



CHAPTER IV

FROM SEED TO TENDER SEEDLING: The SFCC EMERGENCE

A WHOLLY NEW-STYLE SISTERHOOD

Responding to Vatican II's call to the Church to return on every level to a participatory and mutual service model of organization, the Sisters For Christian Community sprouted upward into Church history in the spring of 1970. Like tumbleweeds blown by myriad winds, the members gathered from East Coast and West, from the Great Lakes Region to the Deep South, across the prairie states, and finally from the Canadian provinces. Their spiritual unity soon spanned the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans where scattered catalysts in Europe, Africa, Mexico, Central America, South America, Australia, the Philippines and Guam joined in the spiritual safari. Together they are determined to explore a wholly new pattern of consecrated life, —one embodying the visions of Vatican II with their ultimate realization of the **CHURCH RADIANT**, a Church of community, simplicity, and love.

Many ask: What are the distinguishing characteristics of this new and unique expression of the consecrated life? How do the Sisters for Christian Community see themselves as differing from sisters of traditional apostolic, monastic, or contemplative congregations and orders? In what forms of ministry do these women serve Christian Community and persons beyond its boundaries? How are the vows in this biblically-based unity expressing scriptural understandings quite different from the medieval interpretations still prominent in most contemporary sisterhoods? What collective or commonly held charisms, convictions, dreams and determinations drew these women together from every continent of the world? What rationale prompts them to eschew customary forms of security in canonically approved structures: motherhouses, novitiates, retirement centers, constitutions, incorporated works, formation programs and a presumably stable bureaucratic organization? The answers to these important questions have already unfolded in part, and will continue to do so in subsequent sections of this study as the comparison and contrast of traditional and new-style sisterhoods continues. The focus of this specific section, however, is limited to an encapsulating overview of the SFCC rationale for emergence. This mini-history of the Sisters For Christian Community was prepared to better acquaint interested persons with this particular movement of the Holy Spirit over the troubled waters of these times. The sharings here will answer questions about **WHO** these sisters are, **WHY** they are emerging, **HOW** they see themselves as differing from traditional groups, and **WHERE** they believe they and other Christian women will be serving the Church in the future. Spotlighted in these few comments will be the forces which propel them in this pioneering of a wholly new-type sisterhood whose membership explosion, over half a thousand in their first decade, already attests to a certain inner vitality and a strengthening unity among all Christian women in this post-Vatican II era.

THE PAST THAT URGED THEIR PRESENCE

Most readers have lived through the spiritual cataclysm of the Sixties and early Seventies and know that the vocation-rich but somewhat somnolent sisterhoods awakened suddenly, —as did the universal Church—, to the realization strongly

stated by the Vatican Council that an era of Church history was ending: the era of concentration, centralization, and bureaucratization. All Christendom was being challenged by the Holy Spirit speaking through that massive assembly, to cross an epochal threshold into a new Pentacostal period, into a new phase of Church history, into the transforming Church of penetration, communication, co-responsibility, and community. Thus the Holy Spirit initiated nothing less than a genuine revolution in the Church's self-understanding, and set in motion spiritual and structural changes of such momentous implication that they have yet to be fully explored and completely grasped.

THE VISION THAT CALLED FORTH THE SFCC EMERGENCE

Christians are well-aware that responses to the call of the Holy Spirit to put the new wine of **AGGIORNAMENTO** into wholly new skins for new times, range along a continuum whose extreme poles are open-spirited readiness and closed-minded resistance. On this continuum the Sisters For Christian Community can be identified as women willing to live consistently on the cutting edge of readiness, —women who recognized early that the new constitutions of the Church: *Lumen Gentium*, and *Gaudium et Spes*, summarizing the collegially affirmed charisms and wisdom of the bishops of the world, were probably the most significant advances in the evolution of the Church's self-understanding throughout its first two thousand years. This new Vatican II vision of the Church, reflecting fresh scriptural, theological, and ecclesiological research and the world's most profound religious scholarship, called for comparably fresh structures consonant with the new insights. It was the force of the Vatican II vision and its demand for new skin for new wine that called the Sisters For Christian Community into being, —that planted the seed.

THE CATAclySM THAT FREED THE SEED FOR BECOMING

Knowledge of the crisis-pocked history of the first post-Vatican II decade precludes one from holding any illusion that SFCC might have been conceived in tranquility. Rather, it germinated for years in the ambiotic sea of ambivalence and anomie. Sisterhoods at the time of its emergence seemed strangely disjointed by the conflicting internal forces of renewal, coupled with resistance and retrenchment. World sisterhoods, torn with tensions and travail, bureaucratized, polarized, and sometimes terminally afflicted, watched membership diminish by almost one third in one decade. According to one Vatican release, world sisters diminished from roughly one million in 1965 to 609,369 by 1975. This attrition was due to natural deaths, a dearth of new vocations, but most pronouncedly, from sisters seeking affiliation dispensations. The enormity of the tragedy seemed to lie in this: thousands of those sisters-in-exodus undoubtedly had, —and continue to have—, a deep sense of vocation and a determination to remain vowed and Christ-committed women with or without the stabilizing and encouraging companionship of like-determined women. They stepped out alone into a world as yet unready to offer any challenging alternative to the specific religious life-styles, **TOTAL INSTITUTION** or democratized bureaucracy, which they could no longer embrace with conviction.

The life-cycle of any seed is wrapped in a degree of mystery. Some seeds require the violence of winter freeze, the drench of spring storms, or the scorch of summer sun to crack open the outer shell and free the inner germ for a new burst of life. So it was with the SFCC beginnings . . .

Realization of the terrible waste being caused by the spirit-abrasive exodus from world sisterhoods served as a needed catalyst or cataclysmic force: the freeze, the drench, the scorch that would wrench into sprout-stage the first Sister For Christian Community, so-named. She was Sister Audrey Kopp, who among American Sisters was a well-known sociologist-anthropologist inextricably caught-up in writing and lecturing on the Vatican II-inspired structural renewal of sisterhoods, —on their needed radical transformation from top-heavy, work-oriented, person-manipulating, bureaucratic organizations, into person-oriented, Spirit-directed, collegial communities of co-equal, co-responsible women penetrating the total culture with Christian values rather than concentrating in corporate apostolates or ministries. It was possible for Audrey Kopp to present this message to thousands of sisters in the United States and Canada at their Chapters of Renewal or at diocesan sisters' councils. Another communication

opportunity she relished was being co-editor of **TRANS-SISTER**, the first grass-roots, cross congregational, nuns-to-nuns-only newsletter on renewal, —a forerunner of NAWR's (the National Association of Women Religious) **PROBE**. Her authorship of the mini-book: *The New Nuns: Collegial Christians*, 1968, plus a number of articles in the *NCR*, *Catholic Mind*, *Sister Formation Bulletin*, etc., facilitated ever-widening contacts and communication with sisters of all ages and stages of Vatican II-directedness. Some congregations which she visited as a consultant knew they were "too big bureaucratically," or too small, too old or entrenched in tradition to weather out the turmoil of renewal. She was particularly disconcerted, however, when administrators spoke honestly about the loss of some of their "finest women," —sisters spiritually mature, professionally competent, and vocation-gifted, who felt "called to leave." But called to **WHAT** beyond the leaving, she often wondered.

A DREAM WITHOUT RENTS AND PATCHES

After several years on the Chapters of Renewal circuit, the collective impact of problems within sisterhoods pressed heavily. The enormity of the internal erosion caused by pouring the new wine of Vatican II into old skins, or the affixing of a new patch on an old garment and calling the process renewal, drew Sister Audrey Kopp to dream continuously about the possibility of a wholly new pattern of the consecrated life: —a fresh start without rents and patches.

A glow of joy began to overlay her apprehension about renewal. It arose from an increasing awareness that in every congregation she visited, in every audience she addressed, there were other sisters likewise envisioning a wholly new-style sisterhood, —a world-wide unity that would embody from its inception the inspirations of Vatican II, and the on-going advances in the theology of the consecrated life, based not on centuries of cultural accretions, but on the Gospels alone. She kept wondering: Could these sisters and those already in exodus be brought, somehow, into communication and unity? Could their mutual dreams become a shared reality? Was the Holy Spirit gathering all of them, even at that moment, into a spiritual unity that transcended distances? It seemed so . . .

Feeling closely identified with these yet nameless, like-minded, twin-spirited women soon to be co-foundresses of a new world sisterhood, she took up a pen on behalf of all of them and sketched out in broad strokes their common charisms for unity-in-Christ. Thus the **PROFILE** took shape. In March, 1970, it was published in **TRANS-SISTER**, and the news began pulsing out to waiting sisters everywhere. The seed had broken free . . .

from mutual



to Shared Reality

THE RISKS THAT SUMMONED ALL THEIR COURAGE

And thus the gathering and re-gathering of hundreds of Christian women into a warm, loving, caring, and simple spiritual unity was under way. Strangely, because never so-planned nor anticipated, the second member of SFCC, like a small number scattered throughout the membership thereafter, was what they now designate as **DUAL** member. That is descriptive of persons who have retained membership in their traditional congregations but are so convinced of the need of SFCC that they have been whole-heartedly involved as co-pioneers, sharing the risks involved in cutting new paths, blazing new trails, creating new patterns, and helping to demonstrate the authenticity of this fresh expression of the consecrated life by being bridges between the old patterns and the new.

This spiritual journeying has demanded of most members, however, that they leave still-loved sisterhoods, that they initially experience the isolation and solitude of a celibacy without a close-by celibate community, that they embrace a new expression of poverty and obedience requiring self-support, taxes and insurance payments, personal responsibility for home, meals, education, spiritual enrichment, travel, medical needs, retirement, and even burial. So the archives of this young community already swell with personal adventures of saga proportions about the women sharing in the collective determination to help transform the Church into its Vatican II-and-beyond vision.

THE SFCC ROLE IN THE TRANSFORMING CHURCH

The whole glorious transformation of the Church into the Pilgrim People of God living in Vatican II-inspired collegial community is still in its earliest stages of becoming. The process has always been necessarily slow as the universal Church moves gradually from one phase of its evolving expression to another. In retrospect, historians tend to name and roughly date certain facets of the Church's ever-changing image overlaying its never-changing essence.

One very recent enumeration of these areas, or major phases, by Marcel LeGaut, renowned French theologian and philosopher, prophetically concludes with a suggestion for the currently dawning era. (See his "Glimpses of Tomorrow's Church," *CROSS Currents*, Vol. 23, No. 1) LeGaut's listing in brief:

- the **PRIMITIVE CHURCH**, the beginning of community
- the **CHURCH OF THE CATACOMBS**, the suffering community
- the **TRIUMPHANT CHURCH**, identified with temporal power and monarchical organization
- the **CHURCH OF THE REFORMATION**, a Church bureaucratizing
- the **CHURCH OF THE COUNTER-REFORMATION**, a Church declining
- the **CHURCH RADIANT**, a Church returning to simplicity, community, and love

It is with this **CHURCH RADIANT** that SFCC readily identifies and feels "missioned" to promote. Its qualities of simplicity, community, and love have constituted their shared ideals from inception. The Sisters For Christian Community have described themselves as a tiny seed in 1970, and but a tender seedling today. Yet they know that they are more than that. Theirs is an eschatological presence: a transcendent community. Their fresh greenness is one fragile witness to this **SUDDEN SPRING** in the Church. The Sisters For Christian Community represent one tiny growth heralding the era of the **CHURCH RADIANT**. They are a sprig of hope that has broken through a rock of tradition, a seedling whose penetrating roots crumble the stones that hold back the future . . .



PROFILE OF THE SISTERS FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY (1970 edition)

WHO WE ARE

We are a non-canonical nucleation of contemporary Christian women gathering together from traditional congregations and orders who wish to continue our commitment to Christ within currently-to-be-explored religious life styles. We envision such to be necessary for the survival of religious life into the 21st Century.

WHERE WE ARE

From ocean-to-ocean, in large town and small, in rural area or in inner city, —wherever there is need for love and community witness—, we hope to be present.

HOW WE LIVE

We live in free-form, contemporary units in apartments, houses, or even with family or friends, if such serves the apostolate. Some may need to or prefer to live alone at times, but even then community will be effected through on-going communication. Sisters know from experience that physical togetherness and geographical proximity do not by themselves create community. Community transcends distance. It is the warmth and security that one experiences from shared love-in-Christ, shared confidence, shared concern, and shared risks for Christ . . .

OUR APOSTOLATES

Our primary apostolic goal is to witness the uniqueness of Christian Community. We agree with Vatican II's statement that the era of concentration of works is ending, and that the era of **PENETRATION** is before us. In this opening era each sister will determine her own penetration role on the basis of her time, training, and temperament. She will be yeast for Christian Community in whatever work or living structure she penetrates. Yeast must be within dough and not along side it. We seek to elevate the value system of the total society.

OUR COMMITMENT FORM

Each sister of our community creates the content of her own commitment formulation and decides the length of time according to her own vocation charisms. If she wishes, she may formalize her dedication with her bishop or spiritual counselor. The traditional vows will give way to a simple statement or promise to give witness to Christian Community in a celibate state. Each sister is self-employed and self-supporting. Poverty in this contemporary, free-form community is not concerned with the quantity of money held but with the Christ-like relationships and services it facilitates. Poverty in this context becomes loving availability. Obedience follows Saint Thomas Aquinas' simple definition: the conformity of the will to right reason as directed toward the common good. We will be collegial in any decision which affects the community.

OUR STRUCTURE

We recognize from the Gospel that Christ gathered together a community of believers whose specifying character would be mutual love and helpfulness. During the course of decades the Church moved slowly into the bureaucratic mode of organization thereby confounding and alienating some members. Our goal, as simply stated in our title, is to help return the Church on every level to the community principle of organization and service. We will avoid being a formal organization. By design, we are simply a free-form unity of persons gathering together in community-in-Christ. We are united not by rules and constitution but by mutual concern and communication.

OUR GOAL

We strive through all means available to forward the realization of Christ's prayer "... that they all may be **ONE**." that they may be community. To this end, through the means of **COMMUNICATION HUBS**, we seek to draw together into a community of interest all the tiny non-canonical sisterhoods which have been forming, and all the **SISTERS-AT-LARGE**, —women committed to Christ but without formal congregation membership. We anticipate that being a **SISTER-AT-LARGE**, a mature Christ committed woman, joined with other like-kind sisters through a national or international unity such as the emerging **SISTERS FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY**, may be one of the paramount religious life styles of the future.

REVISED PROFILE OF 1979

WHO WE ARE: CONSECRATED WOMEN IN ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY

We are contemporary Christian women gathering together to manifest our commitment to Christ within a new pattern of the consecrated life, as a prophetic ecclesial community.

WHERE WE ARE: FROM OCEAN to OCEAN

Wherever there is need for love and community witness, we seek to be present, permeating the world.

OUR SPECIAL MINISTRY: BUILDING COMMUNITY

Our primary apostolic goal is to promote and witness Christian Community. To concur with Vatican II that the period of concentration of works is ending and that the Era of Penetration is here, we will determine our own ministry individually on the basis of our time, training, and temperament. We will be yeast for Christian Community in whatever work or living structure we penetrate and permeate.

OUR COMMITMENT FORM: SERVING, LOVING, AND LISTENING

We each create the contents of our own commitment formula and decide the length of time of special service according to our own vocation charisms. We may formalize our dedication with our bishop or spiritual counselor in a public or private liturgical celebration. The traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience will be freshly expressed in terms of serving, loving, and listening. Poverty in this contemporary, free-form community is concerned with the quality of Christ-like living and serving it facilitates. Poverty in SFCC is loving availability, simplicity, and the recognition of the equality of all before God. We are self-supporting. We give witness to Christian community through celibate love. Obedience is listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit toward the common good. We are collegial in any decision that affects the community.

HOW WE LIVE: IN GOSPEL FREEDOM AND LOVE

We live in free-form, contemporary units, alone or with others. Community is effected through personal contacts, local hub meetings, regional and international gatherings and newsletters. Community transcends distance. It is the warmth and security we experience from shared love-in-Christ, shared confidence, shared concern, shared risks for Christ.

OUR STRUCTURE: COMMUNITY-IN-CHRIST

We recognize from the Gospel that Christ gathered together a community of believers whose charisms would be mutual love and helpfulness. However, through the centuries the Church slowly moved into the pyramidal mode of organization. Therefore, as urged by Vatican II, our goal, as stated simply in our title, is to witness everywhere to community and service through the collegial process. By design, we are a free-form Community-in-Christ. Rather than by rules and

constitution, we are united by mutual concern, communication, and common commitment to promoting the growth of Christian Community, the People of God/the Church Radiant.

OUR GOAL: THAT ALL MAY BE ONE

We strive through all means available to forward the realization of Christ's prayer, "... that all may be **ONE**," that they may be Community. To achieve this goal we seek to draw together Christ-committed women afire with the mission of building up the Body of Christ through helping to build dynamic Christian Community wherever we live out our calling.

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A more detailed elaboration of the SFCC patterns and their rationale will unfold in the following chapters as we continue exploring the trends of change in sisterhoods throughout the world.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

The Church is an ever-renewing organism in which old growth recedes and decays in order to fertilize the new growth which keeps emerging from its rootedness in Christ. The raging storms of culture change spin some structures out of orbit thus making room for new growth. In the midst of massive structural upheavals and spiritual renewal, world sisters are moving together ever-forward, journeying . . .

FROM

- **FROM** 20th Century **TOTAL INSTITUTION** and democratized bureaucracy
- **FROM** the Church transforming
- **FROM** 4th stage moral development or fixation in a law-and-order orientation that unquestioningly conforms to dominative patterns of authority
- **FROM** a bud form

TOWARD

- **TOWARD** 21st Century collegial communities of a wholly new design
- **TOWARD** the **CHURCH RADIANT**
- **TOWARD** 6th stage maturation and vocations of respectful questioning and confrontation with all patterns of domination in Church or society
- **TOWARD** a growth spurt and a flowering