

PAPERS READ AT THE FIRST SESSION OF THE SEVENTH GENERAL CHAPTER
OF THE SISTERS OF MERCY OF THE UNION IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AUGUST 18, 1965 - SEPTEMBER 5, 1965

RELIGIOUS GOVERNMENT

THE IMPORTANCE AND NEED FOR IN-SERVICE DEVELOPMENT OF SUPERIORS

All development is ultimately self development but it is prudent and practical to provide the environment, the psychological atmosphere and specific means to assist the person in the process of self development.

Special programs of in-service development are planned to meet specific needs, and hence, are highly goal oriented. Enterprise has successfully engaged in these programs by searching for and developing managers for every level or organizational activity. Millions of dollars have been spent and are being spent each year by business and industry for in-service development of key personnel. Why not consider the possible advantages of such an approach in the religious community in preparing superiors?

An "in-service program" is understood to mean the gradual introduction to, and the gradual assuming of professional and technical responsibilities through a series of planned educational and work experiences which enables a person to grow in breadth and depth in the area of his or her professional competence. Such a program enables a person to develop potential abilities and capacities through providing and utilizing opportunities to put theory and principles into action; through developing the various skills essential to professional performance and in acquiring a degree of confidence in the performance of the various required skills. For us as Religious Sisters of Mercy, a more formalized approach to in-service training would enable Sisters to grow in their religious vocation through the continued wholesome integration of the spiritual, intellectual, and apostolic aspects of their religious life.

At the present time, we are not aware of the existence of any formalized program for the preparation of superiors, either within or external to a religious community. Why have we been so slow in recognizing the need for preparing religious superiors? Father Gallen, SJ, stated in a publication in 1962, titled THE LEADERSHIP OF THE MAJOR SUPERIOR IN THE RENEWAL OF RELIGIOUS LIFE, "Any religious institute is only as good as its superiors. Everything in the religious life ultimately depends on them. This is especially true of local superiors because they do most of the governing. No duty of a higher superior is more important than the appointment of spiritually minded, spiritually competent and spiritually influential local superiors."

The Very Reverend Paul Philippe, OP, said in 1952, "She (the local superior) must continue the spiritual and religious formation of her subjects, especially of the youngest, but also of the oldest. She must be able to speak with profit concerning the spiritual life and the obligations of the religious state, either in Chapter, or in conferences, or in private conversation. . . . Finally it is indispensable that she know thoroughly the constitutions of her Institute, as well as, the decisions of the General Chapters and the regulations of the Sacred Congregation of Religious."

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The Reverend Charles J. Corcoran, CSC, during the Sisters Institute of Spirituality at Notre Dame in 1959, said that "the superior is primarily a spiritual guide and leader, not an administrator. She is appointed as the head of a religious house made up of women who are dedicated by vow to the pursuit of perfection. She is placed over the house of a religious community, whose end is, above all, spiritual. Primarily and most fundamentally, the superior operates in a spiritual milieu. Because of her presumed talents and virtues she has been appointed to this post; but here we come face to face with a paradox. Is it not strange in this era of specialization, the only persons who are not trained for their position are superiors?"

You may have many other ideas to contribute to the importance and need of in-service development for local superiors. May I conclude with one last contribution by A. Henry, OP, in his publication, THE KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED BY A SUPERIOR: FAITH AND THEOLOGY. He says, and I quote, "Young nuns therefore have today intellectual needs unknown to their elders. Sometimes perhaps they suffer from the ignorance, in religious matters, of their superiors. Priests may come across novices who dare not expose their doubts to the novice mistress, ask her questions or even converse with her in case they should display too great a knowledge before the ignorance of their superior. No doubt, the holiness of the latter will often make up for this lack, but nevertheless, what a temptation remains for the subject to lose her confidence in one who should be her spiritual guide. The superior has a responsibility for these souls which even spiritual insight derived from sanctity where it exists, is unable to bear alone. The wider the scope of authority in matters both spiritual and intellectual, the more culpable is ignorance in a superior."

Major superiors on each level should look upon the preparation of superiors as a primary and very essential duty of their office. It is a duty which when fulfilled in proper perspective on every level of religious government has universal and far reaching effects. It is as broad as the vision of the Church, because it can influence the lives directly and indirectly of millions of souls who come in contact with the individual religious serving in the apostolate under their superiors.

What does the scope of the duty of preparing superiors include? It includes all superiors, on every level in the religious congregation - as well as - potential superiors and mistresses of formation, including the major superior herself and her council. The scope of preparing superiors is further characterized by immediate and long-range plans to achieve this end.

In depth, it also embraces the responsibility for determining the criteria to be used for selecting superiors; that is, for defining at least, the basic qualifications which should guide the higher superiors in selecting those who will be responsible for the formation and government of the community, whether on the local level or the provincial level.

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Some great attention needs to be paid to the means for determining which Sisters possess the basic qualifications which will enable them to develop and become good superiors. Further study is required to determine what knowledge, experiences, attitudes and skills are helpful in becoming spiritual leaders of religious women.

Again, Father Corcoran has something important to say on this matter. "It is evident that if the superior is primarily the spiritual guide and leader of her community, then she herself must be a spiritual person. If she is not a spiritual person, she is not going to act in a spiritual way. She may mouth spiritual principles, but there will not be that sincerity, that conviction, which alone makes one's pronouncements acceptable."

In our zeal for preparing good superiors, we may not overlook the complementary need for Sisters formally prepared in administrative or management roles in governing the temporal affairs of the apostolic works of the congregation.

If we are to propose some logical approach to the development of a practical program, could we think together in terms of four general areas of concentration, namely:

- A. A formal process of selection of religious for positions of religious government aided by the use of some objective criteria.
- B. A series of planned experiences in gradually increasing responsibilities before assignment as a superior.
- C. A continuous, on going, immediate formal preparation for a Sister prior to assuming the responsibility of superiorship.
- D. A continuing, on going, program of development while functioning in the position of a superior.

If you agree on the four general areas of concentration for an in-service program for superiors within the community, then we might explore briefly the responsibilities for the implementation of such a program on the generalate and provincialate levels of our own Institute.

It would seem that on the generalate level it would be the responsibility of the Mother General with her Council to define and promulgate the goals, the philosophy and the broad policies for a program of development for superiors within the Institute. The broad policies would of necessity require a definition of the roles of superiors on each level of government and the Mistresses of formation, and in keeping with the goals of the Institute and the spirit of our foundress - the spirit of Mercy - her legacy to her spiritual daughters. From the roles would flow the qualifications essential to the performance of the functions of superiorship.

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This immediate formal preparation for superiors could be planned and carried out in one or more of our Mercy Colleges, wherein courses for credit on a Master's level could be offered, preferably, in summer sessions on the college campus.

A teaching team made up of a Mother Provincial, Sisters of Mercy, a priest and other persons qualified in the specialty areas required could present such a program each summer, alternating the geographic locations. This would allow all Provinces of a given region to assign newly appointed superiors for participation, at least, during the summer session at a given College.

Careful planning would be required to provide the essential knowledge in the areas to be covered, accompanied by opportunities to develop attitudes and skills in leadership, the art of governing through the use of management principles, functions and techniques, along with fundamental concepts in theology, liturgy and canon law, including a study of the goals and spirit of the Institute, the Constitutions and directives, and a knowledge of human relations and psychology. Such a uniform approach on the Province level would be a means to insure continuity in the content and approach in the preparation of superiors throughout the Institute and would also conserve the use of physical facilities, resources and personnel through sharing them with other Provinces.

The Mother General and her Council might envision a similar program for each group of newly appointed Mothers Provincial and Provincial Councilors.

The Mother Provincial and her Council, it would seem, should be concerned with two other aspects of the preparation of superiors, namely: provision for some planned on-going experiences to encourage growth and self development for those given the immediate formal preparation while functioning in their assignments, and provision for some means to help present superiors, who did not receive any kind of planned preparation, to meet existing needs in the performance of their duties. A variety of less formal opportunities can be provided for both groups of superiors through special workshops, conferences or regional meetings of the superiors by the Mother Provincial with the assistance of the members of her Council. Special retreats for superiors should also be included. These experiences can be geared to achieve specific goals based on existing needs as expressed by the Superior and the Sisters through the annual visitation, through analysis of problem areas, questionnaires and observations made by the Mother Provincial and Councilors.

The last aspect of such an all-embracing program of development should include some means to measure or evaluate the end results achieved in order to improve upon and meet the new needs of superiors to be prepared in the future.

If we pursued a course of action as outlined in preparing superiors, what might be some of the expected outcomes?

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Let us briefly list a few of them.

1. Greater "goal consciousness" on the part of the superiors and the Sisters, consequently greater commitment, personal involvement and achievement of the goals of the Institute.
2. Greater continuity in religious government, hence, the continuous striving for excellence.
3. A reduction of conflict and frustration, consequently a more effective carrying out of apostolic services.
4. Greater collaboration with the Church, resulting in a greater influence upon those being served.
5. A means of insuring a continuing integration of the spiritual, the intellectual and apostolic aspects of religious life resulting in holiness for the Church and greater honor and glory for God.
6. A means to insure the knowing and doing of God's will, hence, a greater obedience on the part of the superior and each Sister.

And in conclusion, a deepening of the spirit of Mercy with a love and loyalty for our Institute, with a means to insure that for all religious an opportunity is created wherein a newer, fresher love of God is supplanting an older faded love - a continuation of the spirit of renewal and adaptation - a "dynamism" truly at work within our Community.

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