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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

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: Mother Mary Regina Cunningham, R.S.M.

Good morning, Mothers and Sisters. We are gathered here this morning in the name of the community and the task confronting us as Chapter delegates is one of tremendous importance to the Church, the Institute in general and the individual members of the community. This Chapter must point the way that our Institute of Mercy should proceed during the coming years so that it may best fulfill its God-given role in the Church's mission in the world.

During these days we must take a new look at ourselves, a new look at our responsibilities, a new look at the world in which we live. In the light of this vision we must re-evaluate our commitments, perhaps make a shift of emphasis in our apostolic works and recommit our resources to the areas most in need. Each one here has a sacred responsibility to participate in a positive way so that the decisions reached will redound to the greater honor and glory of God, the needs and demands of the whole Church, and a more vital and fruitful spiritual life for the community.

General Chapters are the supreme authority in all religious families and one of the most valuable means for religious communities to bring about adaptation and renewal in keeping with the mind of the Church. When the Chapter is called together for the election of a Superior for the whole Institute, the power of governing for the Institute for the time being is as it were latent and vested in the Chapter as a unit. As soon as the elections have taken place and the Chapter of Affairs is held, the Superior General and her Councilors retain their ordinary powers; yet even then all the Capitulars share in the highest authority of the Institute. Hence the need for each Capitular to exercise rightly and bear influence on consequences which will extend into the future and that may prove a decisive factor in determining a step forward, or else a step backward. This influence of the Capitulars is exercised in two ways: by the right to vote and by the right to discuss and debate.

The rule that must prevail over all decisions made is the rule of the common good and all other considerations must be subordinated to this. Once legitimately elected, a capitular must give thought above all else to the common interests of the Institute and subordinate to this all other considerations. Ecclesial mindedness should be the atmosphere pervading the Chapter and members are urged to act in this spirit.

Even though the Mother General acting as president of the Chapter presides over the Chapter, she is not supposed to rule it; there is equality among the members and each votes according to her own convictions, abiding by and upholding the final majority vote in the end. Deliberations are kept secret until promulgated by the Mother General and Council. The Chapter determines what should be promulgated.

Change for the sake of change should find no place in the Chapter. Capitulars should be mindful that traditions and customs in religious life are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. Essential elements of the religious life must not be touched. The Chapter should consider possible modification or deletion of customs or regulations no longer relevant today. It would be a false sense of loyalty to our Foundress that

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would hold us back from making the changes needed for an effective achievement of our goals. Mother McAuley was a woman of her time and far ahead of her day but her thoughts and actions were in conformity with the mind of the Church. Were she living today, she would use the Chapter to "open windows" and let the fresh winds of the Spirit breathing in the Church permeate and revitalize the life of her religious communities. Let us in this Chapter consider the needs of the community in relation to the needs of the Church, knowing that decisions we make can bring our Sisters closer together in union, charity, mercy and justice and thus effect the whole Church. We can advance the life of the Church by manifesting through our lives the oneness which Christ sought among His followers. We must pass on from generation to generation the legacy of our Foundress -- "my legacy to the Institute is charity".

Our big question in all matters presented should be: Where and how will the cause of God be best served by the Sisters of Mercy in 1965 and the changing years ahead?

Father Adrian Van Kaam, CSSP says a necessary condition for the meeting of Christ in the mystery of the religious community is the silent listening to the voice of the community . . . Our vow of obedience is a promise to develop a sensitivity for the voice of the community. Therefore . . . a truly obedient community fosters a continuous dialogue among its members . . . Community life can only reach its optimal beauty and efficiency when everyone can contribute his insight into the possibilities of improvement of the modes, rules and customs which express, protect, and enhance the life of the community.

This is what we have tried to do through our Chapter preparations which were begun in August 1963. We have gone down to the "grass roots" for suggestions, we have listened to those who wished to speak, we encouraged active participation in the preliminary work. Now we have come to the time for decision and a tremendous responsibility rests with this Chapter. We can't afford to make mistakes -- the consequences would be too far reaching. We must approach the task at hand with a spirit of deep faith and loving trust knowing that we will do our best and then whatever the results may be we will accept as God's will. Trust in God inspires patience and wisdom that will enable us to overcome any obstacle. In His will is our peace.

We must face all issues with an open mind and earnestly strive to see things objectively as they really are. We must admit the need for change if it is warranted. We must hold fast to that which will not be bettered by change or deletion.

To be realistic we must first of all believe that adaptation and renewal are necessary; we must know what needs to be done to make the necessary adaptations; we must do it. Once we decide that a change is in order then we should propose a means for bringing about the change gradually rather than by revolution.

We are all aware that we must face the world with a different mentality today and consequently some of our rules and regulations must be changed. The order of the day

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is conformity to the mind of the Church which is the "mind of Christ". The positive will of the Church is that all religious communities cooperate with her in fulfilling her mission which is actually the continuation of Christ's mission on earth. "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." (John 20:21)

The wind of change blowing through the Church today is affecting our Institute and we must make every effort to harmonize our spirit and apostolic endeavors with the mind, the heart and the directives of the Church. Since the Church is a living organism, growth is of her very nature. As growth is a sign of life so adaptation is a function of a living organism and the organism either adapts itself to its environment or dies. We can't be realistic if we fail to come to grips with the fact that the apostolate is one of the points of contact which the Church must use if Christ is to save the world. The apostolate today demands adaptation. Father Fichter, S.J. says: "We cannot save a world from which we flee; we can't reform a culture we despise; we can't change a society about which we know nothing." Need is a determining factor and we must not hesitate to make changes that will aid us in reaching our goals more effectively, otherwise we will cease to be a part of the Church militant. The accelerated pace of today's living demands that we keep abreast of the times, and this means that we cannot be satisfied with the status quo.

We must study the proposals submitted with open minds and let our discussions throw light on every possible angle so that we will be able to make prudent judgments in our acceptance or rejection of them. In making or recommending proposals we will try to foresee objectively the future effects and determine whether or not the change will further or hinder the achievement of our goals. In a message this summer to the Conference of Major Superiors of Men meeting in De Pere, Wisconsin, Cardinal Ildebrando Antoniutti, prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Religious stated: "The decisions of the Council on renewal desired by the Church should have been awaited, before theories were advanced or changes proposed which do not seem to be in accord with the life of religious. Renewal is a seductive word, and care must be taken that under the guise of this name reforms are not introduced which could undermine the religious life. This renewal must be in full conformity with the spirit of the founders and with the teachings of the Church. Religious must preserve always and everywhere, in a visible and unmistakable manner, the specific character of their consecration to God in obedience, in poverty, in the shining example of their humble, pure and self-sacrificing lives." With sincerity, faith, hope and great love for the Church and our Institute we will hold sacred the essentials of the past, but courageously seek to chart our plan for the future in the light of the eternal NOW of the Holy Spirit. Our task is not an easy one -- there may be many pitfalls but let us place all our confidence in Him Who said: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of them." We are gathered in His name -- He is in the midst of us. Let us begin our work with a plea to our beloved Foundress to guide us in these Chapter deliberations. The prayer is on the back cover of your program.

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RELIGIOUS GOVERNMENT

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

Religious government is deduced from the principle that the invisible God wills to direct and govern men through other men as His visible representative. Religious government must promote and maintain that order which will insure liberty in striving for the goals of the Institute. Effective goal achievement is aided by the exercise of sound leadership which organizes the use of all resources including the inclinations, efforts and abilities of members of a religious community toward the development of themselves as individuals and as contributors achieving their own goals through the corporate goals.

Planning is required for determining the needs, establishing goals related to these needs, and developing means to effect ultimate goal achievement for the religious community.

The goals, objectives and purposes of the religious community must be clearly defined by the highest authority in the Institute. They must be clearly understood and communicated to all members through organized channels. The mind of Christ, apprehended truly in His Church and subsequently through the Church's authority, in religious superiors directs to fullness human motives, desires, ambitions and talents.

The goals can be stated thus:

Corporate Goal ----- to be witness to the world of the community of love
as it exists in Heaven

Individual Goal ---- to be a personal, consecrated witness to God's merciful
love.

The attainment of the goals will be aided by:

1. Clear-cut lines of authority -- no man can serve two masters
2. Proper exaction of religious obedience -- "an obedient man shall speak of victory"
(St. James)
3. Reasonable participation in problem-solving and planning on all levels
4. Encouraging a feeling of security among all concerned
5. Concern for the dignity of each individual and provision for her personal development.

For good government the principle of interdependence must be understood and made operable. Pope John XXIII in "MATER ET MAGISTRA" supports this principle: "As mutual relationships of people increase they become daily more dependent upon one another."

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Decisions should be made at the lowest level possible. The principle of subsidiarity must be recognized; "It is an injustice, a grave evil, a disturbance of right order for a larger and higher organization to arrogate to itself functions which can be performed efficiently by smaller and lower groups."

Good administrators know how to use the principle of delegation. By delegating is meant the "process of placing responsibility for decision making at the lowest level where the necessary information, skill, and experience exist to make a satisfactory decision." (Harry J. Merigis -- Amer. School Board Journal, March 1962)

At some level in the Institute, authority exists for making any decision within the competence of the Institute and only decisions that cannot be made at a given level should be referred upward in the organization.

Authority should be delegated to the extent and in the way necessary for the accomplishment of results expected. Mere assignment of a job or task is not delegation. True delegation means a sharing in responsibility and enough authority to accomplish the assignment. It means participation in decision making and freedom of action to insure goal achievement. The content of every position should be clearly defined and authority relationships clearly outlined. The responsibility of any person should correspond with the authority given to execute the task.

Principles relative to religious government enunciated by Pope Pius XII (Allocution Feb. 11, 1958) should be made operative in every religious community.

1. Superiors must cling firmly to well balanced and solid ascetical doctrine as handed down by the first founders and approved by long practice in the Church, and not depart from it in favor of any novelty. It is the part of superiors . . . to lead their subjects securely to eternal life by the safe way of truth.
2. . . . a prudent superior will willingly and freely consult and listen to advice but . . . after having heard . . . his consultors, after having prayed much to the Holy Spirit and maturely considered the entire matter, he will as far as possible come to certain and definite decisions, and not be afraid to impose them properly and with paternal and humble firmness on his subjects.
3. . . . you should exercise this authority of yours according to Our Mind and that of the Church.
4. Your guidance and vigilance must be applied not only within the religious house but to the entire apostolic work which your Sisters are doing in God's vineyard.

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Pope Paul VI in speaking to Superiors General gathered for the General Chapters on May 23, 1964 had this to say in reference to religious government:

Multiplicity of laws is not always accompanied by progress in religious life. It often happens that the more rules there are, the less people pay attention to them. Therefore, let General Chapters always use their rights to make laws moderately and prudently. The most important work of General Chapters is the studied accommodations of the rules of the Institute to the changed conditions of the times.

Here our Holy Father is pointing out the need for all religious communities to update their rules in order to accommodate to the changed conditions of today's world. He is concerned about the real need to modernize rules in order to participate effectively in the modern apostolate. At the same time he is not unmindful of the dangers involved because of the human element entering into the decisions that must be made to accomplish the desired goals and therefore he reminds us: "from simple sincerity, charity and the strength born of faith flows a marvelous and effective ability to persuade souls and lead them to God." (Pope Paul to Fathers General)

Is this for the greater honor and glory of God -- would Mother McAuley reason this way? Our motives must be pure -- our attitudes correct -- we must act sincerely, prudently and courageously. There may be risks involved in the decisions we make and this will be necessary because we are human - but - we must be sure that it is the common good we are seeking and not self interests. We may be criticized for taking some risks but we will have to take comfort from the fact that nothing tried nothing gained. Being human we are not infallible and so we must be willing to risk the satisfaction that would be ours if everybody approved all that was done at this Chapter.

All our Sisters must be aware that while more individual initiative will be provided for, it will require more personal responsibility and this in turn spells sacrifice. In our deliberations we want to consider the intelligent responsibility of the many and not the immaturity of a few.

You must be mindful that while you represent the religious of your province your interest must concern itself with the whole Institute. You vote according to your own convictions. Be mindful of the fact, however, that the provincial capitulars at your province Chapter enabled you to ascertain their feelings on community proposals and this should be a help to you in formulating your vote on the various proposals to be considered.

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Let us proceed now to a presentation and discussion of proposals with an open mind, sincerity of purpose, lively faith and confident hope that He Who is the way, the truth and the life will guide us in our deliberations.

I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the members of the General Council, the Secretary General, Procurator General and each Mother Provincial and her Council, Secretary and Procurator for their untiring efforts in sharing the preparations for the Chapters (Provincial and General). I thank, too, all the committee members and others who in any way helped; the delegates of the various provincial chapters and you who will share in the work of the General Chapter. My gratitude and that of my co-workers will best be expressed in a Mass offered for you and your intentions. May God bless and reward each one of you.

Mother Mary Regina Cunningham, R.S.M.
Generalate