

A Summer Pastime

The Election and Installation of General Officials

Sisters in Religious Communities elect their officials. It is an ancient and highly regarded procedure, an attempt to ensure, as well as it is humanly possible to do, that the best possible talent is directing the spiritual and apostolic works of the Congregation, guiding its decisions, making the common life of the sisters vibrant, growth producing and responsive to the Holy Spirit. That is a big order for any human being. Gratefully it is a work that is entrusted not to one isolated individual, but to the President and her Councilors (of varying numbers according to the particular Constitutions of the Community) in combined effort for the common good. While the President has the last word and the ultimate responsibility for the life of the Congregation, the Councilors give significant input to decisions and offer the wealth of their experience to aid the President in coming to closure in many varied situations. The Sisters of the Holy Family are part of this historic and challenging tradition, and it can be truly said of the Congregation that God has always provided the needed leadership at the times that it has been required.

This year, 2007, has been an election year in Holy Family. It is, as was often noted and mulled over in the Congregational Chapter, a time of momentous decision and confusing, mixed messages about religious life in the Church, which finds itself in transition from what was to what is to come.

In the first election of the Holy Family Sisters, some of the same confusion and uncertainty colored the procedure. One must recall, before outlining the event, that the small community of six professed sisters eligible to vote for Superior in 1880 were, no doubt, unclear on who might be the best candidate for the office. Sister Dolores Armer, who had borne the brunt of the eight (often companionless) years of the community's founding was the charismatic leader of the small group, but she had never been trained in a novitiate, nor been instructed in established religious life. Sister Teresa O'Connor was the acknowledged co-foundress, although she had come to join Miss Armer two years after the

foundation. She had been sent by the Archbishop after four years with Miss Armer to spend a year in the Dominican Novitiate in San Rafael, so she was trained and had convent experience. The Canon Law of the time did not allow an individual to vote for herself, so we may presume that Sister Dolores voted for Teresa, and vice versa.

At any rate, the sisters began a novena on Ascension Thursday May 5 and cast their votes on the Feast of Pentecost, May 16, 1880. The vote was a tie, three votes for each. On May 20th the sisters voted again, resulting in another tie. Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany, O.P. requested that the sisters pray some more and vote a third time on May 21st. On June 2nd word was received that there was no plurality of votes. Alemany appointed and confirmed the foundress, Sister Dolores, Superior for a term of six years. In each election after that time, until her death in 1905, Sister Dolores was clearly elected.

In 1905, until her own final illness in 1921, Sister Teresa O'Connor was elected to fill the position of Superior, although those elected as Councilors changed periodically. In 1921 Sister Gertrude Rourke became Superior for four years, a very difficult time in the young Order's history. She had to make many decisions that she knew would affect the life and future of the group. Her brief, four year administration was a pivotal one for the Congregation, for this was the period in which the Community realized that they no longer had the Founders to lean upon for wise decisions and had to begin to depend upon the wisdom and insight of the group itself.

Each elected Superior, Mother General, Superior General or President (the title always seems to be in a state of flux) has given of talent, time, and energy for the challenges facing the group: Sister Dolores Armer, Foundress and first elected head of the Community; Sister Teresa O'Connor, co-foundress; Sister Gertrude Rourke, Superior; Sister Consilio Casey, Superior; Sister Celestine Delehanty, Superior; Sister Perpetua McCarthy, Superior; Sister Maureen Hennessey, Superior; Sister Margaret Mary Nelligan, Superior; Sister Karen Stern, Congregational President; Sister Elaine Marie Sanchez, Congregational President; Sister Sharon Flannigan, Congregational President; and now, in 2007, to assume office June 17, 2007, Sister Gladys Guenther as Congregational President.

The installation of the new Administration has something of the character of New Year, Mardi Gras and the Fourth of July in its ceremonial beginnings. We see renewal of commitment and energy as part of the celebration, a period of re-evaluating and converting ourselves to the realities around us, and the joyous freedom of the Holy Spirit's explosions of possibility through our corporate choices.

The Sisters of the Holy Family have given thanks for the strong and conscientious leadership of the past and now look forward. Through vote, the Holy Spirit has called forth particular strengths and gifts to be used throughout the next four years, particular persons to call forth the future. The prayers and good wishes of the Community accompany Sisters Gladys, Judeana, Marietta and Guadalupe up the chapel aisle June 17th. Unlike the corporate world, religious women do not see election as a promotion in rank or an increase of prestige. The sisters have willingly agreed to give up many "favorite things" to be at the service of the community. May the Lord bless their gift abundantly.

