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THE NUN: GOING MODERN



Sister Corita





Ken Wittenberg

Musical happening in a Harlem street: Outside the cloister, a vibrant sense of sisterhood

THE NUN: A JOYOUS REVOLUTION

The Christian word was delivered first to a woman. Appearing before the Virgin Mary, the angel Gabriel announced that she was to conceive the Son of God. And she, though bewildered, rejoiced in His service: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."

Through Mary, new life entered the world. And yet, despite its singular devotion to Mary, the Roman Catholic hierarchy has never permitted its own handmaidens to exercise a genuinely feminine influence. From the earliest consecrated virgins through the great medieval prioresses to the modern teaching orders of nuns, the dedicated women of the church have been set aside, protected and periodically throttled by an institution run solely by men.

But now, the purely masculine way of running the church no longer seems to work so well. Catholics seeking new ways to be Christians no longer find the old patterns of much help in creating a more vibrant religious life. Love, freedom and experiment are their bywords, but this message of renewal seldom is loudly proclaimed in priests' rectories or bishops' chanceries. Instead, it is a growing legion of nuns who seem eager to sound the call.

Personality: Indeed, among U.S. nuns, a joyous revolution is in the making. The tall headdresses, starched wimples and flowing robes that long symbolized the nuns' "no" to secular society are beginning to disappear. As the cloister door swings open, there is a new sense of sisterhood—of feminine love—toward the human family. There is also a refreshing militancy. "When you take the vow of obedience," says a Poor Clare nun in New Orleans, "you don't abdicate your personality." In habit or out, nuns turn up in Milwaukee, marching like resolute suffragettes with Father James Groppi's

band of black commandos. Some stride boldly through the nation's Capital, protesting Vietnam, while others applaud at Christian anti-Communist crusades. Still other sisters dot the campuses at Columbia, Michigan or UCLA, debating Sartre or cybernetics with a liberated sense of intellectual excitement.

For most of the new nuns, being in the world means serving the urban poor. They conduct musical happenings in the dirty streets of Harlem, help housewives organize against unscrupulous merchants, assist bewildered families in their search for welfare relief. "Our order is an activist order," proclaims a restless Maryknoll nun who will soon join four other sisters living in a Boston housing project. "We hope to become involved in the neighborhoods as neighbors, not as religious women."

In truth, there is hardly a convent among the nation's more than 500 orders of nuns that is not torn between the im-

pulse to be religious women, wed to the church's schools and hospitals, and the desire to be creative neighbors to those in need outside the church's walls. Some leave the convent to pursue their VISTA visions. Last year alone, it is estimated that 2,000 nuns gave up their vows for this and other reasons. And among the "defectors," as older nuns call them, are groups of women who established their own quasi-religious communities. "In every era of the church, new patterns have emerged to meet the times," explains Sister Francetta Barberis, a former college president who now holds a post in the Job Corps. "Today we must find new patterns to survive."

Those patterns are many, various and deeply personal. Examples:

- In Davenport, Iowa, a new Sisters' Council—representing 800 nuns—advises the local bishop on everything from education to slum projects. A half-dozen other cities boast similar schemes dedicated to giving nuns a more powerful voice in diocesan policy.

- In Detroit, Dominican Sister Joannette Nitz, a former parochial-school teacher, launched a food club last month for ghetto housewives. Operated as a grocery cooperative with 70 members, it has been an instant success. Sister Joannette describes herself as "a very uneducated educator striving for a new role."

- In Portland, Ore., Sister Mary Guadalupe, 26, of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters lives with two other nuns in a downtown apartment. A buoyant brunette, she teaches remedial reading, counsels slum dwellers and doesn't hesitate to plunge into a rough-and-tumble game of back-alley basketball. Her only spiritual insignia: a gold cross hanging from her neck. "We're creating the community of the future," she says.

- In Appalachia, 40 former Glenmary sisters who broke away from their mother-



John Goodwin

Cox and Corita: Closer to earth



Jim Running



Richard Pipes

Guadalupe (left) and Delaney: Alley basketball and equality with the janitor



James F. Coyne



Jeff Lowenthal

Donahue (left) and Reidy: What matters is not garb but ghetto and a right God

house in Cincinnati are working as teachers and nurses among the poor. They still follow their spiritual vows but relish a new flexibility in their personal ties to the world outside the convent.

There are some 180,000 nuns in the U.S.—three times the number of priests—and most of them, unlike the independent novices of today, entered the convent with no thought of developing their individual talents. Typical of the novices of a generation ago is Sister Mary Corita Kent, 49, who joined California's teaching Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary with no more tangible goal in mind than a vague certainty that "I wanted to be a nun." Corita did not want to be a teacher but learned to be one, first in the order's elementary schools and later as an art instructor at Los Angeles's Immaculate Heart College. In fact, the blue-eyed, petite nun remarks: "I probably would never have taken up art seriously if I hadn't become a nun."

Furious: As artist, teacher and woman, Corita incarnates all the ebullience of the nuns' joyous revolution. Her colorful, deceptively witty serigraphs, or silk-screen prints, dance with buoyant hope. In them, words—bits of newspaper prints, a grocery list, a philosopher's maxim or an ad for United Air Lines—flit gaily across abstract patches of orange, red and yellow like charged-up billboards. Though she produces only one series of serigraphs a year during a furious, two-week stint each summer, her prints now hang in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and more than twenty other museums throughout the world.

Her work is "unique, undecipherable, unpeppable," says New Yorker cartoonist and writer James Stevenson. He was first drawn to Corita after he saw her 50-foot mural in the Vatican Pavilion at the 1965 New York World's Fair. "She is," he says, "the most extraordinary person I know. She has life in a highly concentrated form, and when she laughs—which she does easily—the effect lasts a long time."

Unlike many religious artists, Corita

welcomes the clang and clatter of big cities. With her art students, she raids the local jumblescape of supermarkets, hamburger stands and filling stations for new shapes, colors and designs. "San Francisco and New York," she observes, "are finished cities. Los Angeles, though, remains marvelously unfinished." Just as she transforms the city into art, so does she transform people into artists.

Prototype: In fact, Corita's best medium is people. In 1964, for example, she transformed Immaculate Heart College's staid religious festival, Mary's Day, into a religious happening. With black-robed nuns parading in flowered necklaces, poets declaiming from platforms and painted students dancing in the grass, Mary's Day became a prototype for the hippies' 1967 be-in in San Francisco.

The connection is neither frivolous nor profane. Corita sees in happenings a genuine effort to integrate the arts in a multimedia celebration of God's creation. Her own classroom has become choked with paint, sound equipment, a jukebox and movie projectors. ("The first rule for watching a film," she cautions students, "is don't blink.") In her own unblinking way, she manages to turn on the most jaded audiences. In Philadelphia last year, she cajoled a convention of broadcasters into putting on paper hats, reciting poetry to each other and floating balloons. And then she zinged home her point: communicators, of all people, should keep their five senses open to the world and "stay with it."

Before a crowd of students in Boston last fall, Corita joined Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, who gave her a bearded buss on the cheek, for an unfettered "Evening With God." "There's something about a woman that brings her closer to the earth, that makes her less conceptual," points out Cox. "What Sister Corita is saying is that there's this vital and elemental side of life that should be preserved by nuns."

Many gifted people devote themselves to a single-minded goal. But the

nun, because her life is uniquely disciplined and largely stripped clean of irrelevance, has a rare advantage. Thus Corita finds it natural to bring her life to one sharp focus, to cut through the murky clouds of modern life like a single ray of sunlight. "The person who makes things," she says simply, summing up her view, "is a sign of hope."

To clergymen who know her, Corita is herself a sign of hope for the church. "Everyone does his thing when Corita is around," says Lutheran pastor Richard H. Luecke, director of study at Chicago's Urban Training Center. "She makes you see things. She's sort of a medium without a message—insisting on the changing image, rather than the stable concept, as the proper religious approach."

Through her infectious vitality, Corita joyfully subverts the church's neat divisions between secular and sacred. "She merely steps outside the rules and does her dance," says Jesuit poet Daniel Berigan, who wrote a verse introduction to Corita's art book, "Footnotes and Headlines." "But she is not frivolous, except to those who see life as a problem. She introduces the intuitive, the unpredictable into religion, and thereby threatens the essentially masculine, terribly efficient, chancery-ridden, law-abiding, file-cabinet church."

Corita's Christian excitement is so infectious that entire religious communities have picked up the same beat. Indeed, her own order both echoes and helps amplify it. Organized by ten Spanish missionary nuns in 1871, it became a separate American community in 1924. Currently, it has 560 sisters, mostly teachers in Catholic schools in the Southwest. Unlike most orders, the IHM's have long preferred to work pragmatically, stressing personal discovery rather than dogmatic training.

Reforms: When Pope Paul VI, following the Vatican Council II's decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, ordered the world's nuns to update their communities, the IHM's responded



Newsweek—James D. Wilson

De la Cruz (above) and Nitz: Cheaper groceries and the need for a family



Bernice Clark



Newsweek—Joseph B. Cumming Jr.

Harak (above) and Borgia: Too ordered a life and too convenient a labor source?



Newsweek—Jeff Lowenthal

with typical gusto. They re-examined every facet of their life last summer during a long chapter meeting and produced a 58-page outline of provisional reforms which Father Andrew Greeley, a leading Catholic sociologist, considers "the path which all religious orders are going to have to follow to survive."

Under their new and still experimental rules, each IHM nun is free to reassume her family name, receive a small stipend to spend and choose her own clothing. Corita, for instance, spurns the formal habit and wears simple dresses off the rack—as do most other sisters at her college. Each convent within the order is also free to choose its own form of government to encourage "broad participation in decision making." Noting that their community has "tended to become narrowly constricted to services dispensed in church-related institutions," the nuns call for a shift of energies to the "social, economic, intellectual and spiritual needs of the family of man."

This does not mean that the sisters are abandoning their commitment to local parochial schools. But they have insisted on a number of specific and radical changes. Among them: classes must contain no more than 35 pupils; sisters who serve as principals must be relieved of teaching duties; all teaching nuns must be permitted to negotiate annual contracts with diocesan school authorities, and 43 nuns now teaching in the Los Angeles archdiocese must be allowed to return to college to obtain teaching credentials.

Fate: When the nuns presented their decrees to James Cardinal McIntyre, the staunchly conservative archbishop of Los Angeles exploded. Their demands for teaching sisters, he said, represented an unacceptable ultimatum. The nuns reconsidered them, but did not back down. And McIntyre, after warning his pastors to tighten control over parish convents, agreed to let the Vatican's Congregation of the Religious settle their dispute.

Even so, the sisters' plight has awakened resentment in many convents across

the U.S., most of whom are busy formulating their own plans of renewal. "If the leadership of the American church permits a persecution of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart," warns Greeley, "they will have sealed the fate of the religious life as we now know it."

For nuns, that life has taken many strange and complex turns. The first nunneries sprang up in Egypt where, for example, Saint Basil founded a convent in the fourth century which his mother and sister joined. Later, the European monastic movement merged with an early Roman tradition that provided for publicly consecrated virgins dedicated to the service of the local bishop. At first, these women were marked for inevitable martyrdom, but as the church made its peace with the world, the ascetic impulse swung inward. Nuns retreated behind the convent wall to pursue a secluded spiritual life.

Reformation: Like Mary, the medieval nun was a symbol of purity, sheared from life by the monastic tradition. Indeed, the Reformation was as much a rejection of such privileged monastics as it was a reaction to theological errors Luther found in the church. In marrying a nun, Luther emphasized his belief that woman's place was in the home presiding over a good Christian family. The revolution he triggered, however, had little impact on the nun's life. The last 300 years of European church history are replete with efforts by Catholic sisters to establish new orders to reach out and serve humanity. Yet, all too often, such moves were blocked by Rome.

But in America, Catholic nuns found hopeful leverage. As immigrant missionaries, they soon adapted to the new country's pragmatic ways, if only to survive. Appropriately enough, the first U.S. citizen to be canonized a saint was a nun—Mother Frances Cabrini, foundress of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart—who was known chiefly as a hard-driving businesswoman.

The American principle of church-

state separation was another spur to gradual renewal. Forced to build its own separate school system, the U.S. hierarchy turned to nuns to staff them. And in their struggle to compete with public education, the nuns have slowly become better trained—and more demanding. Other facts of American life are making for even quicker change. A generation ago, novice nuns came from safe, authoritarian families and found it easy to adjust to safe, close, authoritarian convents. But modern aspirants are used to college, cars and pocket money.

Most of all, today's independent young nun is looking for meaningful commitment, and the religious communities are trying desperately to provide the challenge. "In five years, nuns will be presenting such a new face to the world that their vocational crisis will be a thing of the past," predicts Father John J. McGrath, a canon lawyer who was recently elected the first male president of St. Mary's College of Notre Dame.

Sex: McGrath's view strikes some seasoned reformers as optimistic. "Make no mistake about it," warns Sister Maryellen Muckenhirn, a theologian who has long been a leading voice in religious reformation. "Most nuns are not yet prepared to see this thing through. Renewal requires every sister to rethink her whole life commitment."

Obviously, such rethinking is abubble. What is lacking, however, is a measured study of the ferment. Thus Sister Formation, a service organization designed to set standards for U.S. communities, has circulated a lengthy, detailed questionnaire asking nuns everything from the meaning of sex in their lives to whether they should dye their hair. (Sample question: "Have you seen the movie, 'La Dolce Vita'?") Ultimately, the results will reach Rome where four nuns, including American Miriam Cerletty, now sit in the Roman Curia's Sacred Congregation for the Religious.

Even though they have a voice in the Curia, many new nuns still resent its pa-

ternalistic sway. "How can some men over in Rome know what I as an American woman can or cannot do?" asks red-haired Sister Patricia McKeough of Chicago's St. Xavier's College. "They're still laboring under their own culture lag." Some orders are not waiting for Rome's approval to experiment. Snaps one middle-aged nun: "Any superior who submits habit changes for approval is foolish. She should just phone her tailor and forget about the Sacred Congregation."

Wrong: Rome may wink at rising hemlines, but to many new nuns the habit itself has become a misleading symbol. Traditional garb, says Sister Jeanne Reidy, 38, a striking woman who wears a blouse, skirt and lipstick to her graduate philosophy classes at Notre Dame University, may symbolize "a consecration to the wrong God, suggesting that to belong to Him is to belong to the past."

But other nuns cling fiercely to their habits—and the values they reflect. "I'm not interested in wearing a 1968 dress,"

Negro ghetto, "we would find everything in order for us: drawers with our own clothes in them, linens, blankets—all neat and prepared." Beyond that, orders themselves convey an image of wealth through their ownership of large institutions. To escape that image—and the burden of becoming businesswomen—communities like the Holy Cross Sisters are shifting ownership of colleges and hospitals to separate, legal corporations.

If the vow of poverty is hard to experience in its full rigor for some idealistic nuns, the vow of obedience—by contrast—often seems too rigorous. To many ex-sisters, the convent they rejected was a social corset laced by demands for strict, often pointless, obedience. "I was an extrovert with a sense of adventure when I entered," says Mary Grandi, 23, a pretty blue-eyed blonde who joined a Franciscan convent nine years ago against her parents' wishes. But in 1964, she left—"timid, blushing and scared to death of people." She was allowed to read only

freeing nuns to serve is just a rationalization. The choice not to marry is a personal one, and has nothing to do with efficiency in the service of God."

Not every nun would agree. Sister Colette, acting president of Manhattan's Marymount College, believes a nun's virginity should be distinguished from a priest's vow of celibacy. "It makes the nun something special in her own right in the church—not just a reverse image of the male." Even so, many younger nuns do not feel that their vows make them spiritually superior. "We're called to the religious life," says 25-year-old Sister Vivian Delaney of Bellaire, Texas, "but we're not any holier than our janitor because of it."

Increasingly, the more pragmatic communities are considering making vows subject to periodic renewal. Sister Mary Evangeline, executive secretary of Sister Formation, predicts the three traditional vows may be replaced by one: "Total availability to God and people." Such a change would retain a certain amount of the old asceticism, but it would also stir new modes of community life.

Laugh: For some, like the seventeen members of San Francisco's "Society of Helpers," this means creating a flexible convent where each nun's sisterhood is what she makes of it herself. "I believe that all women deeply need a family," says Sister Maria de la Cruz, a small, eloquent society member. "If, in our case, it is not to be a husband and children it has to be the family of a religious community." Others, such as Boston's Sister Mary Donahue, a Maryknoll missionary, find their families in the neighborhood. "We have to go out into the community," she notes, "rather than have the community come to us."

More and more, nuns are finding absorbing work outside the church. Part of the attraction is their resentment at sometimes being taken for granted by the hierarchy. "There are some people," says Sister Francis Borgia, the superior of a teaching order, "who see nuns as a convenient labor source." Clearly, some bishops do—and they fear the new nuns eventually may desert the schools. Last year, Chicago's John Cardinal Cody sharply criticized experimental communities in a speech to the heads of U.S. orders. Other prelates tend to laugh off the current ferment.

The new nuns understand the intransigence of the male mystique. And gradually, they are countering it. "If the church is to be liberated at all," claims Dr. Mark Stern, a clinical psychologist who works closely with religious communities, "it will be liberated by women." Perhaps. But communities like the IHM's are too busy and unself-conscious to press their own importance. They don't want to wither on other people's pedestals. Like the Virgin Mary, they hope to create new life by responding to God's call. As Sister Corita sees it, "The important thing about Mary is that her Son turned out so well."



Pierluigi Torrist

Four nuns of the Curia: A new feminine voice in Rome

affirms Sister Caroleen, superintendent of Dallas parochial schools. "I'd rather be medieval all the way." And Sister Mary Ursula, president of the Dominican College in New Orleans, flatly charges that "the desire to display her hair and look like a woman has motivated most of the nuns who welcome the change." Without the habit, she says, nuns lack the "symbol of dignity and majesty of their calling."

What, in fact, is fundamental to a nun's life? To answer that question, nuns new and old are re-examining their traditional vows to be poor, celibate and obedient. They are also asking themselves whether it is really valid to band together in religious communities.

Nuns have always been personally poor, owning nothing in their own name. But in the security of convent life, few have known what it means to scrape for survival. "Always, when we would go to a new convent," recalls Sister Judith Harak, one of four Franciscans who now work out of an apartment in Atlanta's

religious magazines. She needed special permission to talk to teachers, older postulantes and nuns. "You were expected to have an extrasensory perception about the superiors and bring them a cup of coffee before they asked for it. You lived half in fear of forgetting something and getting a penance."

Within renewed communities, cooperation and mutual responsibility have replaced the stiff old style of obedience. Sister Anita Caspary, mother general of the IHM's, rejects both the maternal and military connotations of her title. An author and able administrator, she accepts no more deference than a cheerful "good morning." "My toughest job," she says, "is having to stand by and let others learn by their mistakes."

The one choice that most distinguishes nuns from other women is their voluntary embrace of lifelong celibacy. "The public thinks of celibacy as a negative thing," says Sister Muckenhirn, "and the public is right. All this talk about celibacy