

Chapter One / Changing Times

"CHANGE" WAS HARDLY A BYWORD of the American Catholic church in the first half of this century. In the popular mind the church probably seemed an ancient behemoth given to alien ways, eternally on guard against incursions of secular culture. But nothing alive ever manages to escape change altogether. The fact is that the church was changing, of necessity, from the moment its transplanting to this land presented it with new realities. After World War II seminal changes occurred in its internal life—in biblical studies, in worship, in lay social action—whose full impact would be felt in a later age. But they went largely unremarked by the American public, and even Catholics did not experience them as significant alterations of Catholic identity.

Then, in 1958, John XXIII succeeded to the papacy. An uncontroversial, amiable compromise, whose election postponed the showdown between those who favored the status quo and those who understood that the church had some major changes to tackle, the man defied predictions. He promptly announced an ecumenical council in which all Catholic bishops were to participate. Before the Second Vatican Council ended, prominent non-Catholics as well as a smattering of Catholics (including women) had sat in as guest auditors. And an array of the church's most brilliant contemporary theologians, acting as official consultants to individual bishops or national groupings of them, had used their scholarship to give a highly intellectual cast to the ferment.

Vatican Council II held four sessions from 1962 to 1965. Its agenda covered a wide range—the nature and mission of the church; its relation to contemporary secular society as well as to other religions (Christian and non-Christian); the meaning of commitment in lay life, religious communities, and the

priesthood; the sources of revelation; religious freedom; worship; education; and modern communications. As its members probed these fields, they touched, however lightly, on themes like the status of women in the church and the influence of culture on religious forms. Not then pursued in depth, these themes lay scattered throughout the Council's major statements waiting to be discovered by readers of every ideological stripe. In all, the Council produced sixteen official documents.

Twenty other councils (by the count of Western Catholicism) had preceded it; the last, Vatican I (1869–70), was of interest primarily to scholars of papal infallibility. Vatican II was the first council convened after the advent of electronic mass media. Its agenda was audacious. Quite simply it undertook to lay out the direction for the reform and renewal of the Catholic church *in the context of the contemporary condition*. In short order Vatican II wrought a clear mandate for change—substantive change. In fact, the Council itself mirrored the change already in process. As captured by the media, television in particular, the Council imaged a church even Catholics had not been aware of—a world church headed by bishops of different colors and languages, manifesting as much ideological diversity as any civil society. Their concerns were as plural as the cultures from which they came. They dared to dismember the working papers drafted by the preparatory commissions, demanding to elaborate totally new ones. They voiced divergent perceptions of God and the church and revelation and “the world.” They even squabbled among themselves and took pot shots at one another’s ideas through well-placed leaks. Through it all, in official assemblies and coffee bars and press briefings, they waxed earnest on the changes the church must make if it was to be a credible player in contemporary society. And it was very clear that the Council bishops believed the Roman Catholic church should participate in the making of contemporary history.

That Catholicism could change was as much a revelation to Catholics as it was to the public at large. Traditional instruction had emphasized that "the Church is unchangeable." (Since it already possessed all truth, change could only represent deviance or deterioration.) Generations of American Catholics grew up thinking that the way things were was the way things *are*. Now the official rulers and teachers spoke and acted a different message. Large numbers of American Catholics were exhilarated by the new insights about what the church might become. The spectacle of the Council showed them that diversity and Catholicism are not mutually exclusive. They began to think and talk about change. By the time the Council ended, many were primed for radical alteration in their ways of believing and worshiping and being governed. (Many were equally primed to resist and block change.)

The deliberate embarking by an entire church on a process of renewal (and hence on cataclysmic change) was an intriguing spectacle. During and just after Vatican II, the Roman Catholic church became a major feature of the evening news. American Catholics found themselves in the limelight, the attention of their fellow Americans riveted on them. Influential spokespersons in religious and civic arenas remarked with obvious approval on the anticipated change. Non-Catholics were actually speaking with affection about a pope! From being an alien, often suspect, minority in the land, American Catholics had become an interesting species, the subject of popular report and mass commentary.

If Catholics in general were an interesting lot, one group among them seemed to fascinate the public. The mysterious women whom ordinary usage named "sisters" or "nuns" suddenly emerged into the public eye. They appeared in "normal" clothing. They were to be seen marching in Selma, running health and Head Start programs for migrant workers, brandishing placards in front of chancery buildings. *Life* magazine featured "Sister J" (Jacqueline Grennan, SL), the intrepid, self-

possessed president of Webster Groves College (St. Louis, Mo.). The bright splashes of Corita Kent's art linked faith with homely realities (the Virgin Mary and a ripe tomato, for instance), delighting—and horrifying—many. Newspapers and popular magazines spoke of the “new nuns.” Long one of the most dependable agents in upholding and transmitting the Catholic tradition in both spirit and practice, the sisters now seemed inventive crafters of the new.

The fact is, however, that the process of change in American women's communities had begun well before Vatican II. Two initiatives in particular—one conceived by the women themselves, the other by the Vatican—were critical in the transformation of American sisters. Both prompted change and both established networks later to prove invaluable for the organization of planned change.

The first of these, the Sister Formation Movement, was, without question, the single most critical ground for the radical transformative process following Vatican II. First, it converted American sisters into the most highly educated group of nuns in the church and placed them among the most highly educated women in the United States. Second, it became the vehicle for the transmission of common ideas and a common language about change in religious life. Third, it effected the first mass shift in the worldview of American sisters.

The movement originated in the honest admission that, although they were dedicated and worked very hard, the sisters who staffed American Catholic schools lacked adequate intellectual preparation for their task. In the forties a doctoral dissertation on the state of professional preparation among teaching sisters attracted the attention of several sister academics.¹ That study was followed by a troubling presentation, “The Education of Our Young Religious Sisters,”² at the annual National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) meeting in 1949. In 1952 an NCEA survey of American teaching sisters confirmed that their professional preparation did, in-