 1956, chronicled a century of apostolic endeavour which carried the congregation from a group of four Sisters of Charity from New York, who landed in Halifax on May 11, 1849, to the “fourteen hundred and thirty-seven professed members, eighty-seven novices and sixty-four postulants ... in fifteen dioceses, five provinces of Canada, four states of the United States, and one house in Bermuda” proudly recorded on the jacket of the book.²³ It was a triumphant listing of accomplishments which depicted the Sisters of Charity as a highly visible congregation, eminently respected, successful and sought after in their various works of the apostolate.

Teaching was pre-eminent. In the early 1950s Sister Maura was able to enumerate the involvement of the sisters in forty-three public elementary

²⁰ A pontifical institute is “an institute erected by the Apostolic See or approved by it through formal decree. Such institutes have usually been diocesan for some years previously. As pontifical, the institute is immediately and exclusively under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic See in matters of internal governance and discipline.” *Religious Institutes, Secular Institutes, Societies of the Apostolic Life: A Handbook on Canons 573-746*. Edited by Jordan Hite, TOR; Sharon Holland, IHM; and Daniel Ward, OSB (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1983), “Glossary,” p. 335. The Sisters of Charity, Halifax, received temporary approval of the 1908 Constitution for five years trial. This was changed to definitive approval by the “Decree” dated July 24, 1913, a copy of which may be found in *Constitutions*, 1964, p. ix.

²¹ Sister Maura, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-259.

schools, thirty-nine parochial elementary schools, four private elementary schools, eight public high schools, seven parochial high schools, and seven private high schools — in all, twenty-two high schools and eighty-six elementary schools. They conducted an independent, accredited college for women and a Normal School for members of the congregation. In the health care professions, the sisters had founded six hospitals and conducted two schools of nursing. In the area of social services, their endeavours included homes for the aged and orphans, unmarried mothers and unwanted babies, residences for students and working girls, and residential schools for native Indian children. As an addition to their regular undertakings, the sisters in all their missions engaged in voluntary work in summer schools and vacation camps and conducted innumerable Sunday school and religion classes.

As the congregation entered the 1950s the winds of change began to be felt. During the first International Congress of Women Religious held in Rome on the eighth of December, 1950, Pope Pius XII sounded the keynote for adaptation and renewal. He underscored the need for religious to follow the example of their foundresses and adapt their life style to meet the changing conditions of the times. For Mother Stella Maria Reiser, elected Mother General of the congregation by the Eighth General Chapter on June 20, 1950, the Holy Father's message was

... essentially an appeal to religious to deepen the life of prayer and union with God, to increase the sense of personal responsibility, and to produce a religious characterized by holiness, culture, learning, and zeal for the apostolate.²⁴

The congregation had already begun the process of change during the Seventh General Chapter held in 1944. Because of the growth of the community and, also, of the large area over which the houses were spread, consideration was given to the formation of "provinces."²⁵ There was provision for the formation of provinces in the constitutions but when the delegates met six years later for the Chapter of 1950 they felt still further study was necessary. Before action was taken on the decentralization of government or on any of the topics proposed by the Holy See, the congregation was devastated by a catastrophe of monumental proportions.²⁶ In the early hours of January 31, 1951, the motherhouse — a huge complex of buildings which

²⁴ Archives, MSVM, "Circular Letter" from Mother Stella Maria, dated December 1, 1961.

²⁵ A province is "the name given an immediate part of a religious institute, composed of several houses under the same superior and canonically erected by legitimate authority," Hite, Holland, Ward, *A Handbook on Canons 573-746*, p. 336.

²⁶ Sister Maura, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-133; see also, *Mother House Chronicle* (Extra), February 1951.

housed an academy, a college and the residences of the sisters – was completely destroyed by fire. The loss of over one hundred years of temporal acquisitions was a cataclysmic blow to the sisters individually and corporately. The material loss was incalculable; however, the fact that of the hundreds of occupants – professed sisters, novices, postulants, academy pupils and college students – not a single life was lost gave hope that somehow, phoenix-like, “the Mount” would rise again.

By the time the Ninth General Chapter was convened in 1956 the long road to restoration of buildings and programs was well on its way. Congregationally, preliminary action had been taken in 1953 by way of experimentation to proceed with a form of regional government to assist with the governance of unwieldy numbers of sisters over vast geographic areas. Three areas of the congregation were designated as “regions” – Boston, New York, and the West. Three “Consulting Superiors” were appointed to preside over these jurisdictions. Three years later, an enactment of the Chapter of 1956 approved the establishment of five provinces – Halifax, Antigonish, Boston, New York, Western – each of which was to have its own provincial superior and Council. For various reasons connected with the building and educational programs which were underway in the congregation and external requests for missions in foreign lands, the control of personnel and finance remained with the general administration. The “need of bringing its constitutions into closer conformity with recent ecclesiastical directives, and of adapting them to present conditions” was not given serious attention until the Tenth General Chapter when steps were taken to revise the constitutions of 1908.

The charismatic Pope John XXIII and the Ecumenical Council he convoked on January 25, 1959, with its call for *aggiornamento* promised “a spiritual springtime” for religious.²⁷ However five long winters were to pass before the Second Vatican Council released its document on *The Constitution of the Church (Lumen Gentium)* in 1964 and Pope Paul VI promulgated the decree on *The Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life (Perfectae Caritatis)* in 1965.²⁸ Meanwhile, the sisters worked assiduously on a revision of their constitutions to reflect the recent directives from Rome. The text of the 1964 revision detailed a few minor changes in procedure for the section dealing with the administration of the newly-formed provinces but reaffirmed the hierarchical form of government. Some degree of flexibility was permitted

²⁷ Leon Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *The Nun in the World*. New Revised Edition (Maryland: the Newman Press, 1963), “Foreword,” p. v.

²⁸ Walter M. Abbott (Ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), Paperback. “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” *Lumen Gentium*, pp. 9-101; “Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life,” *Perfectae Caritatis*, pp. 466-482.

in life-style inasmuch as the “Order of the Day” might be arranged by individual houses according to the circumstances of the place and the nature of the work. Also, regulations regarding the religious habit, although not as detailed as before, called for a uniform long dress and veil. These constitutions, when approved by a decree of the Sacred Congregation of Religious on January 18, 1964, were already out-of-date. That fact was one source of frustration.

During the mid-fifties another project was initiated in response to Pius XII’s directive to heads of religious institutes to provide “theological education and professional credentials for those teaching and doing other professional work.” Religious leaders engaged in an intercommunity cooperative effort “to rethink what is foundational in both the ascetic life and the intellectual life to prepare young religious *today* for the uncertain future they face TOMORROW.”²⁹ This mammoth project was called “the Sister Formation Movement.”³⁰ The Sisters of Charity, Halifax, launched what was termed their Scholasticate program on September 8, 1961. “Scholasticate” was a comprehensive term used to denote all those participating in the five-year program including postulants, novices and junior-professed sisters.³¹ The unavailability of younger members of the congregation for ministry in the traditional works of the congregation during those years was another source of suffering and hardship for those in leadership positions.

When the documents of Vatican II – summarizing as they did the doctrinal foundations of religious life – were finally promulgated, they became the catalyst of even more revolutionary changes with profound and far-reaching implications for religious institutes and the entire church in the years to follow. In short, they were to effect a major “paradigm shift” within religious congregations and the Roman Catholic church itself.

According to the document on religious life *Perfectae caritatis*:

the appropriate renewal of religious life involves two simultaneous processes: (1) a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and the original inspiration behind a given community, and (2) an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times.³²

²⁹ William J. Dunne, SJ, “National Aspects of Sister Formation Conference,” an address to the biennial National Conference of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. Quoted in the “Scholasticate Report” to the Tenth General Chapter of the Sisters of Charity, Halifax July 1962.

³⁰ The history of the movement may be found in the following works: Sister Bertrande Meyers, DC, *Sisters for the 21st Century* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), pp. 104-124; and Sister Mary Emil, IHM (ed.) *Report of the Everett Curriculum Workshop* (Seattle, Wash: Heiden’s Mailing Bureau, 1956).

³¹ Report to the Tenth General Chapter, July 1962.

³² Abbott, *op. cit.*, p. 468.

The Council's mandate on renewal was meant to transcend the impact of cultural factors – historical, spiritual, canonical, psychological, and sociological – which militated against the living of the monastic model of religious life and fulfilling the demands of the apostolate in the modern world. The documents challenged religious congregations to appraise and assess their “mission” in the modern world; to identify the spirit which gives it its unique nature, purpose and expression and to eliminate those structures, customs, and so on, which impede that mission.³³

The “*charism*” handed down by the foundress St. Elizabeth Ann Seton had been incorporated in the Rule of 1812:

... to honor Jesus Christ our Lord as the source and model of all charity, by rendering Him every temporal and spiritual service in their power, in the persons of the poor, either sick, invalids, children, prisoners, even the insane, or others who through shame would conceal their necessities.³⁴

According to Vatican II, this original spirit had to be updated and revitalized in order to address the present times with the same validity and relevance as it did when the congregation was first founded. Furthermore, *Perfectae Caritatis* was specific in its requirements for changes in life-style, ministry, and government.

As the community attempted to respond to the challenge of the conciliar decree, norms/directives for implementation were provided by Pope Paul VI's *Ecclesiae sanctae* promulgated on August 6, 1966.³⁵ This mandated that “A Special General Chapter should be convened within two or at most three years to promote the adaptation and renewal in each institution.” According to the Constitution of the Sisters of Charity, Halifax, the Eleventh General Chapter of the congregation was due to be held in the summer of 1968. On November 13, 1966, Mother Maria Gertrude Farmer (later, Sister Irene Farmer) announced the meeting of the Special Chapter of Renewal which, she stated, would be preceded by an intensive period of preparation known as Explorations for Renewal.

Because of the enormity of the task to be accomplished, a decision was made to take advantage of the Norm allowing the holding of the special general chapter of renewal in two sessions spread over no more than a year.

³³ Ibid., pp. 3-8.

³⁴ Archives MSVM, St. Vincent's Rules adopted and adapted for the community at Emmitsburg (Mimeographed). Titled “Regulations for the Society of the Sisters of Charity in the United States of America,” 1812, Chapter I, Article 1.

³⁵ Paul VI, “Ecclesiae Sanctae II,” *Norms for the Implementation of the Decree on the Up-To-Date Renewal of Religious Life*, August 6, 1966 in *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (New York: Costello Pub. Co., 1975).

The first session was scheduled for the summer of 1968, the second for the summer of 1969. These two sessions laid out the plans for the major changes in the congregation.

In preparation for the Chapter of Renewal, the year 1967 was earmarked for

... Exploratory study on the status and role of the congregation as it is now, and what it must become in the future in terms of the needs of the individual religious, of the corporate congregation, and of the whole Church.³⁶

Ten objectives were outlined which, at the time, were seen as revolutionary and radical:

1. To provide the framework for a community-wide study of the religious life in the post-Vatican II era.
2. To make it possible for each sister to become knowledgeable in the thinking of renewal.
3. To provide each sister with the opportunities to express her views on all aspects of community living.
4. To promote serious thinking and discussion among the sisters.
5. To emphasize the responsibility of each sister in chapter presentations.
6. To provide an opportunity for an exchange of ideas among the sisters on the fundamental principles of religious life and the basic problems and issues of our own congregation.
7. To identify major problems in the congregation.
8. To provide background information for the submission of chapter proposals.
9. To provide opportunities for the sisters to demonstrate initiative, creativity and leadership ability.
10. To initiate depth research on the relevance of the Sister of Charity in the world of tomorrow.

The plan called for a program of monthly study and the following five topics were given consideration: Spiritual Life; Community Life; Apostolic Works; Organization and Government; and Formation. The study was organized on two levels, the general administrative and provincial levels. Actually, this stage of planning represented the first utilization of the provincial level of government by the Sisters of Charity.

The first session of the Special Chapter of Renewal produced a document *Guidelines for Renewal*. These *Guidelines*, together with the

³⁶ Archives, MSVM, "Memo to the Sisters from Mother Maria Gertrude on the subject of Initial Preparation for the General Chapter [1968]," November 13, 1966.

unchanged articles of the 1964 *Constitutions*, served as directives for the congregation's way of life during the year between the Chapter sessions. The year 1968 was designated as a year of experimentation; its purpose was succinctly summarized by the superior general in the foreword to this document:

The experimentation, however, must not be thought of as substituting one set of norms for another. The renewal and adaptation called for by Vatican II must be a radical change in our Christian living as we review ourselves and adapt our life and activities to the exigencies of the Church and the needs of modern man.³⁷

Guidelines for Renewal

The document itself affirmed three principles – the dignity of the human person, subsidiarity, and collegiality – as a basis for renewal.³⁸ The first principle – the dignity of the human person – stressed the unique dignity of each human person and his/her universal and inviolable rights and duties; the second principle – subsidiarity – stated that decisions pertaining to the government should be made and carried out at the level of responsibility appropriate to the body in question. Superiors at every level should be given the authority to make the decisions pertaining to their own provincial/local communities; the third principle – collegiality – was based on the principle of shared responsibility, and stated that all members should participate in governing and obeying. Even though these principles revealed the potential for profound change, the *Guidelines for Renewal* were accepted as “interim constitutions” until review and ratification by the second session of the Special Chapter.

The first principle, for example, relating to the role of the Sister of Charity in the post-conciliar church was in sharp contrast to the old paradigm of submission and obedience in every dimension of life. The *Guidelines* stated

*That each Sister of Charity be free to make those decisions in her personal life which would be left to the judgment of a mature christian woman always conscious of her responsibility to the commitment she has freely made to the Church through her religious profession as a Sister of Charity.*³⁹

This policy of self-determination in conjunction with the principles of

³⁷ Sister Maria Gertrude Farmer, “Foreword,” *Guidelines for Renewal*, (Mount Saint Vincent, Halifax, NS, September 1, 1968)

³⁸ Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, *Guidelines for Renewal*, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1968. Sister Maria Gertrude, *Superior General*, sent a personal copy of the interim constitutions *Guidelines for Renewal* to each sister with an accompanying letter, September 1, 1968.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

subsidiarity and co-responsibility within the spirit of *Vatican II* had far-reaching ramifications for radical change in every aspect of religious life.

Prayer, for instance, was no longer restricted by “prescribed spiritual exercises” in the daily program (the horaria); henceforth, each sister was free “to design” her own spiritual life within the charismatic insights of the Sister of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul and the *Guidelines for Renewal*.⁴⁰ While the *Guidelines* envisioned some form of communal prayer to strengthen the bond of community as well as the traditional liturgical prayer, there was freedom and flexibility in regard to the time, place, form, rhythm and length of personal prayer.

No less revolutionary were the recommendations for change within the *government* of the congregation. By 1972, there were seven “provinces” in the congregation – Halifax, Rockingham, Antigonish, Boston, New York, Western, and Central – in addition to the General Administration. An experimental form of “collegial” government at all levels was inaugurated for a trial period of two years. The congregation was defined as “an international community of provinces, distinct in entity, yet united in their apostolic goals and common purpose.”⁴¹ The revised guidelines, *Covenant of Renewal* (1969), stated that “Collegiality is a mode of exercise of authority in community.”⁴² The executive of the congregation became the collegial body at the general level [later to be known as the Governing Board]. It consisted of the superior general as president, the assistant to the superior general as vice-president, the Canadian coordinator, the American coordinator and the provincial superiors.⁴³

At the local level, the “order of the day,” dictating every activity of every member disappeared; henceforth, *community living* assumed a totally different life-style. Many sisters opted to live in small houses or apartments in preference to large convents and/or institutions. In 1968, there were ninety-five local communities; in 1972, there were 116.⁴⁴ To foster “true ecclesial living,” the consensus of the local “collegial group” made decisions within each community, not the local superior/coordinator; individual sisters assumed responsibility for communications, media, personal contacts, visits and travel; apostolic, professional and cultural opportunities were decided in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity and co-responsibility.⁴⁵

In this context, the *apostolate* in the traditional sense of teaching, nursing, and social service was far too restrictive; a broader concept was deemed essential for an active ministry to meet the needs of the modern world. Henceforth, the availability of personnel and their preferences in ministry became the determining principle for the works of the congregation,

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 62.

⁴² *Covenant of Renewal*, p. 42.

⁴³ *Guidelines for Renewal*, p. 62.

⁴⁴ In 1968, there were two sisters living alone; by 1972, there were eighty-one. The number of local communities had increased to 161 by 1979.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 21; pp. 57-59.

not the demands of the social institutions in existence.⁴⁶

Some of the changes proposed in the *Guidelines* were less dramatic and took place gradually during the period between the two Chapter sessions.⁴⁷ For example, sisters who wished were permitted to revert to their baptismal and family name. The only title to be used in the congregation, including higher and general superiors, was *sister*. The sisters were free to follow diversity of dress but were reminded that changes should “be conducted with propriety and wisdom.”⁴⁸ The wearing of the veil became optional and all who wished to retain the traditional habit were free to do so.⁴⁹

During the second session in the summer of 1969, two more principles – unity and pluriformity – were added to the original three.⁵⁰ Unity was defined as the oneness in heart and spirit that binds a community for the purpose of its apostolic mission; pluriformity, the presence of diversity in community whose members are united by common goals, apostolic heritage and mutual trust. Thus, by the end of the Special Chapter of Renewal *five* basic principles were recognized as applicable to religious life. These were incorporated into the *Covenant of Renewal* which replaced *Guidelines* in 1969 as the interim constitutions until the Chapter of 1972.⁵¹

The Vatican granted extensive powers to superiors of pontifical institutes during those years to permit experimentation and to adapt current legislation in order to foster renewal.⁵² After a decade of experience with these innovations, the Sisters of Charity revised their *Constitutions* which were approved by the Sacred Congregation of Religious in Rome. They now emphasized the responsibility of each sister to give witness to the gospel values and to remain faithful to the charism of the foundress of the Sisters of Charity.⁵³

Those years, designated by Rome for experimentation, were both the “best of times” and the “worst of times” for religious congregations.

By the mid-1960s, at the apparent peak of their success, religious orders experienced a cataclysmic exodus. Over 25% of the professed religious of

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 29; 36; 69

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 22; see also, Emanuele Clarizio, D.D., Apostolic Delegate to Canada, *Adaptations for Communities of Religious Women* (Ottawa, Ontario: July 20, 1968).

⁴⁹ *Covenant of Renewal*, p. 22

⁵⁰ Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, *Covenant of Renewal: Interim Constitutions*, Mount Saint Vincent, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1969, pp. 9-10.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. iv.

⁵² Paul VI, *Ecclesiae Sanctae II*. August 6, 1966; Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, (SCRSI) “Instruction on the Renewal of Religious Life, *Renovationis Causam*, January 6, 1969; “Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life,” *Evangelica Testificatio*, June 29, 1971.

⁵³ Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, *Constitutions*, Mount Saint Vincent, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1985.

the church, most of them younger and newer members, left religious life. What had been the norm and nature of religious life was now questionable. What had worked in the past was now self-defeating. What had been idealized and idolized in the society before it now became suspect.⁵⁴

In 1968, the congregation of the Sisters of Charity, Halifax, numbered 1,616 members; by 1979, the number was 1,251. In the one year, between June 10, 1968, and June 10, 1969, *nineteen* sisters left the congregation (sixteen of them in their twenties and early thirties). For the four-year period from June 10, 1968, to June 10, 1972, the total number of withdrawals was 138, seventy-nine of whom had taken perpetual vows. The congregation was further depleted during those same years by the death of sixty-six members.⁵⁵ Many of these members seem to have been disillusioned by decisions of the congregation to divest itself of the ownership of property, to dispose of the cloistered atmosphere, the structured patterns of prayer and community living, the religious habit, and traditional forms of ministry.⁵⁶ A former member of the congregation, for example, worried about the future of the congregation and said “she wanted out while she was still able to make a life of her own.”⁵⁷ For many of those who stayed, these changes brought about an overdue emancipation. In a study of “Women Religious in Transition,” Sister Marie Gillen, SCH found that the eighteen Sisters of Charity, Halifax, selected for in-depth, open-ended interviews, perceived the years since Vatican II as “a time of personal growth.”

They appreciate the freedom and responsibility they now have to decide so many personal issues in their lives. Overall, they report satisfaction with themselves, their ministry, and their life choice; they intend to continue as religious. In the process of breaking with the unchallenged and oppressive cultural expectations of the past they had not lost their reason for being religious but made instead a bid for a radical alternative to the traditional

⁵⁴ Joan Chittister, OSB, ‘An Amazing Journey: a Road of Twists and Turns,’ in *The Challenge for Tomorrow: Religious Life*, ed. Cassian J. Yuhaus, CP (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), p. 79.

⁵⁵ Between 1972 and 1979, another 133 professed sisters withdrew from the congregation; there were 148 deaths during those same years.

⁵⁶ This was not unique to the Sisters of Charity Halifax. In a recently published article entitled “Contemporary Religious Life: Death or Transformation?” in *The Challenge for Tomorrow: Religious Life*, ed. Cassian J. Yuhaus, CP (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), pp. 10-11, Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM, writes “American women’s religious congregations have declined from over 180,000 members in 1966 to 126,000 in the early 1990’s. Today only one percent of sisters are under thirty years of age while the median age in most congregations is over sixty. Congregations which once attracted fifty or sixty postulants a year now receive one or two. The financial and institutional dimensions of congregational life are commensurate with the decline in personnel.”

⁵⁷ Sister Marie Gillen, “Women Religious in Transition: a Qualitative Study of Personal Growth and Organizational Change,” (Doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 1980), Chapter 7, p. 150.

religious life.⁵⁸

The Challenge for the Future

And now – thirty years after Vatican II – as the congregation prepares for the Eighteenth General Chapter, it continues to chart its journey into the future. Since the “transformative journey” on which it has embarked is essentially a journey of faith, the transition into the post-modern era with all its ambiguities and uncertainties will require an unprecedented leap of faith. Sandra Schneiders sees it this way:

Our entire culture is involved in a deep crisis, the crisis of transition from modernity to post-modernity on which our physical survival depends, but also a crisis of transition from the human-centered spirituality... to a genuinely theocentric spirituality on which our spiritual survival depends. If religious, who may be in the vanguard of this transition precisely because they are ...obsessed with God can lead the way through the darkness, they may be in a position to make a contribution to postmodernity far more important than the contribution of schools and hospitals in the modern period.⁵⁹

Thus, the “signs of the times” point to the need for shift to a new paradigm, a paradigm which, in the words of Gerald A. Arbuckle, S.M., demands of us:

... a prayerful journey into a world of Gospel faith, on-going conversion to the Lord and at times discernment in the midst of agonizing darkness and chaos....⁶⁰

It is his contention that

... No amount of *merely* human effort or experimentation on our part will bring about the refounding of any religious congregation.⁶¹

The challenge that lay ahead for the congregation after Vatican II was to maintain a balance between the old classical institutional paradigm and a fast emerging *laissez-faire* individualistic model for religious life. Reflecting on the transformative process for groups at large, Marilyn Ferguson noted in her work *The Aquarian Conspiracy*:

We find our individual freedom by choosing not a destination but a direction. You do not choose the transformative journey because you know where it will take you but because it is the only journey that makes sense.⁶²

⁵⁸ Sister Marie Gillen, *op. cit.*, Part III, Chapter 9, pp. 174-5.

⁵⁹ Sandra Schneiders, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁶⁰ Gerald R. Arbuckle, *Out of Chaos: Refounding of Religious Congregations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Marilyn Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 416.

For the Sisters of Charity, Halifax, the *Covenant of Renewal*, by outlining the “direction” affirmed by the Chapter of Renewal, initiated an on-going cyclical process of transformation within the congregation. By 1979, the congregation had divested itself of the ownership of all institutions except Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Immaculata Hospital in Westlock, Alberta.⁶³ The process gained momentum as each succeeding Chapter injected new vitality which by the mid-eighties culminated in new *Constitutions*. Meanwhile, this vigour produced a variety of new ministries to the poor – battered women, single parents, abused children, victims of alcohol, drug abuse, and Aids, the unemployed, the lonely, the aged, immigrants, prisoners, visible minorities, illiterate adults – in addition to the traditional ministries. Despite reduced numbers and aging members, in 1979 four hundred nineteen sisters were still involved in education at all levels; forty-eight in health care; thirty-three in social service; thirty-seven in religious education; 114 in pastoral ministry; 170 in congregational service; and fifty-one in other forms of ministry.⁶⁴

⁶³ In a ceremony at noon on Friday, July 8, 1988, the Sisters of Charity officially handed over Mount Saint Vincent University to the institutions’s lay board of governors; ownership of Immaculata Hospital was transferred to the government of Alberta on April 1, 1985.

⁶⁴ In addition, the congregation recognizes the incalculable value of work done on a casual basis as strength or health permits, even though such works are not included in the above figures reported for statistical purposes. This is also true for the invaluable worth of the prayer and sacrifice of those sisters who have completed their lives of active service, and are now incapacitated by age and/or infirmity.