

# The Catholic Lawyer

---

Volume 17  
Number 2 *Volume 17, Spring 1971, Number 2*

Article 7

---

February 2017

## Love, Law and Life: Religious Women in America

Sister Joan De Lourdes, C.S.J.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/tcl>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sister Joan De Lourdes, C.S.J. (1971) "Love, Law and Life: Religious Women in America," *The Catholic Lawyer*. Vol. 17 : No. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/tcl/vol17/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Catholic Lawyer by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [selbyc@stjohns.edu](mailto:selbyc@stjohns.edu).

# LOVE, LAW AND LIFE: RELIGIOUS WOMEN IN AMERICA

SISTER JOAN DE LOURDES, C.S.J.\*

TODAY no one person speaks for all religious, nor does any one group of religious women speak for all the others. This very fact is a clear indication that religious life is alive and well. Rigor mortis has not set in, despite the prophets of gloom. On the contrary, every aspect of religious life is being radically reexamined down to bedrock theological foundations. There is a ferment of renewal and adaptation that has already transformed a way of life that had largely emerged from seventeenth century beginnings.

Like most of our customs and institutions, religious life for women had undergone comparatively little *qualitative* change before this twentieth century. The same thing can be said of other social institutions. Alvin Toffler in his book, *Future Shock*, goes so far as to say that "the present moment represents nothing less than the second great divide in human history, comparable in magnitude only with that first great break in historic continuity, the shift from barbarism to civilization." Change which had been gradually developing in Western society for the past three hundred years has now become a raging tide of impermanence and rethink. According to Toffler, "we have set the stage for a completely new society and we are now racing toward it." This may be graphically illustrated by saying that if we were born at the beginning of the twentieth century, almost as much has happened since we were born as had happened in the whole previous course of human history.

All around us we have exploding evidence that a sort of historical chain reaction of events combined with human inventions and accom-

---

\* Superior of the Brentwood New York Sisters of St. Joseph.

plishments has situated us in an era which is best described as the already past coupled with the not yet. We can, therefore, only expect to be in dynamic process, without familiar structures and old securities, in constant ongoing dialogue among ourselves and with our contemporaries. In short, we have to be people of faith in a pilgrim church redemptively involved in building a new creation for time and for eternity. Consequently, religious women in the church are presently engaged in re-founding their congregations on this premise.

Radical renewal, which is another word for re-founding, is not a one-operational task; rather, it involves a continuing effort to rediscover that profound and mysterious communion in God which brought this particular religious community into being and now is at the heart of its re-founding. This is both a personal and a corporate effort which is never complete, but involves constant rediscovery as new persons respond to the call that attracts them to enter into, or to grow within, a communion of shared love and self-giving in Christ within this *particular* community for the sake of revealing in a *particular* way the encompassing love of God calling all men "to concelebrate his own love."

When Vatican II urged religious congregations to renew their spirit and to adapt their life and discipline by putting into effect the norms and teachings of the Council it placed the responsibility for so doing upon the General Chapter of the Congregation, emphasizing the fact that the Chapter did not complete its task "by merely making laws, but especially by promoting spiritual and apostolic vitality."

How to promote spiritual and apostolic vitality relates closely to the norm for implementation of *Perfectae Caritatis* which provided for constitutional experimentation "as long as the purpose, nature and character of the institute are preserved." Out of this norm have come two differing schools of thought about renewal of religious life: one is inclined to a strong affirmation of the indicated limits on experimentation; the other, to a broad permissiveness which operates freely within the generic character of being an apostolic community, and would rather speak of ongoing development of a congregation rather than experimentation. The first is labelled by some as possessing a static view with emphasis on the word "*preserved*"; the other is charged with being totally indifferent to law in the effort to be dynamic and relevant. No congregation exemplifies either school of thought in an absolute sense; most congregations range the broad spectrum of religious life of which these two schools are the antithetical poles. An analysis of relationships between love, law and life in contemporary American religious communities therefore seems to be in order.

When I launched this effort, knowing that every major superior of religious women has her own context of being and living, I asked more than a hundred of them to share with me their views on seven key questions:

1. In your judgment, what should be the relationship between Church law governing religious congregations of women, and the "perfect charity" which is the avowed goal of religious women in the light of Vatican II?
2. What, in your judgment, is meant by

the Vatican II norm which provides for experimentation in religious congregations "as long as the purpose, nature, and character of the institute are preserved"?

3. What kinds of experimentation have your congregation engaged in? With what consequences?
4. What is the prevailing attitude about the relationship between *person* and *community* in your congregation?
5. Among your sisters how strong is the corporate sense of mission as distinguished from the concept of personalized Christian mission?
6. If and when you write a "permanent" constitution for your congregation how do you think it will be conditioned by these years of experimentation?
7. In what specific ways would you like to see changed the present Canon Law for Religious Women?

I had a wide and generous response, for which I am deeply grateful knowing that each one had precious little time for mulling over her living experiences in this day of collegial discussion, constant deliberations and discussions, plus inter-congregational meetings and collaboration. Moreover, the answers were thoughtful and extensive. Most respondents agreed that these were key questions today and that the topic chosen was most relevant to where we are. One of them proposed additional questions, saying:

It seems to me that these seven questions, good as they are, do not address themselves to perhaps the most basic question in this area: what is the relevance of a canon law for religious and what is its binding force? I do not say this cynically. It is no secret that the norms of Vatican II are quite

widely set aside. What is their relevance and binding force for religious? Surely a canon law will have no more collegial or universal force than these four documents that deal with religious. And surely we can hardly expect the new canon law to be more general or filled with a spirit of love. Hence, someone should raise and answer several more questions in view of our current experiences:

1. Does a canon law for religious bind those congregations who in chapter may not agree with it? If so, why? If not, why?
2. What is the relation of a canon law for religious to the theological ecclesiality of religious?
3. If one returns an affirmative answer to #1, what procedures are in order when serious norms are violated? What procedures are not in order?
4. If one returns a negative answer to #1, what exactly is the ecclesial significance of a canon law for religious? Would this law really be desirable at all?

From an opposite point of view, another of my respondents said she would like to propose another question: "Are we, and the authority which serves us, people who not only reflect listening and praying in legislation, but who also share in the consequences when each of us maturely chooses to embody legislation?"

With these questions, it seems to me, we move toward raising the radical issue of whether or not the prophetic role of religious communities in the Church can be encompassed by Church Law. I believe that Father Bernard Haring pointed the way to a valid response by saying: "Between love and law, as such, there is no incompatibility. Law protects love and

conveys a concept of love, beyond which boundaries lie arbitrariness, injustice, and self-serving utilitarianism; these are the real incompatibles. The contradiction, then, is not between love and law but between the true countenance of love and those attitudes which can never fit into love's essential character. What is needed is a long and searching look into the face of love, as well as a searching attitude with respect to the real meaning of law."

In the same vein, Father Thomas Clarke, S.J., in a recent article asks whether there is not a justifiable position on the subject of renewing religious life located somewhere between the two alternatives of rigid canonicity, on the one hand, and "an amorphous drift into an unidentifiable future," on the other. He believes there is—in "the methodology of historical identity and contemporary discernment." He says more specifically: "Consulting the Spirit does not mean that one neglects history, rationality, or pragmatic good sense. Communities, like persons, are always situated in their freedom. There are antecedent probabilities to be respected. There are inherent historical limitations which would make it folly for Community X to develop in one direction, or Community Y in another. Communities, like persons, are called to be faithful to their own past, a past that they bring with them into the future."

What religious communities need now, it would seem from this perspective, is the opportunity under the Spirit to wisely discern their own direction without nagging scrutiny and prescriptions from lawmakers. In Father Clarke's judgment, sound experience and enlightened reflection will, in due time, find appropriate canonical ex-

pression, especially for the protection of the rights of persons and communities.

Father Andrew Greeley puts it this way: "Law must serve the order and development of persons in community; rooted in truth, built up in justice, and animated by love." In itself, it cannot hold a society together unless there is a consensus about broader values and commitment to the goals inherent in these values.

Love is today recognized as the authentic expression of the meaning of persons and human relationships. The practical difficulty at the present moment is that although we recognize this truth, the ethics of the signs of discernment, as Father Bernard Haring points out, "have not yet been sufficiently developed with regard to the matter of love, law and situation." Hence, not only religious congregations but the whole Church is in the painful and healthy tension of searching, and we find ourselves in an evolving state of mind and circumstances. For the most part, the discernment of the first chapters following Vatican II has already undergone the test of living experience with varying consequences and deeper understanding. One thing is certain, religious women of today are not the people for whom the 1917 Code of Canon Law was written. Times have changed but the position of women in society is changing too. The new Code of Canon Law must take this into account.

I have a theory that the promulgation of the 1917 Code was, even then, something of a set-back for the flexible lives of American religious women. Pioneering as they did in a country on the make, and being in short supply, American women

(including religious women) had a reputation for enjoying greater freedom than European women. Although the married woman had no personal legal rights and had only a limited education, if any, her contribution was a dynamic one in a lustily growing America. Mid-nineteenth century America witnessed a strong assertion of women's rights, but their greatest triumph was in the period between 1870 and 1920 by which time they had won the right to vote, had gained significantly in education (including some higher education), and were looking for full equality in business and the professions. In short, by the time Canon Law was codified in 1917, women had come a long way from the seventeenth-century European status of wardship and protection which had colored the beginnings of most modern apostolic congregations of women. Yet the Code did not reflect this fact. As Father Andrew Greeley has pointed out: in the existing Code "Women are definitely inferior beings. Whatever power is conceded to them is second-rate power, and they are expected to look to men for ultimate decisions. The Code is careful to protect their rights, but nevertheless those rights are simply not comparable with the rights that male leadership possesses."

Those engaged in rewriting Canon Law today are in a society where Women's Liberation is making capital out of discriminatory practices. Analyzing the data of the 1970 census, it becomes obvious that American women in the seventies are rapidly moving toward full equality with men. Eighty per cent of the white women and sixty-one per cent of the black women today have at least four years of high school

education; moreover, between 1960 and 1970 the number of women with college education rose one hundred sixty per cent. Religious women, in addition, have gone on in increasing numbers, for graduate education and the number getting second advanced degrees is rapidly on the rise. The Sister Formation movement which was so influential in promoting the education of religious in the decade of the fifties had laid the groundwork for today's General Chapters with their astounding response to Vatican II. It is only fitting that the Canadian bishops should recently have voted 64-1, to make an effort at the World Synod of Bishops to be held in Rome next fall to remove "all discriminatory barriers against women in Canon Law and tradition."

What, then, is the conceptual and existential condition of American religious life for women since the Council? What has happened in the brief years from the ending of Vatican II to the present that has made it so necessary to radically rethink Church Law concerning religious women instead of simply modifying it.

I may begin by saying that, literally overnight, religious women moved, to a greater or lesser degree, from the moral and traditional hierarchical pattern of relationships, rooted in long-respected structures of uniformity and conformity. They entered directly into a new horizontally-oriented mode of shared fellowship with a diversity of unique persons, each of whom was simultaneously in the process of discovering herself as someone called to communitarian responsible freedom in a commitment of love at the service of God's people. What is more, each one was necessarily arriving at a growing understanding and response at

her own rate of speed even while she was catapulted into new structures, or else she was being overwhelmed by the rate and quality of change. For some, the new way of life was a natural; for many, it was partially and painfully understood and lived, or else, there was a retreat to defensive isolation; for the rest, it was a relearning process, more or less willingly accepted, with a variety of consequences at once enriching and demoralizing, perhaps.

The new Chapter decrees which became guidelines for living were gospel-rooted and inspirational, even in format. For the most part, they set forth values, norms, and principles which were to be interiorized by each person, each local group and the whole congregation, and then to be authentically lived out amidst a diversity of pluralistic understandings of how to reduce them to the concrete circumstances of daily living. Authority was to be at the service of the unity of community and to be exercised in a collegial manner. In general, *persons* were exalted rather than institutions; *freedom* was emphasized rather than authority; *principles* were set forth rather than rules and directives. The vows became less legalistic and more spiritual. Each of the traditional three vows underwent a change of emphasis from binding to liberating, and there was a strong tendency to sum them all up in one vow of total loving surrender. Religious life demanded maturity and free response, so the program of formation had correspondingly to deal with those persons who entered somewhat older with work, college experience, or both, rather than with the high school graduate or younger person, and it had to meet their individual growth needs in a diversity of ways. Prayer

life has tended to emphasize shared prayer rather than saying prayers; Scripture has come into its own. On the whole, silence, mortification and apartness have suffered a decline; much more attention has been paid to the asceticism of self-giving and the charity of communication and involvement. Convents have been opened for sharing of their community living. Sisters have been urged to active concern for civic and social issues.

New structures have emerged in order to meet the needs of personalism and decentralization. Shared responsibility has assumed a number of new forms such as team government in place of appointed or elected superiors. Even when there is a superior, responsibility is shared in a consensus process. New terminology plus new forms has given rise to presidents, senates, coordinators, assemblies, regional, area and district leaders, or animators. Accountability has been proclaimed as a principle but it has yet to be institutionalized in most cases.

One of the most important things said about these new developments in religious life, it seems to me, was the statement of Sister Francis Borgia, of the School Sisters of Saint Francis who in addressing the Canadian Canon Law Society last October devoted herself to the "Power of Decision in Religious Communities." In part, she said: "The power of decision is the power of judgment, the power to determine directions, the power of shaping the kind of person or community we are becoming." Then she asked who has the right and the responsibility to make these decisions today, given the fact that "we define who we are by our decisions." The first step in

answering this, she held, was taken by Pope Paul, himself, when he called upon the special General Chapters of each congregation to review the community in the light of today's needs with the entire community taking a responsible part in the process: "Without changing our nature or purpose as apostolic religious but simply by trying to clarify more fully our meaning in our time, by accepting the ongoing responsibility of evaluating, refining, and responding to the truth, a major evolution-revolution is occurring. A stronger form of the apostolic religious life for women is emerging from within." She then suggested how this is being accomplished at four different levels—person, primary group, congregation, and sharing with the authorities of the Church. It seems to me that much has already happened on the first three levels. On the fourth level, a new spirit of dialogue between religious women, on the one hand, and their Vicars, Bishops, and diocesan officials, on the other, has already come into being in many places, though unfortunately this is not universally true. Most religious are anxious to see a deepened dialogue with the Sacred Congregation for Religious. All religious hope that they will have a great deal to say about the new Church Law in their regard, and they further desire that it may be fully in accord with the best efforts of their Chapters of Renewal.

All of this is not to say that religious women are in full accord on what they want, nor does it intend to convey the notion that all is well in religious life today.

If I consider the latter point first, let me just say that, aside from the immaturity and adolescent behavior of some religious

who seem to recognize neither their commitment nor their human fallibility and give the impression of caring less, there are many others who have been challenged to a deeper, more personal, and creative love by Vatican II's emphasis on a free, loving response in Christ to the Father. Still others have come to a recognition that, beautiful as is the goal of religious life, they can not or do not want to live it, so they leave; most of them with deep gratitude for the growth they have experienced as Christian persons in a community of shared love. Others, again, need whatever psychological and spiritual help they can get in order to surmount the difficulties of commitment in the absence of sufficient supportive structures. Finally, many have for the first time, faced themselves honestly, and through prayer, effort, experience, and encouragement have grown up both humanly and spiritually. Not everyone has interiorized values or focussed on commitments; the sharing of authority has not been easy for many, largely for lack of know-how and experience: shared responsibility has at times given way to the tyranny and dominance of number. Polarities have on occasion developed into conflict and alienation. Persons have lost their way, and important corporate commitments have suffered.

One aspect of community transformation since Vatican II has not yet been mentioned, that is, small group living experiments. Recently, the CMSW issued a progress report on the experiences of religious men in this regard. For what it is worth in terms of similar groups of women, I quote the *America* condensation of the report:

Not all of the new communities, the report indicates, have succeeded. Several reasons account for the failures. When, for instance a small community is brought into existence in alienation from the parent group, the chances for survival are poor. When it is undertaken, however, as a project sponsored by the total religious community, it has usually succeeded. When the membership of a small group is homogeneous in terms of both age and attitude, the survival rate is poor. Experience suggests that where, on the contrary, the group possesses considerable diversity in its ranks, the chance of success is greatly increased.

One of the most commonly stated purposes for a change toward small communities has been to satisfy the need for closer personal relationships. This, in turn, was seen as likely to enrich one's relationship with Christ. In fact, closer personal relationships seem to have been achieved, not without an increased sense of responsibility for one another. Most new "small communities," experienced an initial decline in communal prayer, but discovered a gradually deepened sharing of personal faith orientations. This exchanging of faith perspectives then began to lead to experimentation with different forms of prayer such as reflections on Scripture, hymns of praise and expressed petitions. These informal approaches to God have, in many cases, made religious more of a source of consolation and have intensified the desire for prayer.

All of the Major Superiors who responded to the questionnaire indicated experiments in the same general areas as those already mentioned as well as in budget, dress, and job application. Almost without exception, they felt that much which is being done under the name of "experimentation" would be better named "change" because there is no or little evaluation, and no possibility of rescinding.

When she answered the question on experimentation and its consequences one major superior made this significant remark:

Underlying the delicate movement of the experimentation and change which has become so real in our lives is a feeling of deep love for the *process* of change rather than a love only for the *product*. We have not all achieved this love, but it is a beautiful, peace-giving quality to be desired. In fact, if we truly believe we are a pilgrim people "always on the way," it is imperative that we do learn to love the process of becoming and that we accept the mystery of Jesus—life, death and resurrection—as our Way of Life.

Looking, then, at the realistic picture of religious life today one remembers the old saying: "Opinions are open to opposition but it is foolish to feud with facts." In a few short years, religious life for American women has undergone drastic alteration; this is the fact and it will not be altered by contrary legislation. Rather than halt their movement toward self-direction, some religious congregations have asked, or are tempted to ask: "Why stick with canonical religious life at all?" This is not the question which is being entertained by the vast majority of religious women, but, if the new Code of Canon Law does not allow a wide margin of initiative to communities in determining under the Spirit what constitutes their own religious life it could become a groundswell.

Even in my sampling of religious communities there are those who ask: why should religious women find a special place in Canon Law; is it not sufficient that they are included in the Church's universal law. One expressed her thinking by saying:

One great evil I see in detailed law which allows for little or no freedom of expression, is what I currently experience in America regarding Canon Law: a complete disregard for it—a contempt for it. . . . There is *very* little relationship between Church law and our striving for “perfect charity” because, except for basic elements of perhaps the essential structure of religious life (such as, celibacy and community life) this is a life of response to the Spirit of God working in our hearts.

At this moment, though, there is still a wide recognition by religious women that law is the protector of love and the freedom of persons. Religious life should be well-organized, with a clear definition of the rights and duties of members, giving assurance to all liberty of action in genuine response to the Spirit. They are, however, increasingly asking to at least have a hand in the formulation of that law.

The CMSW, in 1965, established a national committee and several regional ones which produced, three years later, a book of *Proposed Norms for Consideration in the Revision of the Canons Concerning Religious* which was submitted to the Pontifical Commission on the Revision of the Code of Canon Law. Ninety-five per cent of the members of the Conference approved these proposals which, unlike the detail of the 1917 Code, were expressed in broad norms allowing for flexibility and diversity. Many of the Major Superiors who responded to my questionnaire gave hearty approval to these proposals and asked what had happened to them. But, in the past three years, a number have moved into the position of thinking that even many of these proposals were superfluous.

What, then, are the chief current sug-

gestions concerning religious women in Canon Law indicated by the responses to my questionnaire?

1. Church Law governing religious women should be of the most general nature, addressing itself only to the essentials constitutive of the life and to matters extending beyond the jurisdiction of a particular congregation. All particulars should be left to the General Chapters of individual congregations.
2. In general, the law should be pastoral in tone, gospel-oriented, inspirational, and offering broad guidelines allowing for diversity.
3. Church law for religious could be an explication of Chapter VI of *Lumen Gentium*: the incorporation of religious in the Church, the principles that determine their vocations as religious, the responsibilities and privileges that follow from their consecration to the service of God in His people.
4. It should facilitate charity and protect liberty of person. A good law discerns the Spirit.
5. Law should have a strong theological base.
6. It should clearly provide for ongoing evaluation and change.

These are the general recommendations. A good many particular proposals for changing the present code were also made.

1. The role of women must be recognized; today it seems highly irrele-

vant and unsatisfactory to have men making laws and passing judgments on a way of life they have never experienced and can never experience in the same way as a woman. More women should be involved in the formulations themselves.

2. Provision should be made for channels of dialogue with the hierarchy and the Sacred Congregation of Religious.
3. There should be no distinction between male and female congregations.
4. From Canon Law should be deleted all antiquated norms that govern the personal lives of religious women.
5. There should be no pre-fixed statements interpreting the meaning of "perfect charity" as that concept applies to particular areas of the apostolate.
6. The Code of Canon Law for religious women should not address itself to matters such as control of correspondence, religious habit, regulation of confession.
7. Canon Laws regarding the sacramental life of the Sisters, are outdated. There should be no mention of these things in the new code.
8. When there are laws which specifically apply to cloistered communities, they should not be re-written and reworded to be binding on active communities. Examples are cloister and visitation.
9. There is no reason for age require-

ment for sisters who hold office in communities. If a sister is capable of authority at a younger age, the community should not be deprived of her leadership.

10. For Pontifical Institutes leave the erection of provinces up to the General Chapter.
11. As regards Visitation by the Local Ordinary—the rights of the Ordinary to judge concerning the functions of religious life and of other matters pertaining thereto, should be shared with a council or a board among whose members are women religious.
12. There should be no Canon Law for religious women.

One question which I asked of the Major Superiors was "If and when you write a 'permanent' constitution for your congregation how do you think it will be conditioned by these years of experimentation?" In the 1966 Norms for implementing *Perfectae Caritatis* it was specified that the "experiments" encouraged by the norms might be prolonged until the next ordinary general chapter but not beyond the chapter immediately following. Being interpreted, this allows about twelve years of experimentation before writing a permanent constitution which must be presented for ecclesiastical approval. The idea behind this was that, mulling over Chapters V and VI of *Lumen Gentium* together with *Perfectae Caritatis*, religious women would seek to rediscover the spirit and charisma of the founder and try to reintegrate it into the new theological principles and emphases of Vatican II while, at the same

time, they probed contemporary society in order to better meet its needs. Then, on the basis of this new theoretical integration of purpose, goals, and means, they would endeavor to experience the living effectiveness of what they had conceived. Ultimately, theory combined with living experience would show them what to incorporate into a permanent constitution and what not.

In the practical order, however, there are a number of religious women today who are questioning the very idea of a "permanent" constitution. The accelerated rate of change, they argue, is so great that impermanence is a manifest condition of life and the best thing to be done is to constantly reevaluate and change. A few do not plan to write permanent constitutions, but rather to live on the basis of evolving "statements" concerning spirit and goals, government structure, formation norms, community, nature of vows, etc. These will be regarded as "policies" to be in effect until changed by the community chapter. One major superior said very explicitly: "unless Church law legislates to the contrary, I see this as the future process." Another said: "with the changing conditions I believe that each General Assembly will evaluate the previous period and plan for the following." Others have accepted the desirability of a permanent constitution but see it as skeletal, fundamental, gospel-oriented, theologically-rooted, and made up of broad principles and values without any specific details but clearly providing for flexible living in order to adjust to rapid change. As one major superior expressed it: the constitution will be a "clear, charismatic, gospel-based theo-

logical expression of what the congregation stands for." There is, said another, a common realization that "we must not again let ourselves be smothered under a myriad of laws in the name of God's love."

I think that there is a great deal of provocation to further exploration in what is being said about permanent constitutions. Obviously, the same attitude prevails with respect to Church Law generally. Law, in fact, is very negatively viewed by too many religious women today. This is, of course, a natural swing of the pendulum of history—an overreaction to the past and a rather unanalytical approach to the future. Time and experience will probably temper it.

Already, the decrees of earlier post-Vatican II Chapters are being, in some degree, rethought and modified as experience has shown the need. To take one instance, early chapters reacted strongly in favor of the freedom of the person. This was, as has been well said, "an effort to break through the static pattern, through the over-scheduled living, through the elaborate permission system, through the heavy pressure of conformity." But whatever the initial reactions, today there is a felt need to see the freely committed religious woman as person *in* community. One response to my questionnaire put this experiential evolution succinctly by saying: "we have moved from *common* life to personhood to *community* life." We first understood that uniformity, conformity and physical togetherness did not necessarily create community. Now many have come to understand that true personhood is relational, and see that individualism spells isolation. So, we are bringing our personhood to a

real sharing of human, divine, and social life. And, we are coming to realize that the fellowship of the persons with whom we live is our primary support for relating to other communities of persons, including the whole congregation to which we contribute in so many ways of presence, worship, compassion, financial sharing etc.

Another example of experience qualifying early Chapter decisions is in the area of government. In brief, the congregations moved from unitary and highly-centralized government to subsidiarity and collegiality, emphasizing shared responsibility through a wide range of new governmental forms. Now there is a definite tendency to simplify governmental structures without destroying the principle of involvement and shared responsibility.

Again, the reaction against institutional commitment to certain works which characterized many congregations at first is beginning to give rise to a search for a new corporateness. One respondent to my questionnaire said: "Among all who are now appreciating more the value of community, I think the corporate sense of mission is much stronger than the concept of personalized Christian mission. I believe that many found they did not have the influence as individuals that the community once had. There is much evidence of a desire to seek a corporate response to situations." Another said: "There is some indication that the idea of the importance of the corporate mission as understood in terms of large institutional apostolates is waning. However, on the other hand, the idea of 'corporate mission' if that is meant to imply '*communal* witnessing' through various facets of the apostolate, is growing

stronger," or, as was expressed by another: "The corporate sense seems to be strong among us but the placement of this sense seems to be shifting from our 'work' (teaching) to our 'lives' (loving, holy service)." It is probably true, as one sister indicated, "Our corporate responses would be better if our goals were more clear at this time or could be made more clear to everyone."

The radical evolving character of what has been happening in apostolic congregations of American religious women in the last few years makes it very difficult to predict what the shape of that life will be ten years from now. At present, however, the existential situation has given rise to many fears and some dire predictions. For some, experimentation has gone too far without a corresponding renewal of spirit. One superior wrote me: "To be quite honest with you, Sister, this period of experimentation has shown me that there was probably a very good reason why most of the items are in the present code. As things are developing now, there was a lot of wisdom based on nineteen centuries of lived *experience* which is now being made quite clear to us. And I can appreciate that it took them 116 years, I think, to codify Canon Law."

Moreover, the superior who asked about the binding force of law for religious women today, raised a most important issue: "can any society last unless the law has real sanctions?"

Father Andrew Greeley gives a sociological point of view on Church law generally:

There are those who would argue that there should be no law in the Church—that the

People of God are governed by an authority which is different from all human authority, which should need no law to maintain order within its community. We are told that authority of the Church is authority of love and service and hence different from all human authority. Sociologists must remark that these arguments are naive; in the modern world all authority justifies itself as being an authority of service, and in any human group, regulations, formal norms, established procedures, protection of rights and methods for settling disputes are essential."

An organization well-rooted in law is very different, he points out, from one that is held together *only* by law. The essential thing, it would seem, is that religious

women have to build up the inner resources and responsibilities that will enable them truly to be free persons in a community of free persons united in Christ in order to continue his mission. As Father Maloney pointed out yesterday in his keynote address, as Christians in the community of the Church we need to look at the content of law, but much more, we need to discover what the Lordship of Jesus Christ means to law. I would add, that, in Christ, through love, openness, and sharing, we ought to be able to integrate love, law, and life, but we will not have our Easter until we have passed over from the death of individualism, and selfishness to true freedom in the Lord.