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Author(s): Angelyn Dries

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# LIVING IN AMBIGUITY: A PARADIGM SHIFT EXPERIENCED BY THE SISTER FORMATION MOVEMENT

BY

ANGELYN DRIES, O.S.F.\*

Prior to the 1950's, most women who joined religious congregations had very little formal spiritual preparation and almost no educational background for teaching, nursing, or other ministerial tasks. Religious formation, teaching, or nursing were learned "on the job." By the 1950's, however, state laws, papal encouragement to professionalize, and the Sisters themselves were calling for a more formal period of educational and spiritual preparation for ministry. A small committee of the college section of the National Catholic Educational Association discussed the idea of an "integrated" formation and education at their annual meeting in 1952, and by 1954 the Sister Formation Conference was launched. The Conference kept this name until 1976 when, after organizational shifts, it became the Religious Formation Conference.<sup>1</sup> Sister Formation not only accomplished its educational, spiritual, and ecumenical goals but also became a quite visible barometer of the changing intellectual and ecclesial "weather" in the Catholic Church just prior to and immediately following the Second Vatican Council. We will examine how Sister Formation employed the prevailing intellectual and ecclesial constructs of the 1950's.

In 1954 Sister Ritamary Bradley, editor of the *Sister Formation Bulletin* (hereafter, *Bulletin*) for its first decade, had written an article in *Speculum, the Journal of Medieval Thought*, on the background of *speculum*, that all-pervasive term in medieval literature.<sup>2</sup> We might

\*Sister Angelyn is an assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies in Cardinal Stritch College, Milwaukee.

<sup>1</sup>For a brief history of the Sister Formation Movement, see Mary Lea Schneider, O.S.F., "American Sisters and the Roots of Change: The 1950s," *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 7 (1988), 55-72.

<sup>2</sup>Sister Ritamary Bradley, C.H.M., "Backgrounds of the Title *Speculum* in Medieval Literature," *Speculum*, XXIX (1954), 100-115. Bradley eventually left her congregation to join the Sisters for Christian Community. She wrote of her experience in the Sister Formation Movement in Ann Patrick Ware (ed.), *Midwives of the Future* (Kansas City, 1985), pp. 69-81.

make a similar observation about the word "integration" in the Sister Formation literature and in the American Catholic experience, particularly from the 1920's until Vatican Council II.<sup>3</sup> Integration implied a unified center, a synthesis of faith and nature, and a methodology based on reason and deductive thinking from *a priori* first principles. Catholic professional organizations, with the National Catholic Educational Association leading the way in 1904, sought to establish a Catholic identity for its growing professional population and to find the Catholic "way" to approach the content of their subjects. Sister Bertrande Meyer's 1940 dissertation proposed a plan for Sisters' education based on "a controlling, integrating aim."<sup>4</sup> By 1946, the lay editors of *Integrity* sought to "make a new synthesis of religion and life."<sup>5</sup> In 1949, the Catholic University of America hosted an NCEA workshop on "Integration in Catholic Colleges and Universities," and two years later, another workshop was titled, "Theology, Philosophy and History as Integrating Disciplines in the Catholic College of Liberal Arts."<sup>6</sup> Professor John J. Ryan, who spoke at these workshops, defined integration as "the harmonious cooperation of forces resulting in well-coordinated actions which lead to the attainment of hierarchically ordered ends."<sup>7</sup> The Franciscan Educational Conference picked this same theme of integration for their 1953 convocation.<sup>8</sup> Thus, when the NCEA committee met in Kansas in 1954 to discuss the problem of the professional

<sup>3</sup>See Philip Gleason, *Keeping the Faith* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1987), especially chap. 7, which examines the pursuit of integral unity in America in the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>4</sup>Sister Bertrande Meyers, D.C., *The Education of Sisters* (New York, 1941), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>For the premises and position of the editors of this magazine in its decade or so of publication, see James Terence Fischer, *The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933–1962* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1989).

<sup>6</sup>Roy J. Deferrari (1890–1969) was a professor of classical languages at the Catholic University of America and was the editor of the published proceedings of these workshops. Roy J. Deferrari (ed.), *Integration in Catholic Colleges and Universities* (Washington, D.C., 1950); *idem* (ed.), *Theology, Philosophy, and History as Integrating Disciplines in the Catholic College of Liberal Arts* (Washington, D.C., 1953). He delivered the keynote address at the first workshop, "The General Interest In, and Need For, Integration." His article in the *Sister Formation Bulletin* (hereafter "SFB") described the role of the Catholic University and its affiliation with the Sister Formation Institutions: SFB, I (1955), 4–5. Deferrari narrated his efforts to help educate Sisters, especially on the graduate level, in *Memoirs of the Catholic University of America, 1918–1950* (Boston, 1962), pp. 69–80.

<sup>7</sup>John J. Ryan, "On the Meaning of Integration," in Deferrari, *Integration in Catholic Colleges and Universities*, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>Kevin O'Sullivan, O.F.M., "The Integration of Theology in College Life and Curriculum," in *Theology in Daily Life* (Brookland, Washington, D.C., December, 1953), pp. 70–86.

preparation of Sisters, they did so against the background of this Catholic environment which supported certain assumptions and values.<sup>9</sup> Through Sister Formation, women religious would seek, like their lay counterparts at *Integrity*, a new synthesis of religion and life, initially through the language and suppositions of the Neo-Scholastic worldview, along with its assumption of unity.

But this synthesis had been in trouble for some time. Tensions around that paradigm and the issue of American Catholics and the intellectual life came to the fore in John Tracy Ellis' article in *Thought* in 1955.<sup>10</sup> Walter Ong, S.J., criticized the scientific bias and ahistorical tone of what passed for American Catholic thought which looked to Europe for the source of intellectual life. Ong suggested regard for and critique of the American experience of the frontier, the spirit of exploration and expansion, and the industrialized mass culture which needed the development of interiority for the person.<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. O'Dea berated the negative attitude of American Catholics toward their intellectual environment and suggested that the Church would not mature if it did not face the crises before it, one of which was the presence of an educated, upwardly mobile Catholic population. Rather than look to the bankrupt Scholastic manual and catechism for the foundations of intellectual life, O'Dea suggested knowledge should begin in wonder and mystery.

But the theme of integration and an emphasis on "returning things which were in the beginning joined together by God, and have been put assunder by man," dominated the early literature and concerns of

<sup>9</sup>For examples of the connection between "integration" and Sister Formation, see Sister Ritamary Bradley, "Integration and Sister Formation," *SFB*, Supplement 1 (Summer, 1956), 1-6; Robert J. Henle, S.J., "Integrating Factors in Sister Formation," *SFB*, IV (1957-58), 6-11; Henri Renard, S.J., "Integration in the Sister Formation Program," *SFB*, VII (1961), 1-5; Elio Gambari, "The Unity of the Religious Life," *SFB*, VII (1961), 1-4. See also, Philip Gleason, "Neoscholasticism as Preconciliar Ideology," *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 7 (1988), 401-411.

<sup>10</sup>John Tracy Ellis, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," *Thought*, 30 (1955), 351-388. Two other tensions in American Catholicism of the 1950's were the relationship of an educated, upwardly mobile laity who sought their place in the Church and the relationship of Catholics to the non-Catholic majority in America. See Patrick Allitt, "American Catholics and the New Conservatism of the 1950's," *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 7 (1988), 15-37, here 25-27.

<sup>11</sup>Walter Ong, S.J., *Frontiers in American Catholicism, Essays on Ideology and Culture* (New York, 1957). For a retrospective view from those who had been to Catholic colleges in the 1950's and for their response to the issues around the promotion of Neo-Scholasticism, see Daniel Callahan (ed.), *Generation of the Third Eye* (New York, 1965).

Sister Formation.<sup>12</sup> The liberal arts core, which they espoused, contained the components of a well-rounded education and carried the values thought to restore unity in knowledge, values which the educators of the 1950's found present in the medieval period: enduring and timeless values, a cohesive and rational universe, the promotion of scientific endeavors, a hierarchic system, and a methodology based on reason.

However, Sisters first had to persuade clergy and bishops that the opportunity for such education was the right of Sisters. They felt the need to assure bishops that education would not make Sisters intellectuals (i.e., "overfascinated with the speculative"<sup>13</sup>). Rather, the women would find practical application for their learning. Clergy could still count on them to staff the growing numbers of parish schools at the completion of their education. In the 1955 survey of clergy, Sister Formation found that most priests agreed "that the woman's mind tends to unify, to work out a concrete synthesis of what she has learned."<sup>14</sup> Who better than Sisters, those very visible and veiled manifestations of the American Catholic worldview, could save the synthesis?

The time and attention given to study for Sisters was not, though, to be so all-encompassing that it detracted from the development of a religious life. Integration included the spiritual, physical, cultural, as well as the intellectual elements in the young woman's life. Elio Gambari, the Italian Montfort priest who worked closely with Sister Formation, reminded the Sisters that "the Religious-Apostolic life is, of course, a unity."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>John J. Ryan, in Deferrari (ed.), *Integration in Catholic Colleges and Universities*, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup>Sister Ritamary Bradley (ed.), *Spiritual and Intellectual Elements in the Formation of Sisters* (New York, 1957): whole of questionnaire, pp. 170–173, here, p. 171.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>Elio Gambari, S.M.M., *The Religious-Apostolic Formation of Sisters* (New York, 1964), p. 37. Gambari (b. 1913), a canon lawyer and Montfort priest, worked in the Sacred Congregation for Religious in Rome. Collaborating closely with the Conference, he conducted workshops in the United States and wrote prolifically about renewal in religious congregations. During Vatican Council II he was on the subcommission which was set up to work on the section on religious life, the workings of which commission eventually became part of the dogmatic constitution, *Lumen Gentium*. Gambari thus brought to his book and to this subcommission the experience of thousands of women religious. For a detailed account of the subcommission's work in 1964 (members from the Doctrinal Commission, Commission on Religious, and *periti*) to develop the placement and emphasis of the material on religious life, see Ralph M. Wiltgen, S.V.D., *The Religious Life Defined, an Official Commentary on the Second Vatican Council Declarations* (Techny, Illinois, 1970).

In addition to this general, pervasive philosophic atmosphere surrounding "integration," the methodology of the Sister Formation Conference reflected the premises of reason, rationality, and the use of a scientific approach to their problems. This was demonstrated in Formation Conference surveys on clergy perceptions of women and the intellectual life, juniorates, vocations, and on academic resources present among religious congregations.<sup>16</sup>

In their ecclesiology, Sister Formation began to favor the organic paradigm of the Mystical Body, an image, which, since the 1920's had emerged among some Scholastic theologians, rather than the post-Vatican Council I image of the Church as Perfect Society. This latter symbol had emphasized the Church's public role and the exercise of its external authority in the context of often hostile European civil governments. The image identified the Church as over and against the "world." For religious, this ecclesial image, supported by the 1917 Code of Canon Law and by the cognitive structures of Neo-Scholasticism, highlighted the legal, juridic, and rational foundation of the vows. Because the issue of authority was an important criterion in this ecclesiology, the emphasis in the three vows of religious life had been telescoped into one—that of obedience.

While ecclesiology based on the symbol of the Mystical Body still presupposed the unity of the center, the image allowed for an active role for laity, emphasized the Holy Spirit and the interior life, suggested the possibility of diversity, and recognized mission as essential to the nature of the Church.<sup>17</sup> Sister Formation was not immediately comfortable with the ramifications of the Mystical Body image. As greater numbers of laity began to be energized by this image and to exercise the "apostolate" in Catholic Action groups, Sisters sought, in Scholastic fashion, to find distinctions between themselves and the laity. The

<sup>16</sup>Sister Ritamary Bradley (ed.), *Mind of the Church in the Formation of Sisters* (New York, 1956), p. xxii.

<sup>17</sup>Two of the speakers at the Sister Formation Conferences particularly built their theology on the Mystical Body imagery: Fulton J. Sheen, *The Mystical Body of Christ* (New York, 1935), and Richard J. Cushing, Archbishop of Boston, who arranged for Cardinal Suenens to speak to the Sisters in the Archdiocese. Both Cushing and Sheen relied on the work of Emile Mersch, S.J., a professor of theology at Notre Dame de la Paix, Namur, who spent his entire academic life constructing a theology around the image of Mystical Body. Emile Mersch, S.J., *The Whole Christ, The Historical Development of the Doctrine on the Mystical Body in Scripture and Tradition*, translated by John R. Kelly, S.J. (Milwaukee, 1938), and *idem, The Theology of the Mystical Body* (St. Louis, 1951).

second issue of the *Bulletin* (1954) projected a sense of confidence about the place of Sisters.

Because of her greater maturity and livelier motivation, the Sister can get her education in less time than can other students. . . . the religious should be in an atmosphere that stresses the dignity of her vocation. . . . Nor is it consonant with the dignity of a religious to become an equal, a companion, with the lay students.<sup>18</sup>

But as the years progressed and as the hierarchic ordering began to shift in the Body, Sisters tried to account for the distinctions. Sister Formation literature suggested that the use of radical means to live their life, the need for "super apostles" to train laity, and the formation of community were things which identified their "place" within the Body.<sup>19</sup>

This examination of identity which Sisters began to undertake indicates that the components of the Sisters' "universe" were changing. However, to understand those developments, Sisters exercised an important function of their methodology which was typically unscholastic. They began to think inductively rather than deductively. Discomfort with the effects of their compartmentalized life led them to start with their experience and not with *a priori* principles. Sister Formation set in motion a self-conscious, public reflection on their experience through dialogue with their constituents in their conferences and in their literature. They asked questions about what, in practice, was actually happening to their theoretically cohesive way of life. From the start, the *Bulletin* had raised the question whether there was or "should be a tension, opposition, or dichotomy in the Sister's life between her spiritual and her intellectual formation, between her personal religious life and her active apostolate."<sup>20</sup> This question, which dominated the first decade of the *Bulletin*, became the problem of the "hyphen": Sister-Teacher, Sister-Nurse, etc., terms which were a variation on the dual poles in the Neo-Scholastic worldview. The hyphen reflected the experience of dissonance, ambiguity and incompatibility attendant to the unraveling of their "universe." Sisters were receiving mixed messages about the unity of their world.

<sup>18</sup>*SFB*, I (1954), 3.

<sup>19</sup>Sister Mary Daniel Turner, "The American Sister of Today," in Sister M. Charles Boromeo Muckenhirn, C.S.C. (ed.), *The Changing Sister* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1965), p. 305; Sister Ritamary Bradley, *SFB* III (1957), 12; Sister Audrey Kopp, "Renewed Nuns: Collegial Christians," *SFB*, XIII (1967), 17.

<sup>20</sup>Sister Mary Emil Penet, in Bradley (ed.), *Mind of the Church*, p. 2.

They were to be separate from the world, but their salvation depended on their activity in the world.<sup>21</sup> Canon Law in 1917 had placed congregations into categories which reflected Scholastic constructs of primary and secondary aims. Individual congregations had become islands unto themselves as they accentuated their distinctiveness, not their commonalities. Their daily schedule, modeled after that of contemplative communities, tended to partition their prayer and apostolic life. The hyphen attempted to hold together or to bridge all the elements which seemed to be coming apart for Sisters and for the American Catholic Church: action/contemplation, religious/apostolic, public/private, sacred/secular, intellect/affect, a renaissance curriculum/a philosophical medieval synthesis. Throughout the 1950's and early '60's, the *Bulletin* continually expressed the uneasiness and ambiguity Sisters felt in the discrepancy between the real and the ideal.

In one of the lengthiest articles in the *Bulletin* a sociologist, Sister Audrey Kopp, depicted the experience of American religious life as anything but the unity Elio Gambari claimed it to have. Her 1967 article, "The Renewed Nuns: Collegial Christians," sketched two models of Church and religious life.<sup>22</sup> She starkly delineated the real as the "Split-Level Bureaucratized Convent" especially in the area of the practice and theory of authority. Her arguments for the need to move to an *Ecclesia Caritas*, a phrase she borrowed from Yves Congar, were based on reason.<sup>23</sup> She sketched a Mystical Body ecclesiology which recognized collegiality among members on the basis of the presence of the Holy Spirit in all persons. Kopp itemized the elements of the professional mode, a model she proposed for the entire church: peer-to-peer relationships, an authority of expertise, collaboration and consensus, and the virtues of creativity, originality, rationality, adaptability, and proficiency.<sup>24</sup> This model critiqued the effects and practice of the Perfect Society model of Church as that image had impacted

<sup>21</sup>"Catholic schools are means whereby we bring men to heaven. They are instruments whereby we save our own souls. If your vocation in life is Christian education, you cannot fail to perform this work diligently. To be remiss is to run the risk of losing your soul." Edward D. Howard, Archbishop of Portland (Oregon), in Bradley (ed.), *Mind of the Church*, p. 36. In the same issue of the *Bulletin*, two contrasting articles also point this out: "Excellence of the Religious State," and "Sister Formation and the Ecumenical Movement," *SFB*, VIII (1961), 1-4 and 4-8.

<sup>22</sup>Kopp, *SFB*, XIII (1966), 17, and XIII (1967), 4-18.

<sup>23</sup>Yves Congar, O.P., *Power and Poverty in the Church* (Baltimore, 1964). Kopp uses Congar, Joseph Fichter, S.J., John McKenzie, S.J., and Thomas Aquinas to support her analysis.

<sup>24</sup>Kopp, *SFB*, XVIII (1967), 9.



the daily life of Sisters and called for a change in practice more commensurate with the symbolism of the Mystical Body, nuanced by the American democratic experience. Kopp proposed, by way of analogy, what all of church life should be. Religious life and, specifically, women's religious life, was the locus, the *speculum* for the struggles and strains of the Church in relation to the age.

In addition to their own public and insightful reflection on their experience, the Movement looked to European theologians to elucidate the problem of the "hyphen." Ritamary Bradley chose *Bulletin* material from those who supported the analysis of the Sisters' experience. Yves Congar, O.P., M. Dominic Chenu, O.P., and Karl Rahner, S.J., were engaged in the reform of the Church through a dynamic use of Scholasticism. Chenu and Congar, known for their positive attitude toward "the world," were concerned about the role of the laity and the issue of authority. The *Bulletin* featured material from A. Pié, editor of *La Vie Spirituelle*,<sup>25</sup> Thomas Merton, and Anthony Padavano, who were exploring the relationship between action and contemplation. These theological influences appeared in the *Bulletin* in a changed perspective on the vows: an emphasis on personalism, Scripture, the imitation of Christ, and the vow as a public witness which speaks to a social reality.

The Neo-Scholastic method had proposed the ideal as normative and had examined the real to discover where it was out of harmony with the ideal. Sisters acknowledged the dehumanizing effects in their lives of certain elements in the Neo-Scholastic framework. As they started to put into practice a lateral network of collaboration and collegiality, they demonstrated that the way to deal with the real was through a change in practice to correspond with a new ideal—the Mystical Body, an image more in keeping with their experience. This symbol would give way by the end of the 1960's to an even more decentralized and less hierarchic image of People of God.

<sup>25</sup>During the 1950's and '60's, many authors who were excerpted in the *Bulletin* were influential among American progressive groups: J. LeClerq, P. Grelot, L. Bouyer, Chenu, and Congar. For the history and philosophy of *La Vie Spirituelle*, see "Les Vingt-Cinq Ans de la Vie Spirituelle," A. Pié, *La Vie Spirituelle*, No. 564 (October, 1969), 221–226. Pié's "Adaptation of the Religious Life to Modern Conditions" was one of the selections from the Notre Dame Institute of Spirituality, *Religious Life in the Modern World* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1961). For the European context of these authors, see Jean-Marie Domenach and Robert D. Montvalon (compilers), *The Catholic Avant-Garde: French Catholicism Since World War II* (New York, 1967).

## Conclusion

On the one hand, Sister Formation achieved a unity that delighted Neo-Scholastics. The Movement had disseminated ideas within and across regions. Sister Formation leaders achieved effective programs because they assumed commonalities of educational needs and problems. They convinced women's congregations not only to work together as one to attain similar educational aims but to collaborate on the fundamental issues and problems of religious life. In the 1950's, "integration" had kept Sisters' influence primarily within the confines of American Catholic circles and the Catholic "system."

However, by the mid-1960's, Sisters, whose appropriation of professionalism, personalism, and a Christian humanism which was at the heart of Thomism, had stretched that circle in order to include Anglican Sisters, Sisters in Peru, and "the world." Integration as a philosophical system had been overtaken by the experience of an unintegrated, racially segregated America. But by that time also, Sisters had virtually abandoned the language of logic and the methodology of manualist Neo-Scholasticism. Sister Formation resolved the dualism of "Sister-Teacher in favor of "Sister." In their search for the development of prayer, mission, and community, Sister Formation began to speak, for the most part, in the language of Scripture, symbol and psychology,<sup>26</sup> language which seemed to fit the dimensions of the Mystical Body image more accurately. This language was fashioned from reflection on their experience and from their use of theologians, who, like Rahner and Congar, were seeking a more dynamic correlation between theology and life. These developments were not uniform, nor universal, among Sisters. Canon Cotel's *Catechism of the Vows* was republished in 1962 to give a clearer definition to religious life. But Vatican Council II gave public voice and expression to the direction of the reflection and thought which American Sisters, a microcosm of the American Catholic experience, had taken over the previous decade.

Sister Formation was thus a public engagement in the development of a spirituality and lifestyle which evolved (and which they helped to shape) from within the changing Neo-Scholastic paradigm. In meeting the questions and solving the problems they encountered, by

<sup>26</sup>Sister Margaret Gorman, R.S.C.J., specifically puts to rest the scholastic philosophic foundations as a way of religious formation in her "Preparation for Service in the Global Village, 2000 A.D.," *SFB*, XVII (1970), 3.

changing certain elements in their “universe” (approach to time, dress, relationships, structures, etc.), Sisters were, in effect, creating a new paradigm as they answered questions about identity. An examination of the Sister Formation movement provides us with a microcosm of the dynamics of change which occurred in the 1950's and '60's in the Catholic Church, the churches in America, and in the whole of American society.