The Saturday Evening POST

THE NEW NUNS

By MICHAEL NOVAK

Photographs by John Launois

Breaking through the old rules that long imprisoned them, many liberated young religious women are boldly moving out into the streets to attack the major problems of American society.

Sister Monica, of the very advanced Glenmary community, looks for an apartment in the squalid Chicago district in which she will live and work.

Many nuns object to the new style of life; many

"In some places," she said, "when you mention renewal, some people still turn their eyeballs and see pea green. Really!" Sister Charles Borromeo Muckenhirn, theologian and journalist, spoke rapidly, her blue eyes flashing, her smile conveying a delight in irony. "They don't understand that we have to get out of ourselves. We can't sit forever and listen to our arteries harden. We have to get out of our little nunny world."

For years America's nuns have been, as it were, hidden away in the Catholic "ghetto," teaching in parochial schools and running huge and successful hospitals. Many of the sisterhoods came to this country with the Catholic immigrants from Europe and, at that time, to teach and to nurse was to attend to society's severest needs. As the immigrants rose into the middle class, however, the sisters rose with them, and the civil government began to provide schools and hospitals. Soon most nuns were no longer tending severe needs but being merely useful, and this is the situation in which nuns find themselves today. "Too often," says Sister Mary Peter Trexler of Chicago, "sisters are considered a money-saving device for a middle-class society with middle-class values. And people want to keep them middle-class." People do so by treating nuns as "nice little things"—"the good sisters"—of no consequence to real adult life in America. Newspapers run photographs of nuns doing cute things—sisters on roller skates, sisters on skateboards, sisters swinging softball bats: "Look, Ma, they're human!" Few educated non-Catholics have ever in their lives had a conversation with a sister.

Challenged by the outward-going spirit of Pope John XXIII and his Second Vatican Council, many of America's 175,000 Roman Catholic nuns are now breaking away from the old world of the cloister—prim, protected, constrained—and are getting out into the thick of life. Press reports emphasize the shortened skirts, the briefer veils, the appearance of nuns on public beaches, but these are misleading, superficial aspects of a deep-running revolution. In ever-increasing numbers the sisters are creating new rules to define what tasks they may or may not tackle, what style of life they may or may not adopt. Sometimes their challenging leads them to dispute their superiors and alarm the more timid sisters; it leads a few even to leave their sisterhoods and try out new kinds of religious action.

"Either the American sister . . . becomes the avant-garde of the church," Sister Mary William Kelley of Los Angeles declared last summer in a speech to the executive officers of the sisterhoods, "or she will quietly fade from the scene. . . . She may say more, but she will be heard less, unless and until she is willing to put her body where her words are."

Evidence of the conflict is everywhere.

• In Milwaukee, three sisters who are doing graduate work at Marquette University have moved from their convent into an apartment in a sprawling slum. Not long ago a spindly, 10-year-old girl ran across the street to them and blurted out, "My mommy wants you," then led them to a basement several streets away. From a bed in the darkness, a woman not entirely sober told the sisters that she had been deserted and that her 14-year-old daughter was being drawn into a dangerous teen-age gang at school. The sisters helped the mother to sources of assistance and found a new school for the troubled girl. The same sisters, led to another apartment, discovered an aged, crippled woman who was unable to care for herself. One of the sisters cleaned out the accumulated dirt and refuse, scrubbed the floors and, despite her upcoming doctoral examinations, returned every three days to prepare a good meal and to chat.

Sister Gilmary Hudson of Milwaukee is the very model of the determined new nun.

Such charity from the Catholic sisters is not, of itself, newsworthy. But the striking part of this episode is that there are two other permanent Catholic convents in that same neighborhood, one for the sisters who run the parish elementary school, and one for the sisters who teach at a private academy; and the sisters from these ordinary convents *do not get out into the streets to share the lives of the people of the neighborhood.* They are separated from the suffering around them.

"Our order was founded to help the poor, the sick, the suffering," one of the student sisters, Sister Gilmary Hudson, explained. "So were many of the other communities. But then we became institutionalized. We became separated from the poor our foundresses wanted to help. Now some of us want to serve again. We think that sisters belong with the poor."

• Early last year, nearly 50 sisters marched at Selma, Ala. They were following the precedent set by Sister Angelica Seng, a Franciscan high-school teacher in Chicago. In 1963 Sister Angelica led a group of pickets in a protest against a racially segregated swimming pool used by the Illinois Club for Catholic Women. Repercussions to Sister Angelica's action were swift—outraged Catholics withdrew thousands of dollars they had pledged to the support of various Catholic girls' schools in Chicago. "The fact that there was such shock in the Catholic community," Sister Mary Ignatia Griffin, B.V.M., academic dean of Mundelein College in Chicago, said recently, "told me, at least, that we nuns were thought of as stylized, costumed dolls who should be kept inside a convent but who had no right to be out there where there was social injustice or discrimination or where there should be Christian witness."

• In still another city, Sister Maura Sullivan searched for her size among the ladies' suits in a department store; her companion, a sister, suddenly looked the other way. In 24 hours Sister Maura would once again be Miss Dorothy Sullivan (to protect her privacy, I have used pseudonyms). She was now 36 and had lived in a convent almost half her life. For many years she had argued with herself that convent life was supposed to be "accepted on faith" or "under obedience," just as it was, uncritically. But the Vatican Council had led her to see the importance of creative thinking, personal responsibility and the need for experiment. At first she was excited by new possibilities, but her enthusiasm earned much opposition and several rebukes. For three years she had worked for "gradual change." But it was now plain that her community would not move very far during her lifetime. Minor adjustments were being made, but many sisters resisted change. Sister Maura had only one life to give to God, and she had become convinced that she could spend it more effectively as Miss Dorothy Sullivan. She planned to join three other ex-sisters she had met, who were continuing to live their life of consecrated virginity. They earned their living by teaching in public schools, and they used their free hours to help organize Negro freedom schools, rent strikes and community services. They had abandoned the convent rule and monastic notions of obedience.

Sister Maura tried on the suit she liked and asked to have it wrapped.

Not long ago one of the oldest, most conservative of the American bishops, who does not like the quiet revolution of the new sisters, took to the pulpit to express his concern. "Some people," he declared, "are shocked by the manner of dress of the [new] nuns. Some [of the sisters] can hardly be distinguished from the laity—knee-length dresses, a lot of color, almost no headdress. The

ɔthers find the changes much too gradual.

reason their superiors give for such is that it brings them closer to the laity. Is this desirable? If they dress like lay people, will they not be treated like lay people? The sister's habit not only protects her, but is a source of inspiration and veneration to the people."

The bishop added: "What is more alarming, we find nuns more and more out of the convent and appearing in public. They appear at evening meetings with the laity; give lectures to the public; eat in public restaurants; march in picket lines and demonstrations for social justice; travel alone from one end of the nation to the other and live alone on the campuses of universities, because they have been offered a scholarship or grant." He concluded plaintively: "One sometimes wonders, 'Why did they go to the convent?'"

But the new sisters are not afraid of laymen, the world or themselves; they didn't enter the convent to escape from the world. Recently Sister Mary Consolata Delaney, now finishing her doctorate in Russian at Harvard, returned from an extended visit to the Soviet Union, where she dressed in lay clothing. Sister Francetta Barberis now works as a senior consultant for the Women's Job Corps in Washington, and she dresses like other women. The Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary now have 41 sisters studying for master's degrees, 32 for doctorates and 14 doing post-doctoral research—at such universities as Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Chicago, California (Berkeley), the Sorbonne, Oxford, London, Munich and Venice; they say this is "just a beginning." A California sister has been a visiting professor in chemistry at Brown; sisters have accepted teaching posts at Berkeley, the University of Rochester and Notre Dame.

Sister Mary Luke Tobin, the sole American sister at the Vatican Council, has stated the new attitude succinctly: "The sisters have a place in the front lines of any movement that is working for the betterment of humanity." Today, these front lines are higher education and the urban poor.

"Sisters have often been isolated from the sufferings of the poor," says Sister Mary Peter Trexler, "but it is not entirely their fault. The canon law of the church looks upon them as minors and defines their conduct as though they were Victorian ladies designed for Victorian drawing rooms."

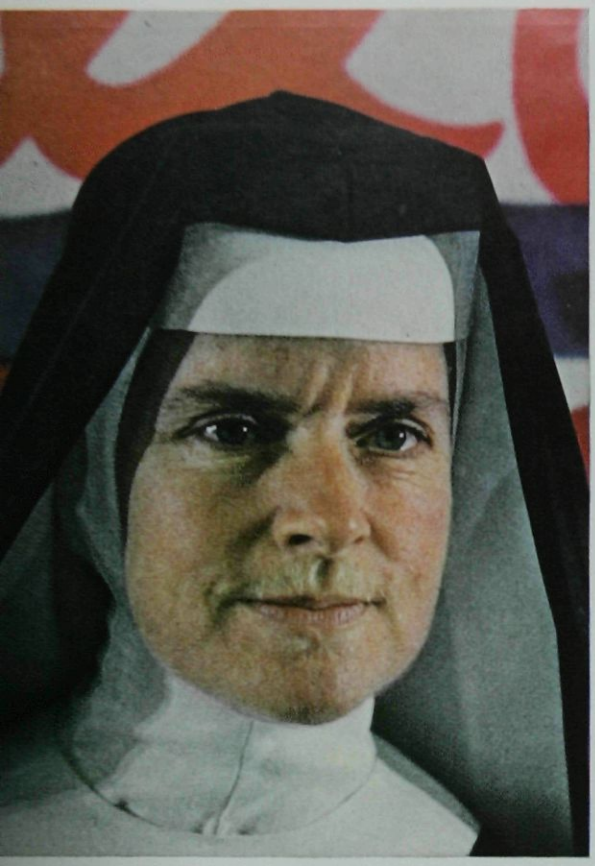
The sisters are proud of the sacrifices and immense contributions made by their predecessors, but now many want to break out in new directions. "The sisters are moving," says one sister. "They are moving outside the cloister and the classroom. They are beginning to appear wherever there is tension and conflict and need."

The revolution sought by sisters is full of poignancy and pain. Many sisters, old and young, are opposed to the new way of life. Many others, especially the young, find the changes much too gradual. In some communities a few of the conservative sisters are leaving the convent because the new style is not what they had entered for; in others, a few of the restless and imaginative ones are leaving because the old style blocks them from doing what they had entered to do. The mothers general of the sisters' communities are divided, some closed to change and others open; many others seem anxious and afraid. "The mothers general are scared," one sister comments. "They don't understand how deep the changes will be. Some of the older communities are not changing at all. Some of the more ethnically mixed ones—especially those founded in the United States and located in the Midwest—are changing very rapidly."

In a sense, the Roman Catholic sisters are making an experiment on behalf of the rest of us. With the most venturesome of all religiously oriented

Veil and shoes off, Sister Gilmary relaxes in her cheery bedroom, a far cry from the nun's usual austere cell.

'We must experiment, that's the important



Sister Mary Corita Kent's splashy, imaginative "un-nunlike" prints were exhibited at the New York World's Fair and have won her wide acclaim. Her convent, Immaculate Heart in

THE NEW NUNS

people in America—Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Jews, Catholics and others—they are testing out the proposition that a new society is being born in America and that religious people must enter into it as fully and enthusiastically as they entered into the rural, more placid society of old-fashioned America. As one new sister, a sociologist, says, "There are *two* cultures coexisting side by side in American life." One of these cultures, the one in which the sisters had been happily and effectively living until the end of World War II, is "family-centered, traditional, stable, sheltered, relatively changeless, often rural, proud." The second culture, in whose anxieties the sisters have increasingly involved themselves, is "technical, swift, mobile, faceless, pragmatic, restless, pluralistic, urban." The question the sisters ask is: "Can our life retain its values in the new culture?"

No religious group in America can avoid facing the risks and confusions of the oncoming culture. Nor is it certain that American religion can survive the vast cultural shift it is powerless to postpone. Must religious people cling to the old comforts and the old ways? Dare they reinterpret their values and practices in new ways? Many of the Roman Catholic sisters are ready to accept that dare. They are a test case, and countless other Americans are watching them with fascination.

II

What is the world of the sister? On one level it is a bureaucratic thicket. Sisters, like sectarian Protestants, are constantly starting new groups, and there are today more than 750 different Roman Catholic religious communities of women in the United States. Only about a half dozen of these have more than 5,000 members—a great many have fewer than 100—and it is a bewildering task to try to keep track of them or sort them out. Complicating the task is the similarity of many of the names. The largest community, for example, is the Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Louis—13,245 sisters. But there is another group with exactly the same name and only 438 sisters, and still another with 806. And there is another group of the same general origin but now called by a slightly different name (St. Joseph of Carondelet), also with headquarters in St. Louis, with 4,701 sisters.

Similarly, the Sisters of Mercy, before their recent federation, comprised one "union" of 6,810 members and 17 independent communities totaling 6,536 members, not to mention three splinter groups with a total of less than 40 members. And so on. In general, it can be said that the large communities grew strong in America because of their early involvement in parochial schools. The big communities, most of them founded abroad, tend to be conservative, yet each has its outstanding sisters. However, it is the smaller communities founded in America—and therefore more likely to be shaped by the American practical sense—that are taking the lead.

To understand the changes occurring in American convents, one must recall what convents were like 25 years ago—what some are still like today. A girl would probably have entered the convent on a feast day of Our Lady. She would have been to a great farewell party thrown by her girl friends and tearful parents: a special dinner, singing, dancing—a last fling. In the night, after everyone had gone home, the future nun would think long thoughts. On the average, such a girl was 19 years old.

At the convent she would change from her bright clothes to black skirts and sweaters and long black stockings. For six months to a year, the future nun would live the life of a "postulant." Prayer, silence, and constant, steady acclimatization to rules marked this period: Walk slowly, speak softly, waste nothing, wax floors and sweep halls as if for the King of Glory, All for Jesus through Mary, etc. Sister Charles Borromeo Muckenhirn, one of the most balanced and perceptive of the new nuns, describes the orientation: "The old system was to depersonalize persons and to upgrade things. Anything run by sisters was to be cleaner and"—she deliberately coined a word—"waxeder than anybody else's. You had to be a person on the sly."

In the old system, "perfection" was reached by discipline—discipline which emptied out all traces of self-will, self-assertion, personal idiosyncrasy, "rebelliousness." Accepted with great warmth and love, such discipline could, of course, become a daily school of self-knowledge and richer sensitivities. But it sometimes merely drove self-will and self-assertion underground. A few sisters who thought they were being unselfish because they were letter-perfect in their observance of the rule might develop hard shells of egoism, irritable tempers, smoldering inner resentment.

It was in the novitiate, a special house often situated in a country place, that the future sisters would begin "living the life of the rule" in earnest. With anywhere from six to 100 other novices, the future sister would receive approximately the same dress as the full-fledged members of the com-

thing. What will nuns be like in twenty years?'

Los Angeles, lives by the free and joyful spirit of her art.

Sister Marie Fleurette, also of Immaculate Heart, coaches a student actor in his portrayal of a drunken Irish husband.

munity, except that maybe the veil would be white instead of black, or shorter, or of a slightly different style. The novitiate was to be a period of the utmost fervor. "Remember," one group of sisters was cautioned at the beginning of breakfast every morning. "What you are in the novitiate, that you shall be for the rest of your lives."

Throughout the novitiate, the young sisters would live in silence for most of the day, except for carefully specified times of recreation, or when their work made speech indispensable. They tried to learn to pray even as they worked, offering their work to God and performing it as consciously as possible "in His presence." They were taught, in the spirit of poverty, not to waste even scraps of paper; in some communities the rule prescribed that a small piece of acetate or a piece of paper be slipped underneath the thumb as one used one's prayer books, so that the thin pages would be preserved from soiling. "You can tell a perfect sister of this order," one nun once told a novice, "by whether she always has a piece of acetate under her thumb." To a young novice, such advice was often just sufficiently practical to mask its pharisaism.

By the time the sisters took their first vows, they often had completed two years of college work. These vows, usually renewed year by year until the moment for perpetual vows, theoretically marked the great step into the religious life. Twenty-five years ago some American novitiates treated profession day like a wedding day. By her vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience, the young girl would become a "Bride of Christ." She would wear a long, white "bridal" gown, and carry flowers. Then, or else on the occasion of her final profession six years later, she would accept a gold "wedding" ring. Most of the new nuns are embarrassed by this symbolism now, and one points out—with marked emotion—that it was based on "incredibly bad theology." (Theologically, only the church is the bride of Christ, the whole church, lay people included.)

The old ideal that governed convent life was that of the medieval monastery. The sisters were supposed to be totally involved in their institution. "Each time I go outside my cell," Thomas à Kempis wrote in the 15th century, "I return less a man." The convent represented safety, shelter, *real* Christianity; the outside world was distracting, crass and artificial. "It would take a very high degree of spiritual strength and concentration to remain in the hurly-burly of the world and maintain any kind of recollection [spiritual calm]," a priest recently admonished a group of sisters. A bishop repeated the warning: "The spirit of the world will dominate instead of the spirit of Christ." Thus the girl entering the convent had to learn a new "spiritual" point of view. She had to accept sharp distinction between "superiors," or staff members, and "subjects." The staff made all decisions, major and minor; subjects obeyed. Even the letters which a sister received from her family were opened by her superiors. Perfection was to be reached, granted God's grace, through obedience and self-effacement. God spoke through superiors.

"Religious too often seem to be living in a closed world, turned in on themselves and having but tenuous contact with the world outside," Cardinal Suenens of Belgium wrote in *The Nun in the World* (1962), a book that annoyed some American sisters and struck others forcibly. "A community of nuns often enough gives the impression of being a fortress whose drawbridge is only furtively and fearfully lowered." He continued: "It has been said of certain congregations of nuns that they are the last strongholds of the very studied manners of the middle-class woman of the 19th century."

It is true that until recently, the clothing that sisters wore usually dated from the century in which their community had been founded—the 13th, or more often the 18th or 19th. One sister explains what happened to her community, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary: "When we were founded in 1833, the dress that was adopted was the dress of the time. The purpose of wearing the dress was to disappear into the public so you wouldn't be noticed. What happened was that what our founders wore in 1833, which in length and color and so forth was rather similar to what we're wearing now, was discarded by women within four or five years, but we kept it. So in a way we have achieved just the opposite effect of what we really wanted. We wanted to disappear into the public, and instead we have the highest visibility of almost any group in America."

The hourly schedule which the girl followed in the convent 25 years ago was also established in earlier centuries—before the invention of electric light. Rising was at five A.M. At 5:30 a half hour of mental prayer would be followed by Mass and communion, and then by a plain breakfast usually eaten in silence or to the sound of one of the sisters reading from some pious work. Afterward there would barely be time to wash the dishes, dust the chapel and hallways, make one's bed, and be ready for the classrooms of the parochial school or the wards of the Catholic hospital. After work, more prayers. (*Text continued on page 66*)

'A sister is simply a person who has chosen to make

Ex-nun Sister Nativity (center) of Oklahoma City left her order because it restricted her work with the poor. Significantly, she still maintains close ties with other nuns.

THE NEW NUNS

Continued from page 25

supper and brief recreation—conversation or knitting or singing in the community room—then more prayers and an hour or so of work before bed.

But the demands of modern professional life began to make great incursions into the sisters' daily schedules (One sister commented wryly: "We try to live modern nights and medieval mornings"), and by about 1950 many convents were beginning to make at least minor adjustments. Fewer prayers were to be recited together; greater flexibility was allowed for individual necessities; later retiring was permitted and sometimes later rising; in some communities the hours were left to individual discretion.

One sister, who had spent 30 years under the old regimen, felt that these small adjustments in her community had not gone nearly far enough: "If only we'd go the whole way on *aggiornamento!* In the morning I drag myself out of bed too tired to think. I get down to the chapel where we say Matins and Lauds, followed by a half hour of mental prayer and twenty minutes of vocal prayers for the church, the community and benefactors, and then Mass starts. By Communion time I'm lost in frustration because I can feel no fervor—only fatigue. Sometimes I kneel at the Communion railing wondering if I can possibly please God, feeling as I do. Then we go to breakfast and are served in rank. Since I'm near the end of my particular table, I'm served near the last, and I practically choke with resentment—and yes, let me be honest—with scruples because I'm in such a bad humor every morning. Yet I love to pray. What a joy and peace it would be if we just had meditation as a preparation for Mass. I could sing aloud with the best of them or join in hearty dialogue at Mass in all the glory of the new liturgy. And if we didn't waste so much time serving by rank in the refectory, life would be perfect. . . . But it's still a wonderful life, and thank God I can still laugh out loud at myself."

Until recently, all changes had to wait upon the good will of high superiors. No idea was more exaggerated in American convents 25 years ago than the concept of "religious obedience." Not long ago, in front of the television cameras of David Susskind's *Open End* program, Sister Mary Ignatia Griffin described the fundamental change in the theory and the practice of obedience from the time when she first entered. She recalled: "When I began to live a life of religious obedience, I was expected to expect specific direction. In fact, very specific direction. And I was expected, if I possibly could, to bring my mind to see that the direction that was being given to me by my higher superiors was the best. I was supposed to get a sort of intellectual agreement with them, if I could do this. However, it was recognized that I couldn't always, but at least this was the ideal." She flashed a smile. "Well, this concept of obedience, I think, is doomed. It's dead. It's gone, and thank God that it is gone, because really today I think that obedience means to young people not mere following, but responsible freedom. Young people coming into religious communities today realize that they have a major share in making the congregation what it is."

At the present time, however, all the rules made for religious women are made by men. A view encountered very often among sisters is that, in the words of one of them, "Bishops and priests are afraid of women. That's why they have tried to make us neuters." Sister Charles Borromeo Muckenhirn, in this connection, pointed to her heavy dress, her heavy men's shoes, even her large-sized men's handkerchief. "It's as if being a woman were being evil."

According to canon law, made entirely by men, the status of sisters in the church is that of "minors"; they were not treated as adults but as women everywhere were treated two centuries ago. From the Roman congregations to the local bishop and even the parish priest, men legally and effectively have the last word about convent life. The Congregation of Religious in Rome, the bureau that has so much authority over the sisters' lives, is entirely masculine. The sisters noted that not one woman took part in the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council until in the third session a handful of "auditresses" was appointed; eight of them were sisters, only one from the United States.

Twenty-five years ago the fact of male dominance was almost disastrous for the sisters' communities in the United States. Unrelenting demands made upon the sisters in the name of the Catholic school system rarely took account of the welfare of the sisters. In 1887 there were in the United States 2,697 elementary schools taught by sisters. For the next 43 years an average of *nine* new schools were under construction *each month*, until by 1930 there were 7,293 such schools. By 1964 this number had almost doubled. Where would the sisters come from to staff these schools? Who would pay for their education? Requests for more sisters flooded in from harried bishops. The sister superiors had learned all too thoroughly the meaning of obedience, and often they would accede to a request for more sisters without pointing out strenuously to the bishop how much harm

herself available as sister instead of wife and mother.'

was being done the young sisters by the work placed prematurely upon their shoulders.

For the new schools devoured young sisters. Fresh from the novitiate they would come, two years or so of college work in their heads, to cope with elementary-school classrooms whose average student enrollment was 38. Some harassed pastors loaded 80 to 100 children in a classroom rather than turn applicants away. And the sisters, unlike public-school teachers, were still trying to live according to medieval monastic standards, as well as to acquire professional competence and also to answer all requests made upon them. At night they had no home, no family circle, to retire to; they lived in the institution where they worked, or with the same people they worked with all day long. Even though they could take their cares to the dark, silent chapel, the pace was inhuman, and something had to give.

III

The renewal of the sisterhoods has proceeded in cycles, with each cycle spiraling higher than its predecessor. The first cycle of the present renewal began in 1941 with the publication of Sister Bertrande Meyer's doctoral dissertation, *The Education of the Sisters*. Sister Bertrande reported on hundreds of interviews with sisters and described the deplorable schedules the sisters were trying to meet. "Neither bishops nor priests," Sister Bertrande now recalls, "could quite grasp the necessity of holding the young sister back until she was fully formed, academically and spiritually, to enter the professions of teaching and nursing."

Little action resulted from Sister Bertrande's investigations, but in 1949 Sister Madeleva Wolff, a highly cultivated poetess and president of St. Mary's College at Notre Dame, made a second thrust. In a pungent paper delivered to the National Catholic Educational Association and later published as *The Education of Sister Lucy*, she argued that sisters could no longer be treated as mere cogs in a vast machine. The early reformers, in short, insisted that "Sister Lucy" must be professionally prepared; her own sense of dignity must be respected.

The opposition to this first reform was threefold. Many bishops and pastors didn't see why fifth-grade teachers needed university degrees. Secondly, many sisterhoods had a tradition of pietism and anti-intellectualism. "I would rather feel compunction than know how to define it," was an accepted maxim. But thirdly, and least admirably, many of the conservatives of that period were afraid because the young student sisters were precisely the ones who had not yet committed themselves by lifelong vows; "Sister Lucy" might get her Ph.D. and leave. To this Sister Madeleva replied, "Nothing can do more to undermine her vocation than to send her out to try to teach without adequate, often without any, preparation."

By 1953 the second cycle of reform had begun, and its leaders were three powerful personalities. Sister Mary Emil Penet, like Sister Madeleva before her, argued brilliantly for a special training program for sisters. Soon the National Catholic Educational Association formed a new committee, the Sister Formation Conference, and Sister Mary Emil was elected its head. Cardinal Spellman offered her a temporary office in New York. And then, unlike Sister Madeleva, Sister Mary Emil received funds to *do* something: $50,000 from the Ford Foundation to examine the actual conditions of sisters' education. One of her first acts with Ford money was to purchase a car—and then she set off almost immediately with a companion upon a trip of 25,000 miles to study the education of sisters in all parts of the country.

Sister Mary Emil (today the president of Marygrove College in Detroit) is a thin, dynamic, restless person with a firm will, whose professional training was in philosophy. She soon inspired scores of other sisters, and almost overnight 150 "Sister Formation Centers" sprang up in the U.S. Despite her own strength, Sister Mary Emil was deferential to bishops and respectful to the executive officers of the sisterhoods. Gradually the sisters' communities succeeded in persuading bishops to endure a three-year wait for new personnel while young sisters completed their education. "Sometimes," Sister Mary Emil recalls now, "you had to promise that after three years you wouldn't forget the bishops who had agreed to wait. You couldn't blame them for being worried. They had countless demands to meet."

Wearing a habit she designed herself, Sister Nativity visits with her neighbors. She lives alone in an abandoned convent.

In her efforts to form a whole new system of education, Sister Mary Emil was joined by Sister Annette Walters, a trained psychologist from St. Paul, and Sister Ritamary Bradley, a bright young writer and college teacher from Ottumwa, Iowa. The three sisters traveled many thousands of miles and gave hundreds of lectures, established a vast and orderly network of communication, and through their Sister Formation Conference *Bulletin* offered American Catholicism more stimulating philosophical and theological reflection than any other institution of the decade. Six special colleges for sisters were built in different parts of the country, and the curriculum of each was based on the assumption that "the spiritual and the intellectual life reinforce each other."

For more than a decade, the programs of the S.F.C. have prospered, even though the three pioneering leaders clashed in an intensely human drama two years ago. Although all three had the basic interests of the Sister Formation Conference at heart, severe personality conflicts arose in which many sisters became involved. Misunderstandings multiplied; unfounded accusations were made; during more than one organizational meeting emotions got out of hand, someone banged fists on the table, feelings were deeply hurt, groups silently formed behind the scenes and rumors flew. Letters, and then counter-letters, were written to all the bishops of the U.S. Today, all three have resumed work in their own communities, and all three speak most appreciatively of one another. Which is to say, more poignantly than pictures of nuns on roller coasters, sisters are like the rest of humanity.

Now a third cycle of reform has developed. While "education" and "formation" were the key words in the second cycle, "community" and "witness" are the key words in the third. One sister active in this third cycle is Sister Charles Borromeo Muckenhirn (her friends call her "Charlie B."), who is head of the theology department at St. Mary's College in South Bend, Ind., and also the courageous editor of *Sisters' Forum*, a monthly supplement of the weekly *National Catholic Reporter*. In 1965 she assembled a set of essays by nine sister scholars entitled *The Changing Sister*, which brilliantly illuminates the revolution occurring in the lives of nuns.

I spoke to Sister Charles Borromeo in the seminar room of the St. Mary's theology department. Upon the wall hung a pennant on which bright lettering proclaims joyously: "WISDOM hath built herself a house . . . a house, a house, a beautiful house!" Speaking rapidly, in a colorful, colloquial style, Sister Charles Borromeo described the present wave of reform. "The renewal," she said, "is a welling up of the Christian life in sisters who want to love and live in genuine communities. They are totally committed to personal prayer,

Bishops couldn't see why nuns who taught school needed college degrees.

thought, dialogue across all lines, in order to become witnesses for the Spirit. And witness does not mean carrying a sandwich board. It means living a free and genuine life, from inside out. Prayer is primary for a sister, like marital intimacy for the married. But all Christians are responsible for acting in the world!"

"I think the sisters interested in renewal want two things and would like to be pictured as wanting these two things," says Sister Suzanne Kelly, the first sister hired to teach at all-male Notre Dame University: "A more meaningful community life, and a non-institutional way of serving the church." Pressed, she specifies that she wants "smaller, less regimented groups" where personal relationships are warm and genuine, and "the freedom to be responsible Christians rather than to go on being mere position-fillers."

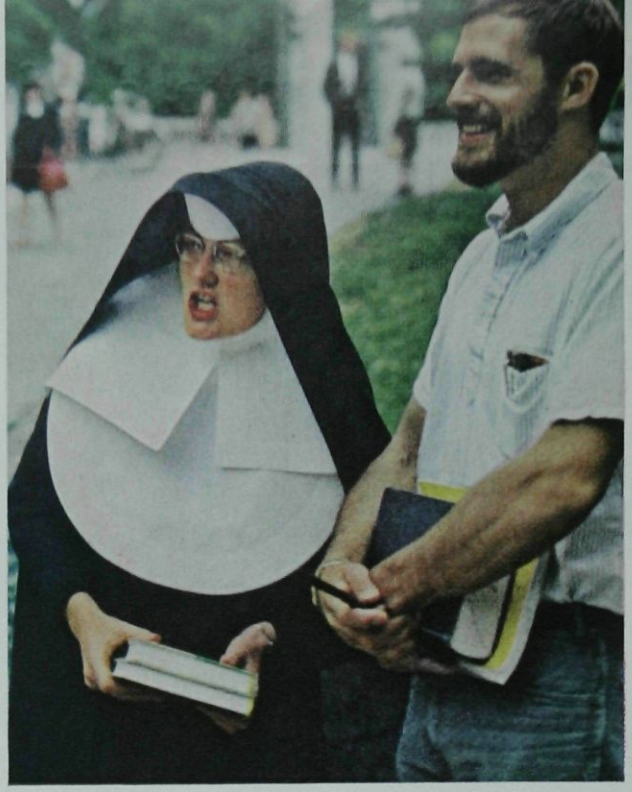
The new sisters feel that they are just beginning to enter the secular world on its own terms. It is not so much that many convent rules have been changed to allow them, for example, to go out on the streets alone instead of in pairs. (Occasionally, as happened recently in downtown Los Angeles, a protective layman accosts a sister on a busy sidewalk and lectures her severely for being "out" alone.) It is rather that wherever there is suffering and need, there the sisters are beginning to go.

Some of the sisters' communities are experiencing the new adulthood more quickly than others. In the communities that still are bent on maintaining "tradition," for example, young girls of 18 or 19 learn to become anonymous and to submit. "They come with their guitars," a sister in one such community sadly reports. "They are full of joy and vivacity. The only church they know is the church of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John's church: critical, questioning, free. But in our community the women training these girls are very rigid personalities and the new girls strike deathly fear into their hearts—they'll *never* fit into slots. These girls are reading Sartre and don't know if they still have faith, but the novice mistress makes fifty of them sit in a classroom for an hour after Mass because on the way to church one girl almost stepped on a worm and those behind her giggled. Another girl is told she doesn't have a vocation because she tidied up her room in five minutes when the rule said fifteen and sat reading Albert Camus for the extra time."

By contrast, in the community of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Namur in Belmont, Calif., the new way is advancing steadily. Recently the younger sisters there gave a pizza party for me, in order to discuss this article for the *Post*. "The last week before I entered the convent," one junior sister reminisced, "I had my last hamburger, my last milk shake, my last pizza, my last everything. Then at our first dinner in the convent they served us ice cream! The record collection we had was just like my collection at home. I was so surprised at first. There were far more connections with home than I expected."

The young sisters talked with uninhibited gestures, fingers moving as fast as their speech. "Why are you writing this article anyway?" one sister asked directly. "What do you think we are doing here? Who do you think we are?"

"The problem is, who do you think you are?"



Without fear of worldly "contamination," nuns are studying at secular schools. Sister Michaele, above, is at the University of California, Berkeley.

The discussion lasted a long time. "Christians," they finally answered, "trying to learn to live as a community."

"What is the essential thing?" I asked.

"We told you. Community."

Like these junior sisters, the new sisters have discovered that merely living together under one roof, taking meals together, even conversing charitably together does not make "community." Many sisters prefer institutional living, but some of the new sisters find institutional living less than Christian. And whereas the old system discouraged friendships among the sisters, the new sisters are not afraid to love.

Upon the walls of the rooms of many new sisters are serigraphs by Sister Mary Corita Kent, the artist of the renewal, whose colorful work pleased thousands at the Vatican Pavilion of the World's Fair. One of her prints reads: "To understand is to stand under, which is to look up to, which is a good way to understand." Reality, risk, trust, joy, love, these are the themes through which Sister Corita speaks of the sources of genuine community. Her own convent, Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles, lives by the spirit of Sister Corita's prints. When the Immaculate Heart sisters speak of "our community," they do not mean only the sisters, but all the people with whom they come in contact—students, lay faculty, workmen, visitors. It would be difficult to find a more thoroughly free and joyful household in the United States. Only the arch-conservatism of Cardinal McIntyre blinds him to one of the most brilliant Christian presences in his archdiocese. Constantly spied upon (even conversations over dinner are reported by telephone), criticized and obstructed by archdiocesan officials, the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart are among the most highly educated, open, imaginative and rapidly developing sisterhoods in the country.

The bitter conservative resistance to renewal imagines that all the new sisters want are petty things like freedom to eat in public, colorful dresses, total freedom from discipline and rules, an ordinary lay life: "Why did they enter the convent at all?" To this, one of the older new sisters, aged 62, retorts, "I wonder if anyone would think that Benedictine, Carmelite, Dominican, Franciscan or other priests are reprehensibly eating their cake and having it by playing golf, swimming at public or semi-public beaches, going to the theater, to concerts, to restaurants, having regular vacations, visiting and dining with their friends in homes."

To the new nuns, these small things are not serious. They are embarrassed that in attending professional conventions they cannot, according to the rules of some sisterhoods, take their meals with "seculars." Sometimes a sister who is working among the poor in the slums cannot, without a companion, respond to a call from a family in immediate need. But such matters are mere nuisances, to be ended speedily. The new sisters are thinking about far more basic Christian issues: how to live a mature, prayerful, free Christian life among people who are in need.

IV

What the new sisters have in mind is, in a striking way, coherent with the whole history of religious sisterhoods. This history begins with those devout women who regularly ministered to Jesus and his disciples, and who stood by at his crucifixion when the apostles had fled. For four centuries, women served in an official capacity as "deaconesses" in the early church. They tended the sick, fed the poor, instructed new believers, comforted the sorrowing.

The church first formally approved of public communities of religious women in the 6th century. In those days it was a matter of practical necessity that every woman be protected by "either a man or a wall," and the church insisted upon strict enclosure of its consecrated virgins. This insistence—a solid wall itself—stood firm for a thousand years. From the 13th century Dominican and Franciscan monks were allowed to live among the people, preaching and begging for their daily needs, but no nuns were allowed the same freedom.

In 1544, St. Angela Merici sent a new sisterhood, the Ursulines, outside the medieval cloisters to meet the enormous needs of the people. But male traditionalists put an end to this brave attempt; the Ursulines were cloistered. A century later, however, St. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, with "patience and pious cunning," circumvented conservative resistance. They dropped the name "religious" and spoke merely of "good girls of the parish"—nothing formal, simply women who wished to live the Gospels, together, in a common life. St. Vincent and Louise envisioned prophetically a group of women "whose only cloister would be the streets of the city; their only chapel the parish church; their veil, holy modesty; and their only enclosure, holy obedience."

The Daughters of Charity, as these "good girls of the parish" were called, dressed as other women dressed, went where other women went. But they did not escape from monastic patterns as thoroughly as St. Vincent had hoped. The weight of the cloistered tradition was still heavy; precautions were taken to safeguard the sisters from the "contamination" of the world. There were to be regular hours of prayer. There were to be superiors and subjects, rules and regulations. The sisters went outside for certain explicitly permitted tasks; then they returned. Thus, they could not really belong to the poor of the streets, to the active world of men, except part-time.

Today, along with many other activities, the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul operate Marillac House in Chicago, a settlement house in East Garfield Park, the area with the

highest crime rate, the highest rate for venereal disease and illegitimate children, the highest illiteracy and the highest degree of desperation in the city. The sisters have worked at Marillac House for more than 20 years, and are slightly amused when other sisters discover their work and take it as something new. "Read St. Vincent de Paul," Sister Winifred Kilday smiles. "It's all in his conferences. 'The poor are anyone who needs us.' We've been here through the frustrated 'Forties and the desperate 'Fifties. Now others are on the brotherhood kick and the inner-city bandwagon. But it isn't new, sir, it isn't new."

The immediate problem in East Garfield Park is hunger. "Another baby dies of malnutrition," Sister Winifred says evenly. She is tall, professional, with a dry wit and an intense devotion to her community's work. "Children are always being bitten by rats. Then there is the 'sin of referral.' The poor are referred from one bureaucratic agency to another.

"What do we do here?" She sat in a neatly waxed and painted office on the ground floor of a public-housing project two blocks away from Marillac House. "There are twenty-two thousand people in our fifty-block area. We have trained three direct-service workers to tend to immediate emergencies. We keep no records; it's either care for people or keep records, and we prefer people. The people here have started twenty-six block clubs; we give them some leadership training, bring in speakers, offer them our center. The work is slow. The poor have no one to speak for them, sir. They need a voice. They need someone to speak for them." She looked for the thread of her account. "The work is slow. This month the project is 'a garbage can for every family.' Garbage is collected only once a week in this area. Next month the project will be, 'Put the garbage *in* the can.' The work is slow. The people need secondary leadership, their own leadership, their own sense of community."

Phone calls often interrupt Sister Winifred. "Gotta see you, sister," one caller recently told her, a 30-year-old woman with five children, whose husband had been in prison for three months. Sister Winifred went immediately, climbing to the fifth floor several buildings from her office. The woman lay on the bed treading her sheets. "Gotta have sex, sister," she said. "Don't let me cheat. Don't let me cheat." (Sister Winifred said later that in that neighborhood "anyone can get sex for fifty cents.") She sat on the bed and took the woman's head on her lap, caressing her hair until she grew quiet. "Every woman goes through what she goes through," Sister Winifred said later. "In her I saw the beautiful purity of our people. I learned what my own vow of celibacy means. 'Don't let me cheat, sister. Don't let me cheat.'"

The five girls are not nuns, and they hate to be thought of as nuns.

When the bell rings at 12:45 Sister Winifred returns from her public-housing outpost to Marillac House for lunch and an hour of common prayer. The people know what the bell means. "Sister, you know that bell's gonna ring. Now you better get there." "You can't cheat on the common life," Sister Winifred says. "I wouldn't want those hours of prayer changed." She returns to duty from 2:30 until 5:45. After dinner, recreation (including the news on television) and a brief period of common prayer, she returns to the office from 7:15 until 10, or as late as necessary. "Sisters must specialize," she says. "Some must teach the wealthy to care for the poor, and some must help the poor. For us, the poor are our masters. They teach us the meaning of the Gospel. Christ is really present in them."

The Daughters of Charity represent a transition from the past into the present. They retain, however, an ankle-length dress and a set of strict rules. And they have kept their three-century-old commitment to the poor (in the United States they also teach in many schools). Many of the new sisters admire their work at Marillac House but feel that the commitment of the sisters to the poor must break still further from the idea of enclosure.

In vivid contrast to Sister Winifred's defense of a strict common life, Sisters Evelyn Eaton, Marie Cirillo and Gerald Peterson of the Glenmary Sisters are proud of the fact that "living in a convent is outside our experience." The Glenmary Sisters were founded 20 years ago in Cincinnati and have done most of their work among the poor of Appalachia. They number at present not quite 100 sisters. Typically American, the sisters are experimenting with a simple gray dress and blouses of various colors.

Sisters Evelyn, Marie and Gerald live temporarily in "uptown" Chicago, in the Irving Park-Bryn Mawr district where thousands of Appalachians have migrated. They are blessed with a bishop who understands the ambiguities and complexities of their work with the poor in his diocese, Bishop Joseph H. Hodges of Wheeling, W. Va.; he has told them they "have his permission" to make mistakes. The sisters came to Chicago "to be present and available," and to study the needs of Appalachian migrants in the city. Rents on the sisters' block run as high as $130 a month for three rooms. Most of the migrants arrive penniless but are expected to pay rent in advance. Even when they find jobs, pay day does not come for at least a week. What do they do in the meantime? "Who knows?" says Sister Evelyn.

In the streets children greet each sister by name, calling joyfully from overhead windows or from the tiny asphalt playground where broken glass shines in the sun. Only a small percentage of the people are Catholic, but almost all of them know the sisters. They do not perceive the sisters as Catholics or as sisters but as distinct persons—Evelyn, Marie and Gerald—whom they trust. A pregnant 19-year-old whose husband is in jail comes by for lunch. An 18-year-old boy comes to ask them for $30 to pay a week's rent, until his first pay check arrives.

The Appalachians are charged 15 to 30 percent interest by salesmen who sell them "installment purchases." They do not know that they have rights regarding their landlords and the city government. They do not understand northern bureaucracy. They are shunted from office to office, distrusted, accused of lying and other immoralities on the merest assumption. The skills of living in the city elude them. Yet hundreds of thousands of Appalachians will be moving into cities in the next decade. The Glenmary Sisters are trying to invent techniques for helping them: block clubs, clean-up campaigns, block parties, choral groups, folk singing, job hunting. The sisters are trying to become links between the migrants and the rest of the city.

On the opposite side of the block from the Glenmarys' three-room apartment is a huge yellow-brick convent in which six sisters—never seen in the streets—are living. Through the window of the huge, three-story house on the next

These five attractive Roman Catholic girls have come to Oklahoma City to lead a celibate, dedicated Christian life together and to work individually for various Christian ends.

corner one can see a gleaming silver service on a white linen tablecloth. Four priests live there. The solid school building next door—once that of an upper-middle-class Irish parish—stands locked and unused after school hours.

One of the Glenmary Sisters—they maintain two apartments, a block apart—teaches at Mundelein College; her salary helps to support the others. (Some of the students from Mundelein come down to help and to make friends, tutor and organize parties in the neighborhood.) The Glenmary Sisters are discovering among the Appalachians what genuine community is.

Even the student sisters of the Glenmarys are different. Eight of them live in a house in Milwaukee, where they are studying for degrees in history, sociology, English, fine arts and other fields. Sister Germaine Habjan composes folk songs, which the entire community sings. Last November, two graduate students from Marquette were married, and the whole group sang two of Sister Germaine's songs: *Love One Another* and *All of My Life, I Will Sing Praise to My God.* Recently, the sisters were saddened because the use of folk music in the liturgy was forbidden by the bishop of Milwaukee as "unsuited" for worship. On Sunday mornings, nevertheless, Marquette students crowd into the dining room and living room of the Glenmary apartment for the Eucharist, and for coffee and rolls afterward. The eight attractive, talented sisters are not afraid to "mix with seculars," but feel strengthened thereby in their service of God's people.

It does not seem fanciful to see in the Glenmary Sisters, and in other new sisters who are trying to revolutionize convent life in a similar pattern, a return to the original role of dedicated women in the church. They dress like other women; they move about in the adult, lay world without fear; they are sustained by the strength of their own inner freedom, love and desire to serve God's people; they are unhampered by the medieval institutions, modern impersonality, rules, regulations and the 19th-century practices that inhibit so many sisterhoods.

V

Why do women become nuns?

In the South Pacific during World War II an American sergeant watched an American missionary sister tend a family stricken with advanced leprosy. He said loud enough for her to hear: "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars." She replied: "Neither would I."

The sociologist points out that for countless daughters of Irish (and other) immigrants the Roman Catholic sisterhoods have offered status, security and acceptance in the educated middle class. The psychologist points out that some girls who are afraid of their sexuality, uncertain of their own worth or unable to make independent decisions find in the sisterhoods a perfect excuse for avoiding contact with men and a guaranteed route to personal sanctity and honor. But in the daily life of the sister, only love for a hidden, often seemingly distant God provides the sustenance of spirit that makes her life worth its sacrifices. The sister lives by faith. Praying in the dim chapel while the benches creak, she directs her will, her thoughts, her affections to One she does not see but in Whom she has the utmost confidence. Sisters deplore any discussion of their life that overlooks their love for God. "Without faith, ' one sister says, "my life would be absurd."

The new nuns share deeply in this faith. But what distinguishes them is that they are bursting with the desire not to let their faith be hidden, "like a candle under a basket." They became sisters in order to live as closely in the presence of God as they could, and to them this means serving God's most needy people. Whereas nuns of the old school find God in quiet, retirement, obedience, peace, the new sisters find God in the secular city, in initiative, in conflict, as well as in prolonged periods of silent prayer. Thus new differs from old, but the fundamental love for God, the fundamental spirit of faith, is the same.

> 'A Christian sisterhood should not be run like an army.'

"I've watched the young sisters for the last five years," reports an older nun, for many years a highly ranked superior in her community. "At first I was suspicious. But I have watched them at prayer, and I have seen their charity for one another, and also for sisters who don't approve of them. They are not like we were in my generation. But we can be proud of them."

A tiny minority of American nuns, some 2,000, belong to fully cloistered, contemplative sisterhoods; their entire lives are spent in silence, prayer and whatever limited work they can do within the cloister. The contemplative nuns, however, like the active ones, are in great turmoil; new vocations have dropped alarmingly. And many contemplatives, inspired by the new theology, wish to make their contribution to the present renewal.

Still, for most of the sisters, holiness lies in serving mankind—in hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly; thus the majority join the "active" communities. Of the 175,000 American sisters, an estimated 105,000 teach—most of them in elementary and secondary schools, the rest in the 140 sisters' colleges (and 26 junior colleges) located around the country. In some places, students in Catholic schools rank lower on standard achievement tests than students in other schools; but often they rank higher. Over all, the sisters are justly proud of their performance, although their own self-criticism is growing healthily.

A more profound question often arises among some of them: Are Catholic schools worth the effort? Couldn't the sisters do better as professional public-school teachers, or even better by setting up youth centers in each parish district for after-school hours? Studies seem to show that, in observable moral and religious behavior, Catholic school children do not differ appreciably from public-school children. In religious terms, then, is the vast expenditure of money upon the Catholic school system worth the effort? Some sisters answer a ringing "Yes!" Others are not so sure.

Some argue that the church should cut back on the number of secondary and elementary schools and aim for quality. The Catholic schools are freer from political pressure than the public schools and could attempt educational experiments among both the poor and the upper classes. The Sisters of Loretto in Kansas City, for example, are experimenting in their new Loretto School with a non-graded curriculum in which the students proceed at their own pace.

One new educational field that attracts the new sisters is teaching and counseling at secular colleges and universities. Five out of eight Catholic college students are on secular campuses; they have been largely neglected by the church in the past. But in 1965 at least two dozen sisters accepted positions as assistants to the Newman center chaplains at various universities, and more entered the work this year.

Perhaps the most exciting experiment in Catholic education is led by the vivacious Sister Jacqueline Grennan, president of Webster College in St. Louis and member of President Kennedy's Panel for Research and Development in Education. Through her service on the panel, she has come to know some of the most sensitive and learned scientists and thinkers in America; several of them confided to her, as they came to respect her, that they had thought of religion as "a sinking ship." None of the sisters is as aware as she is of the gap between the world of belief and the world of unbelief. At Webster, Sister Jacqueline and her community are trying to create a new type of Catholic women's college, open, ecumenical, pluralistic, critical and free. All the Webster girls are expected to take their Catholic faith apart creatively, and critically to work out their basic values. Some of them are afraid of the freedom Webster offers; they want more answers, fewer questions. Others shed complacencies like cocoons and emerge with fresh, resilient spirits.

VI

Although the structure of convent life is highly democratic, calling for the election of major officers and representative bodies (chapters) at six-year intervals, obedience to existing authority often outweighs critical personal responsibility. Some sisters merely go through the motions of voting for officers; they vote for what they think their present officers want. Other sisters think of authority as a reward for long and faithful service; they don't so much seek good leadership as give a vote of commendation. In other communities what one sister calls "government by dynasty" emerges: outgoing officers point out their successors. The result of this breakdown in democracy is that communication between officers and members of religious communities is sometimes rudimentary. In such situations, the new sisters cry out for "dialogue." One of the greatest fruits of Vatican II was the introduction, in nearly all sisterhoods, of regular self-study projects, discussion committees and both written and oral airing of suggestions for renewal and reform. "A Christian sisterhood should not be run like an army, let alone an asylum," one sister exclaims. "Why can't sisters treat one another like adults, trust one another, help one another with criticism? We should call no one 'mother' (as in 'mother superior'), for none of us are children. We can find unity of wills without putting anyone up on a pedestal and waiting for orders. Other Americans do it all the time."

Nonetheless, a feeling of dependency has inhibited many sisters, particularly the older ones. The older system provided the illusion, but often not the reality, of community; the sister knew that she would be fed and housed, and cared for when old, even if she did not have a single close friend who knew her secret thoughts and her hidden emotions; she could feel part of a great institution. The new sisters, however, are a threat to this whole pattern of life. Personal responsibility, critical freedom, meeting people, new clothes, irregular hours—many a sister can hardly suppress a shudder of insecurity.

Besides, many of the older sisters have become so focused upon the trivia of institutional life, upon questions of rank (in some convents every community action is done according to the seniority established by the date on which one entered the convent), upon literal fidelity to rules and issues of propriety, that the indifference of the new sisters to such matters is held to be proof of moral turpitude. After watching four thoughtful and sensitive sisters answer questions for two hours on television's *Open End*, one older sister was asked her opinion. She frowned: "Sister Jacqueline had her legs crossed all during the show."

Paradoxically, at the very moment when the Second Vatican Council has promoted a wave of renewal and reform in the entire church, perhaps more sisters than ever before are asking to be dispensed from their vows and leaving the convent. No hard statistics are available, but competent sisters estimate that in 1965 about 3,300 sisters left, or almost two percent. In some communities fewer girls are entering now, too, and fewer go on to

final vows. But other communities have so far experienced no more "defections" than hitherto—"Not more than two in three hundred sisters in the last ten years," one sister reports.

An eastern sister says: "When a well-trained sister sees a beloved school or project or organization, a worthwhile, beneficial thing, falling to pieces because of an inefficient superior, then, despite all the blithe talk about obeying superiors, it is only the terribly holy or the terribly foolish who can remain cool and uninvolved."

Who are the women who leave the convent? Why do they leave? What becomes of them? A national survey is being launched by several sisters to answer such questions. A tentative answer seems to be that in the last few years the expectations of the new sisters have jumped enormously, far beyond what their orders are prepared to allow. Some of them, with only one life to spend for the church, can no longer spend it conscientiously in institutions which of necessity must change with "deliberate speed." Other women, more conservative, are oppressed by the sudden uncertainties of convent life; their sense of stability has evaporated. Still others have suddenly become critically awake, after years of devoted, unquestioning service.

No doubt every one of the new sisters has thought of leaving the convent; a decision to remain a sister, they argue, should be made anew every day. It is not that their commitment is temporary; not at all. It is rather that they wish their commitment to be realistic, conscious, reflective; for them a vocation is not a matter of drifting. Besides, they are fully aware that, whereas 20 years ago the sisterhood was the only way in which women could give dedicated service to the church, today the possibilities and responsibilities of the lay woman in the world are much more fully recognized. The new sister sees herself as serving in one role among many; she is glad to be where she is, but she does not think the world begins and ends with the convent.

"For myself," says Sister Claire Marie Sawyer, "I think it would be throwing away a tremendous grace to leave the convent in this period; but I understand how others are led differently. We each serve the church; we are all Christians."

VII

Experiments already undertaken provide a look at how the sisterhoods of the future might develop. While the Sisters of Loretto, the Immaculate Heart Sisters, the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Glenmary Sisters are, each in their different ways, leading the other sisterhoods into the future, some imaginative women have skipped ahead several steps. They have founded small associations in which they live out a new form of religious life.

One such group is made up of six women, formerly nuns in the Midwest, who left their sisterhoods to look for a more flexible mode of dedicated service. By chance, they made contact with Bishop Walter W. Curtis of Bridgeport, Conn., who offered to rent them living quarters and to hire them to teach in a new, lay Catholic college in his diocese. For want of a better name, these six women, whose ages range from 30 to 45, call themselves simply "The Christian Institute."

They dress as other women their age dress: On a Sunday afternoon a visitor found one of them in slacks and a University of Texas sweatshirt, the others in assorted dresses, slacks, sweaters. They live now on a small suburban farm, and they plan to find a place in the city slums. Four of them teach in the college. One, a professional social worker, is employed by the federal Office of Economic Opportunity to help the Negro and Puerto Rican teen-agers of the Bridgeport slums to learn

They have just one rule: 'Love one another as I have loved you.'

the skills of competitive white society. The other is a secretary for the diocese. Putting their salaries together, they have been able to help one another further their studies. One has spent a year in Florence, Italy, studying painting; a second will go to Europe next year for advanced studies in theology.

"The Christian Institute's only rule is: 'Love one another as I have loved you,'" says Sylvia Tackowiak, their leader. "Our aim is to witness to Christ through a life of evangelical perfection." The members assume that each of them is adult, mature, and has the interests of the whole group at heart; such persons need few rules. They will accept newcomers to their group only if they have sufficient professional competence to support themselves, wish to live a celibate life, and choose to give meaning to their professional occupations through living in a Christian household. The women make whatever vows they choose, in the privacy of their own conscience, although they do renew their dedication to the institute annually during the liturgical services of the Easter vigil.

The experiment is only three years old, but the six are happy with one another and with their new life. They delight in the freedom and flexibility they have, all the more because all of them experienced the struggles of renewal within traditional sisterhoods. They live, in the words of St. Vincent de Paul, as "good girls of the parish," sharing in all ways the life of the nearest Catholic parish community. They have no formal link to the bishop; they reserve the right to accept, or to refuse, any task that he proposes to them.

Meanwhile, five attractive young lay women have launched the Association for Christian Development in Oklahoma City. They too wear bright, cheerful dresses; each needs and has a car; each works at a different task, though all but one of them are on the diocesan payroll of Bishop Victor Reed, one of the most balanced and progressive of the U.S. bishops. Elizabeth McMahon and Connie Scott came to Oklahoma after their graduation from Manhattanville College in New York, to work as lay volunteers in what was then an understaffed, needy diocese. They loved the free and open climate of the church in Oklahoma and the opportunities they found for their own professional development. By 1962 they had met Mary Christie, another New Yorker, and Sharlene Shoemaker, a Nebraskan; in 1964 a registered nurse from Illinois, Betty Jacober, joined them.

The five are not, and hate to be thought of as, "nuns." To them the word has associations of institutionalization, rules, regulations, formalities. They wish to live a celibate, dedicated life, nourished by common life in a Christian household. Connie Scott says simply: "I want my life to speak to people of more than just me—of Christ. Not in words, but by something in myself. I want to speak as a healthy woman, as someone happy, fulfilled. I've chosen to be single. For me the Association is a way of life, the way I choose to love and to grow in love, to love Christ."

Connie runs a highly successful Montessori school for disadvantaged Negro children and has trained several of the children's mothers to help her. Elizabeth McMahon and Mary Christie try to teach the Catholic parents of the entire state of Oklahoma how to educate their children in religion; Sharlene works for the statewide diocesan youth department. Betty Jacober works among the poor Negro children of the Walnut Grove area of Oklahoma City.

A friend of these girls is the remarkable Sister Nativity Heiliger, formerly a Sister of Mercy, who now lives on her own in a tiny abandoned convent in a Negro neighborhood.

Sister Nativity was educated in public schools and so never experienced, she says, the "mystification" with which many Catholics surround nuns. "Having been reared in a Protestant country town," she says, "where the titles of brother and sister are frequently used between Christians in the community, I learned to love these titles, and to think of them as meaning availability and service." Sister Nativity maintains close ties with the friends she made during her 17 years as a Sister of Mercy, and she retains the name by which she was then known. She has shortened her black skirt to normal length and has designed a brief veil for her hair; her dress is still that of a sister, though it does not hide her femininity. "When I wear slacks or something casual for picnics and the like," she says, "I'm still Sister Nativity."

Sister Nativity has become the center of countless activities on behalf of the poor in Oklahoma City. She works in civic and neighborhood associations and draws other sisters into them. She sponsors lectures and classes on the problems of the city. Her program is simple. "The church should go to the people instead of waiting for the people to come to it. My role here is to be a link between people who want to help and people who need help. I'm willing to stay here a long time before I see any results."

Asked, "What is a sister?" Sister Nativity answers: "A sister is simply a person who has chosen to make herself available as sister instead of as wife and mother. She is certainly not different from other women except as people are naturally different. I think she should be poor, chaste and obedient—but then I think all Christians should be that. . . . I agree with St. Irenaeus that 'The glory of God is man fully alive' and that whatever promotes life or growth is good."

VIII

The new sisters, still working within the institutional structures Sister Nativity has left behind, surely agree with her. They have chosen to struggle, to reform, to remake their institutions from within. I see them, in retrospect, 250 strong in the halls of St. Bridget's church and school in the slums of St. Louis on a Sunday afternoon, each one patiently tutoring a Negro boy or girl, man or woman, in English and arithmetic. I climb behind Mother Patricia Barrett ("eighty pounds of dynamite", she is learning jujitsu for self-protection) as she winds through the darkness and stench of the cement stairway to the 11th floor of a public-housing project in St. Louis; she has helped find a room for a mother of eight whose husband has deserted her. I remember Sisters Judith Mary, David Maureen and Madeleva of Kansas City telling me of their new inner-city quarters in an abandoned hotel on 12th Street: "Every morning one of us will have to get up and empty the rat traps—but all these young kids in the neighborhood do it." I hear the calm, ebullient, hopeful voice of Sister Mary Luke, superior general of the Sisters of Loretto and chairman of the conference of major superiors of women, as she says: "We must experiment, that's the most important thing, experiment. Who knows what sisters will be like twenty years from now?"

As the new sisters set about creating a new style of religious life, they become the vanguard of all Americans who believe in God and who trust that "the glory of God is man fully alive." The sisters come from farther back than most other groups; their rules and traditions date from long ago. But if they can maintain their integrity, their love, their passion for justice, in the world of computers, supermarkets and slums, there is hope for all of us. □