CONSTITUTIONS AND CULTURAL PROBLEMS

Southern Africans and missionary congregations

By SHEILA JOSS

AT THIS moment of history, there are severe problems for International Congregations working in Southern Africa. Central to them all, in the context of revision of constitutions, is the question whether it is possible for these congregations with their deep european roots to integrate southern african women into their communities; and if so, what degree of adaptation and flexibility would be necessary. It was already pointed out emphatically in 1969, in the celebrated Instruction on the formation of modern religious, that it was becoming increasingly difficult to promulgate suitable laws which could be applied in the same way to every Institute, not only because of their growing diversity, but because of 'the complexity of modern conditions which vary so much from place to place'.[1]

However, to identify a problem is to go a long way towards solving it. To know what is wrong, why it is being done, by whom: these facts would certainly help in considering the problems facing religious women in Southern Africa. Many of these problems arise from the complexity of the social and political history of the sub-continent. And inherent difficulties are intensified in congregations originating in the alien culture of centuries-old european Christianity.

It will come as no startling news that almost any question involving Southern Africa is bedevilled with racialism. This takes tangible form in the racial discriminatory policy of the government of South Africa. In this article, I will confine my observations to the Republic of South Africa. There are, however, many similarities in the cases of religious congregations in the independent territories of Lesotho, Swaziland, Transkei, Mozambique; whilst in Rhodesia, the brutal violence of six years of war is a tragic reminder of the dire urgency for Christ's law of love to combat hatred and disunity.

Barriers exist not only across the colour bar. When the Vicariate Apostolic of the Cape of Good Hope was erected in 1818, the greater number of the white population belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church. This was the official church of South Africa, and for many years, mutual mistrust and suspicion characterized relations between these two christian Churches. The Catholic Church has made very little progress among the Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans, who are the political leaders and policy-makers of the

[1] Cf *Renovationis Causam*, Introduction, in *Supplement to The Way*, 7 (June 1969), p 5.

country; whilst most of the white Catholics are english-speaking. At the same time, those not adhering to any christian group, but to traditional african religions, comprise twenty per cent of the total population, the largest single religious group; a surprising fact for those who assume that South Africa is by and large a 'christian' country.

Given the number and variety of factors shaping the south african scene, it must be obvious that revision of constitutions suitable for its religious congregations is not easy. And yet I think that finding ways to make these congregations more receptive (and attractive) to indigenous women might well prove an easier task than finding the answer to what many consider the crucial question: Is racial integration in religious congregations a goal to be pursued at this present moment? Such a statement may expose one to accusations of apartheid leanings. Yet it would be unrealistic (and perhaps cowardly) not to stress it; otherwise we shall fail to meet the manifest need for the Church today to adapt to cultural realities: in this case to assist black south african sisterhoods struggling to forge their identity. There may be, as yet, no clear-cut answer to this question, but unless we ask it, we might find ourselves providing answers to yesterday's questions, instead of tomorrow's.

Historically, the Catholic Church has remained a missionary Church, in the traditional sense. Founded by missioners from Europe, its liturgical expression and religious teaching have always been embodied in cultures imported from Germany, Ireland, Holland, Italy, and elsewhere on the european continent. Clergy of the other major christian bodies are predominantly indigenous (Dutch Reformed Church, one hundred per cent, Methodists, eighty-five per cent, Anglicans, sixty per cent). Yet Catholic personnel are predominantly expatriates, and eighty-five per cent of the total expatriate missionary force in the entire country are Catholics.

> Though the majority of south african Catholics are black, the Church, owing to historical factors connected with the evangelization of the country, is predominantly a western-orientated Church, under white and often expatriate leadership.
> The thrust of evangelization was from the earliest times, among black people rather than white; and there has been a remarkable growth of catholicism among black South Africans. But equally, the urgent crisis in the Catholic Church of Southern Africa is the shortage of black priests and religious.[2]

As elsewhere in the Church today, the chief apostolic task of religious congregations is to be characterized, not so much by a theology of adaptation, but of Incarnation. 'The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us'. He still

[2] *The Catechetical Situation in Southern Africa:* Report of the Conference of S.A. Bishops (1977), p 21.

dwells among his people in their dwelling places, but they need to recognize him. He still speaks in a language they can understand, but they need to hear it in homely and familiar words.

As the Council's decree on missionary activity insisted well over a decade ago:

> . . . just as happened in the Incarnation, the young Churches, which are rooted in Christ and built on the foundation of the apostles, take over all the riches of the nations which have been given to Christ as an inheritance. They borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator, manifest the grace of the Saviour, or contribute to the right ordering of christian life (*Ad Gentes*, 22).

But more recently, it has been said with truth that 'what finally counts is not the objective riches of a theology, or even the decrees of a council, but the intellectual and spiritual capacity of the Christian to assimulate it'.[3]

What does this mean in practical terms for religious women? It may seem easy enough, and also negative to say what it does not mean. Yet this must be the starting point. Wisdom is benefiting from experience, and the realities of the lived experience must be faced and examined, in order to reap the benefit. One of these realities is that the presentation of religious life has not been correctly value-orientated: non-essentials have emerged as primary values. What has been taken for granted as most essential is conformity: in dress, behaviour, thinking, feeling, even praying. Also high on the list of priorities is work and efficiency, cleanliness (especially of neatly-ironed white dresses and veils), punctuality, and the ritual observances of monastic life-patterns.

Now these are fairly common denominators of all pre-Vatican religious living, and much of the 'adaptation' has been based on eliminating these non-essentials. Yet the tragedy for indigenous religious of Southern Africa is that the dismantling of these external structures has left a vacuum. This tightly-controlled, rigidly authoritarian, militarily efficient institution was unquestioningly accepted as religious life *tout court*. This was what the white missionaries brought with them.

Woven into the fabric of the early development of black people was unquestioning acceptance of white values. As these values gradually began to be questioned in secular society, through the spread of education, thinking men and women began to examine and to apply their own cultural value-system. Within the Catholic Church, however, this did not happen. It was only after the african bishops had spoken out strongly in the Roman Synod

[3] Adolphe Razafintsalama S.J., in *Studies in the International Apostolate of Jesuits* (June 1978), p 57.

in 1974, that Pope Paul VI promulgated his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in 1975, which deals firmly with this need for a radical change of outlook:

> The individual Churches — which are involved not only with people but also with their aspirations, their wealth and their poverty, with their manner of praying and living and their outlook on the world — must make their own the substance of the evangelical message. Without any sacrifice of the essential truths, they must transpose this message into an idiom which will be understood by the people they serve and thus proclaim it.
> The Churches must make this transposition with all the judgment, care, reverence and competence which the nature of the task demands in fields relating to the sacred liturgy, to catechetics, to the formulation of theological principles, to the secondary ecclesial structures and to the ministry. When we speak of idiom, we must be understood to mean not an anthropological and cultural adaptation (63).

It was as a consequence of this, it appears, and in an attempt to redress the mistakes which have flowed from the so-called 'theology of adaptation' as applied in the past,[4] that the South African Bishops' Conference have laid down the following guidelines for development:

> It must assist the community to be aware of its identity, value-systems and potential.
> It must make it possible for the people to organize themselves; to analyse their felt needs and problems and to mobilize their resources to meet these needs.
> It must educate the people to discard the dependence complex and cultivate a sense of national pride and self-emancipation.
> It must develop enlightened leaders who will be imbued with a sense of responsibility for the uplift and guidance of their compatriots.
> It must discourage tribalism, élitism and a feeling of hopelessness.
> It must create a just society based on the principles of justice, brotherhood and universal human rights.
> It must strive for social relationships which will enhance the spirit of fair distribution and sharing of all the good things their countries can provide.

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[4] Cf Amecea Documentation Service, 11/74/2, for the following statement made at the 1974 Roman Synod; '. . . the bishops of Africa and Madagascar consider as being completely out-of-date the so-called theology of adaptation. In its stead, they adopt the theology of incarnation. The young churches of Africa and Madagascar cannot refuse to face up to this basic demand.

It must enhance the opportunities of employability and improve the quality of life in every respect.
It must attempt to motivate and animate the people to become willing collaborators in their own salvation.

Let us examine these guidelines in the context of our religious communities. At first glance they might not seem relevant. They certainly are not the language of our old constitutions, nor, probably, of our revised ones. Do we think it desirable to assist sisters to be aware of their identity? It seems to me that unless we can achieve this, we will never bring about authentic renewal. We cannot hope for a revitalization of our congregations until sisters are sufficiently aware of their personal identity as to enable them to move away from the security of traditional life and work patterns. As Paul VI expressed it: 'any living organism adapts to its environment by the development of the form and vitality proper to itself, not by rejecting its own identity'.[5] This is the heart of the matter, the core of all personal response to God: an awareness of my individual identity. I cannot believe in his personal love for me unless I can experience myself as separate from others, as having an intrinsic value just because I am who I am.

There are various sets of identity problems for religious women in South Africa. One, the more obvious, is that of the black sister. Hers is a more complex problem. She faces the aspect of her sexual identity within her own culture, and the aspect of herself as a black person in a white dominated society and Church. In traditional african culture, the woman's role is to submit. She is not expected to hold independent views on bringing up the children, nor is she asked to participate in the local tribunal of justice and decision-making presided over by the tribal chief. She is given in marriage at an early age to a man chosen by her parents, and once he has paid for her, she belongs to him. Her role in life is to provide children, to care for them, and to please her husband. These factors make it extremely difficult, sometimes indeed impossible, for a girl entering religious life to experience herself as a loving and loveable young woman, responding to God's invitation to 'come then, my love, my lovely one, come'.[6]

Black consciousness is a newly emerging phenomenon in this country. Unself-consciousness characterizes the person who is unthreatened, free to be him or herself in an environment of acceptance and love. Consciousness of self comes with any form of threat — forcing an individual to accept or to question the threatening accusations. For many years, black people accepted the assumption that they were inferior, as they found themselves penalized for not being white. Now, however, they are growing in the awareness of their dignity as human persons, made in the image and likeness of God. This awareness is essentially of self as black: but now as a basis for self-worth, instead of denigration.

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[5] Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, 51. Cf *Supplement to The Way*, 14 (Autumn 1971), p 24.
[6] Cant 2, 10.

> Black consciousness, which is the legitimate demand of the Africans to be recognized as a people with their own cultural values and heritage, capable of making their contribution to the Church and to society, has suddenly become a powerful force to be reckoned with. Unless Church leadership accepts and promotes all that is positive in black consciousness, the black people as a whole may be completely alienated.[7]

This sociological development has barely begun in religious congregations: a sad and deplorable fact that calls for a profound and honest examination of conscience on the part of every white sister in South Africa. New legislation in constitutions cannot effect the conversion of mind and heart which is crucial for the fostering and nurturing of the seed of this new life struggling for survival. However, this state of affairs does not absolve us from the responsibility of formulating ideals and values for our sisters to aspire after, as well as to search for prescriptions to make these ideals a living reality.

In practice this means asking black sisters for their opinions, encouraging them to express their needs, desires, hopes, and fears — all without threat of retribution. I have often heard retribution take the subtle form of 'after all we have done for them'. Remarks such as these induce guilt and feelings of shameful ingratitude. Just a few of the many areas requiring open and searching dialogue are theology of the vowed life, apostolic activity — both institutional or pastoral, contributory support for large and often starving families, the meaning of hospitality, liturgical expression of worship in music, song and dance, the paradox of religious poverty providing affluence.

At the first regional meeting of african sisters held in Natal last December, these issues were raised, as well as the need to discern between good and bad traditional african customs, and the need for enlightenment on sexuality. Significantly, they also questioned holding their meeting for black sisters only, and they answered it themselves: 'only when we are aware of our identity as persons, as black women, and as religious sisters, will we be able to play our role effectively in our own communities and in the Church'.

Perhaps less obvious is the identity problem of the white south african sister, who of necessity belongs to an anglo-irish or european congregation. English is the language of communication; but the interpretations and misinterpretations of english words and phrases are many and varied. Patterns of thinking, conversing, worshipping, celebrating evolve from childhood, and the influence of a traditional religious home life remains deeply rooted, whatever the missionary vision of an overseas sister coming to Africa.

'In comparison with other major christian bodies, the Catholic Church has remained too long a church of Europe'.[8] So too have international religious

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[7] *The Catechetical Situation . . .*, p 21.

[8] Report on the ETSA — 'Evangelization Today in South Africa, the questionnaire of the SACBC (South African Bishops' Conference), 1977.

congregations, not adapting themselves to the people of South Africa, but expecting the adaptation from the sisters who join them. Here again it is not possible to bring about change by legislation. What is required is a conversion of attitude, not seeing one's role solely as provider, but also as receiver; not as the master, but as the servant. Those responsible for the future of congregations must work to acquire this attitude themselves, in order to make their leadership authentic. This means establishing priorities for the use of time. The commonest complaint is that major superiors and their councillors are too busy. They are so caught up in administration that they do not have adequate time for the members of their communities. This has to change if the new constitutions are to rectify problems. No member of a provincial team can know the situation in any one community unless she has shared their life for regular and lengthy periods. But time alone is not sufficient, knowing how to use it, and wanting to use it in the most effective way is the next priority. These priorities can and should be made explicit in new constitutions.

There are other races of people searching and struggling for recognition and identity in this country: those of black and white ancestry, forming the substantial number of 'coloured' people, indian and far-eastern immigrants of many generations ago. All these people are an integral part of the heterogeneous society of South Africa, each with their own culture and richness to offer, and with their own specific problems of wanting to be fully accepted, yet experiencing themselves relegated to second- and third-class citizen status; of wanting to contribute to the growth and development of their own race, but caught up in the conflict of insecurity of identity. As religious congregations, we must substantially increase our efforts to understand and to love each one of these peoples, to witness to Christ's love for them.

After identity the programme for development refers to value-systems. A common assumption among early missionaries was that black people had no value-systems. Hence the Europeans' grim determination to impose their own way of living and worshipping as essentials of evangelization. This myth has long been exploded, but its shrapnel is still embedded in the bones of many missionary sisters. At this very moment, as we speak to them of renewal and adaptation, we are busy telling black sisters, our own and those of diocesan congregations, how to renew and adapt. And our way is not their way. Adaptation for us means discarding outmoded customs and life styles, to free us for the following of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel.[9] We have painfully learned that what was intended to bring this freedom has not done so *ipso facto*. Experience has shown us that freedom cannot be coerced; it has to grow organically. Each individual has to find her own pace, as she is challenged, retreats and moves forward; and all of this depends on an infinite variety of factors.

In South Africa, religious living is still presented as the efficient running of schools and hospitals. This has been the prime value transmitted by word

[9] Cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2a.

and action. It is a fact, of course, that education and health services are of primary value in rural areas. It is reasonable, then, for people living in these areas, who constitute the majority of the population, to accept unquestioningly that this provision of a very valuable service is the *raison d'être* of religious congregations. Girls at Catholic schools, and their families, see the positive results of this good work. In most areas, Christianity is as old as the mission school; not more than one or two generations. It is incomprehensible in this environment to talk of change. And it is inconceivable that being a sister could mean anything else than acting and living according to the blueprint of life on the mission. We are asked 'to return to our origins'. And these are *their* origins:

There *are* values in traditional african life, somewhat different from ours. People are important, not achievements. Time is for people, not for setting deadlines. The village forms a community, where no one goes in want if another can provide. The joys and sorrows of one are shared by all. These values provide the potential for cultural integration. They are, in essence, Christian. We must find the way to adapt to them, rather than demand that they be adapted to our formula of religious living.

There are other, non-christian values which must be taken into account if we are to understand our black sisters. Their law demands an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. An insult must be avenged, rights must be fought for, wrong-doers must be punished. These standards of justice inculcate in the growing child an obedience of fear, which does not easily grow into an obedience of love. Loving obedience is often rendered even more difficult because the father of a family is absent for months at a time, as a migrant worker: known to his children only as a stern and an aloof figure. Such a background causes wounds which need infinite kindness and patience to be healed. And healing is necessary to know and to accept God as a kind and loving Father.

In african society, the elders are respected for their age, and with age they acquire authority. This deeply-rooted custom may make it seem quite unreasonable for a sister who has been many years in religion to be expected to obey a young superior. Similarly, tribal pride and élitism may cause problems, where a sister of a minority tribal group is appointed superior over a community the majority of whose members belong to another tribe.

Witch-doctors are not without their influence in religious life, especially among recently converted Christians. I have known them provide medicine which will cause a superior, when her face comes out in pimples, to regret having admonished a sister. Witch-doctors claim that their medicine will ensure that the wrong-doer will not be found out or that a sister will be loved by her superior. One interesting situation arose when a particular medicine was producing a strange smell in the convent: its purpose was discovered to be for the resistance to renewal and adaptation! All the phenomena are attempting to remedy a fundamental insecurity, expressed in the need to be

loved, to stand well with the superior, to keep up appearances, and to maintain the *status quo*.

These are some of the value-conflicts which we cannot ignore in our search for cultural integration. We might do well to give thought to each one of the guidelines for development, and see how they aim at growth; growth from immature dependency to mature adult interdependence, encouraging leadership, the creative use of potential, animating and motivating people to become willing collaborators in their own salvation.

Growth always requires education, exposure to informed ideas and ideals. Education must be planned from the first contact with girls interested in our congregations. I will try to explore more fully some particular problems encountered at this stage. We were urged in *Renovationis Causam* to set higher standards of education and emotional maturity for girls entering our novitiates. This was to be done by extending the time of preparation for the novitiate, and by organizing this probation outside a house of the Institute. In practice, this meant no longer accepting girls in their early teens as recognized candidates into the provincial or formation houses, while they completed their education at the expense of the Institute. In some rural areas, these attempts to apply the recommendations of the Instruction have raised serious difficulties. Here, girls are expected to marry at an early age, and to signify their engagement by wearing a covering on their head. Girls who are waiting to enter a novitiate, without any sign of commitment, may have to deal with advances, even assault, from the young men of the neighbourhood.

The question of school fees is also problematic. The more money the family spend on a girl's education, the greater is the expectation that she repay them by supporting them and helping to educate younger brothers and sisters. She feels this to be her duty, and may often suffer a painful conflict of loyalties when she enters the convent. This conflict often continues for years; in fact, there are more than a few sisters who do hand-work or small trading of one kind or another, in order to send money home to their families.

Formation programmes are still in the melting pot. There is the paradox of congregations with greater numbers of sisters in formation being situated in segregated black areas, where there is little available to them in the way of professional expertise. While in the cities and white areas, where more help is available, the numbers are minimal. It would seem that this situation must be remedied by congregations arranging for their own black sisters to acquire the qualifications and provide the necessary doctrinal, spiritual and psychological formation. On this last point, Fr Rulla's recent research has brought to light some startling facts about religious vocations.[10] He found that four years of formation made little difference in the growth of affective maturity in the male and female who were the subjects of his study from

[10] Rulla, L.M. S.J.: *Depth Psychology and Vocation* (Chicago, 1971).

1969 to 1972 — well after the promulgation of *Perfectae Caritatis*, and coinciding with *Renovationis Causam*. Fr Rulla demonstrates the importance of the unconscious processes which frequently limit a person's capacity to respond freely to God's grace: a discovery that has far-reaching consequences for the selection and formation of candidates for religious life, as well as for the selection and training of formation personnel. It is becoming clearer that the latter should have already recognized and overcome in themselves their personal psychological difficulties and unconscious conflicts; otherwise they project them on to those in their care. Formation personnel, it appears, are also used by their charges to perpetuate the latter's unconscious conflicts. Both of these are seriously limiting factors which hitherto have escaped recognition in the area of formation.

During formation and afterwards, there are difficulties with each of the vows specific to black sisters. I have already mentioned some difficulties concerning obedience. Poverty is always a source of conflict. Paradoxically, many Africans, on becoming sisters, move from a situation of material poverty to relative affluence (for example, electricity and the plumbing which we take for granted frequently constitute affluence). The large, well-furnished, carpeted convents in which we are busily creating our own guilt-feelings are clearly a distressing counter-witness in rural areas, or in the poor districts of the urban areas. Sisters say they often find themselves separated from their own people by their western way of living. And after some years, they may find themselves ill at ease when they visit their own homes and stay among their own people. This can be even more poignant for a sister who has spent some years overseas at a university, and returns to the restrictions of South Africa. Hospitality enters into this area of concern. Unlimited numbers of friends and relatives are invited to a traditional african feast. They travel long distances, and remain for several days to enjoy the festivities with the whole community. In stark contrast, it may happen that a sister is allowed to invite only her parents to her profession: a custom which is not readily understood or accepted by the sister or her family.

Chastity is perhaps the most troublesome of the vows, usually because of inadequate sexual instruction in the novitiate and lack of understanding of the value of celibacy. It has been my experience that some white novice mistresses have failed lamentably here; and the ignorance among some black sisters reaches tragic proportions. This is all the more reprehensible because the african woman's role in her own society is to marry and bear children; so that young women called to a life of celibacy are in need of maximum knowledge and wise guidance to help them respond to this call.

To end on a concrete apostolic note: Should we be training and encouraging black sisters to administer our highly complex schools and hospitals, as the whites are gradually being edged out of black territories — the homelands? Or should we be directing them to pastoral work, where the shortage of priests has long been at crisis proportions? If so, how will they live,

who will support them? Priests and laity alike have not had to provide for sisters in the past. Money has flowed in from the rich, white Church. Now, when black sisters need to ask for a living wage, people wonder why. Many priests are reluctant to pay for the services of sisters as catechists. They still take it for granted that 'the good sisters' can live on fresh air. It is becoming ever more necessary for sisters in parish-apostolates to enter into business-like contracts with the clergy for remuneration, accommodation, and work-projects. Sadly enough, not all the clergy are above exploiting sisters, and black sisters in particular.

What all this seems to be saying is that the international congregations which aim at enrolling in their ranks persons of such a different culture, and bringing with them such a variety of problems and needs, should think carefully about all the implications. One basic question is whether their specific charisms, and traditions and life-style to which they cling, can in fact be adapted in this situation, in ways that do not crush or hinder growth in human maturity, both emotional, psychological and spiritual. Where such adaptation is thought to be feasible, there must be a great deal of flexibility, combined with a much more radical following out, in legislating and in living, of the gospel way. It is the *sequela Christi* which is the heart of the matter, and it is only when his features become recognizable in the physiognomy of any congregation that his call will be heard and his yoke found to be sweet.