# CONSTITUTIONS FOR WHOM?

By ELIZABETH MARY STRUB

I AM BEHIND my closed door, settled comfortably in an armchair, my feet up, a board across my lap for desk. Through one window of my corner room, a pastoral vista: trees — bare and evergreen superimposed one upon the other, sheep moving against the rise of a green hill; through the other window, apartments along the horizon, peopled I imagine. Traffic drones past on the nearby ring road, birds cheep in the middle distance, at a neighbouring building site a hammer chips at stone, and the space-time clock ticks into eternity.

Beyond in the city, politicians talk their way to yet another government; urban terrorists go about their business; John Paul II expects a usual day, if any day is usual for him; and so do all the people of Rome. Further afield, Iran is in convulsion; a fragile treaty tempts the Middle East; the West calculates its energy potential, newly aware that peaceful atoms can be as lethal as nuclear war.

In the face of desperation, people generally dissemble. But the post-modern experience is characterized by helplessness, hopelessness, fear, uncertainty, rootlessness, emptiness — all heightened by the acquired capacity to psychologize. In a world grown too complex, too clockwork, too sewn up by interwoven self-interests, too concealed behind appearances, many simply look to their own advantage, or they take refuge in the two-dimensional worlds of drugs, sex, drink, consumerism, endless travel, or ersatz community. The poor who can afford only reality absorb the full impact of the human predicament, hardly aware of it. When they are no longer needed to keep wheels turning, it is hoped they will go away out of sight.

Out there, separated from me by worlds, are people I could love as I love my dearest friends — persons in anguish, perhaps before a firing squad, perhaps pulling the trigger; trapped down a mine or caught in a deadly relationship. In the moment that I think of them with care we are joined, and the moment becomes significant for them, for me. God has been with each of us in the other. Meanwhile back in my house I am still behind my closed door thinking and

scratching out words. My outward journey, vicarious as it has been, sketches the composition of place, the context, for this article on constitutions.

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I have been asked to write from a personal perspective (and therefore a very limited one) about my congregation as it attempts to formulate new constitutions. I will describe not so much the process we have used but the effect of the process: questions it has raised, levels of self-understanding it has uncovered. Anything I have to say is provisional, for we are, at present, *in medias res*.

To situate my remarks, I will state our case as it stands at the moment. Each member of the congregation has received and responded to a first draft of the constitutions text. This draft, though written by one member of our constitutions commission, was extensively edited by the other members before circulation. It represents material gleaned from over one hundred personal interviews, conducted in depth by commission members; and it takes account of answers from a detailed consultation of local communities over a five-month period. Now, with responses to the draft in hand, it is evident that the community at large is dissatisfied; it is calling not simply for modifications, but for a re-writing. Even as we cope with this apparent set-back, the path ahead has in fact been clarified. By noting what was wanting in the first draft, we have identified more precisely what we are looking for in our constitutions.

Of the many practical questions we face in drafting constitutions, two in particular may be significant for other communities. First, what to do with key passages from the original rule of our foundress? The whole community has drawn inspiration and life from them and they seem to carry our essential spirit; but they are in a language markedly different from that of today. We have to choose between using or not using them; and if we use them, between letting them stand at the head of the book as a kind of spiritual foundation upon which the whole constitutional text is elaborated, or integrating them as chapter one: the definitive statement of our spirit which needs no further explanation in modern categories. In the first draft, our commission opted for the third method, with the result that many of us missed the flavour of that spirit which is uniquely ours, in the modern material which follows.

Secondly, what weight to give our renewal documents in the text of new constitutions? Between our special chapter (*Ecclesiae Sanctae*

II, 3) and the present moment, we have lived by interim documents whose words and way of describing our life have become part of us; though many would say we are just beginning to understand and live them. Younger members have been formed on them; they find there the same inspiration which older members found in the 'old rule'. To what extent can or ought we to retain parts of these documents, and what would be their effect in a new textual setting? With several exceptions, our first draft made a verbal break with our interim documents. The younger end of the community was thus challenged to the same kind of detachment the older end had to exercise in the days of the special chapter: but to what advantage? We are finding, if I am not mistaken, that adequate as new statements may be, they need the ring of the familiar to go to the heart.

I would now like to spend some time looking backwards and forwards. My congregation, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, was founded in the mid-nineteenth century by an exceptional woman, Cornelia Connelly. This is not the place to tell her story, except to say that she spent the span of her years as a religious patching together and re-patching at the cost of her life's blood a 'rule' that was never to be approved in her lifetime. So important to her was this approbation that she said she was ready to sacrifice for it some part of her dream for her community. It has been like that for many a founder. Because the history and experience of one community often throws light on another, I believe that it is worth looking more closely at what may have prompted Cornelia's persistent effort to have her constitutions approved. By imagining our way into her motivation, we can compare it with our own as we draft constitutions. Some of her driving reasons will no longer drive us; some will and others perhaps should. If we were to find new motivation to confront the task, new stamina, faith and enthusiasm — and surely the task requires them — we would not be the poorer.

Cornelia was an American who grew up in Philadelphia. Designers of the American Constitution were only one generation removed from her when she was born. In her mind, a constitution would have stood for the struggle for freedom and self-determination won, the proclamation of liberty, order, and justice under law, the status and the destiny of an established people. Whether or not her attitude toward constitutions was directly shaped by the american experience, she would not have escaped its influence. She wanted to institutionalize breadth of mind and freedom of spirit. Cornelia knew that no body was without its statutes, no religious community without

its 'rule'. She had been sent to found a congregation, so of course she would need a constitutive instrument. Early detractors looked askance at her unprecedented way of witnessing to the gospel; they said she was playing at being a nun, even as children play house. How much more easily she could have countered their aspersions with an approved text to exhibit.

I would suppose that, like many other communities of women, my own is still in a reaction phase after so many years under constraint of law perceived as control. It is difficult for some of us to see law in a positive light because we tend to associate it with the imposition of the masculine optic on our way of life. More than men religious, I believe, women identify law with standardization, regulation from without, and static models of community. Perhaps we have not thought enough about constitutions as a charter of liberties, a way we have of taking our life in our own hands, of declaring our independence from those things of which we wish to be free. I mean this in the gospel sense of living untrammelled and unencumbered.

Whatever its faults, the proposed schema of canons for religious and secular Institutes supports this view in declaring the supremacy of particular law over common law, once constitutions have been approved. Indeed, constitutions should be a protection and safeguard against pressures, even from within the Church, which might inhibit the legitimate evolution of the congregation's life, or deflect members from creatively living their particular gift. The drafting of new constitutions can be taken up as a challenge to institutionalize a new vision of life conceived as growth, to create an inviolable space for the Holy Spirit to work his alchemy at the heart of the community, so to focus the energies of the members that the power of the whole body may set up a chain reaction beyond itself.

Cornelia closely identified approval of constitutions in the strict sense with approval for her congregation in a general sense. Constitutions were seen to guarantee the right to exist and to carry on the work of the Church. They represented authority backed by the Church to administer the congregation, to require unity, to mission its members and to receive new members in view of admitting them to public vows in the Church. According to Cornelia's categories and those of her contemporaries, it was not possible for a community to be fully ecclesial without formal ecclesiastical approbation. Exactness and clarity of expectations required it.

Vatican Council II has had a transforming effect on the way religious think about themselves in the Church. The whole people

of God is called to holiness and to mission. In principle at least, the laity has moved from being the object of the Church's ministry to becoming an agent of and partner with the Church in its ministry to the world. Religious now stand either beside or behind the laity rather than above them. The sharp distinctions have been blurred as lay people and religious, especially of apostolic communities, intermingle more naturally. Religious have come to see their normal setting and place of witness as the world and not the convent. Furthermore, many new groups have sprung up since the Council, not all of them seeking ecclesiastical approbation. No longer is approval viewed as the *sine qua non* for an intense communal witness to the gospel. It is true as well that many congregations have managed quite happily in the limbo between special chapters and the drafting of new constitutions, subsisting on experimental documents, decrees and orientations. It is understandable that the sense of urgency about constitutions has abated. My own congregation exists, of course, in this climate. While we would never choose to become extra-canonical, we are at home enough with the provisional not to want to rush the constitutional project toward its conclusion. We take it too seriously for that.

When Cornelia went from Rome to England to begin her community, she was doing a new thing. She had custody of her three children, presuming that they would be allowed to remain in her care. She had been commissioned to gather companions to begin a work of education. Her sisters would not be cloistered; rather they were to 'pursue their active duties in the world'. But what Cornelia met in the way of expectations and settled patterns bore little relation to her understanding of her mission. If her project were to survive, she would need the support of Rome and a vindication of her mission as coming from the Church and not herself. The misunderstandings about constitutions which she had over the years both with bishops and with Rome deprived her of that support, and gradually took the edge off her originality in launching a new form of apostolic religious life. In this she repeated the experience of a number of other foundresses, whose scope was narrowed by the application of predetermined categories.

In our own day, religious life is reasserting its apostolic spontaneity and originality. While constitutions cannot legislate for originality, at least they can remove the hindrances to it, and by their orientation they can animate and inspire the kind of holy freedom which permits the Holy Spirit to continue to do new things.

Cornelia was a foreign national founding a community in England. She needed 'credentials' for herself and her sisters, and articles of

association which put her on an equal legal footing with other established congregations. It was important to be able to offer prospective members a way of life confirmed by the Church. These days it is becoming increasingly important to look to the legal and financial aspects of religious communities in civil society. It is our constitutions which carry our credentials and upon which our juridical status rests. The structures and modes of governance set forth in constitutions can in turn contribute in an educative way to the humanization of other social structures. In some respects religious communities are modelling for society at large, and even for the Church, new possibilities for participation and co-responsibility in governance.

Though young people who join us now are not looking for the security of an approved way to holiness, they do look for inspiration and support for their own ideals in the written statement of the community about itself. It is in the constitutions that they expect to find traces of the spiritual itinerary which they are called to follow: an authentically evangelical way of life, evidence of a global outlook and a spirit that embraces the people of the Lord's predilection. For newcomers, the *imprimatur* is not of the first importance in evaluating the community self-portrait; content, style and tone are the touchstones.

In the early years of her foundation, Cornelia sought to anchor and stabilize her young community through her own example in its midst. As the membership grew, constitutions were increasingly needed to institutionalize her direct guidance, extend her presence and enshrine her experience, sometimes painfully acquired, sometimes borrowed from other congregations. Constitutions would be a kind of surrogate foundress, capable of outliving and at the same time perpetuating her personal influence. They would smooth the path for neophytes, providing them with predictable demands, obviating costly repetition of past mistakes and experiments. Constitutions would establish patterns of behaviour to create a religious sub-culture supportive of a unique state of life. Spiritual exercises would be regulated and religious observance standardized, not with a view to curtailing freedom or initiative, but to provide a common context for the call to perfection.

Because we now live in an era when rapid change is the norm, predictability of custom or discipline is no longer a guarantee of a congregation's longevity. Flexibility is more likely to ensure survival. Nor can every detail of life be predetermined or foreseen

in legislation. It is accepted among us that standardization or the superimposition of external patterns is neither possible nor desirable. Nevertheless, a fear lurks among us that in the name of good housekeeping constitutions inadvertently turn back the clock, harness the intractable, rein in the community's evolution to a rate of change disproportionate to the world's. This fear, coloured by memories of the classical era, has cooled the enthusiasm of some for constitutional reform. Better not to 'fly to evils that we know not of'.

As a convert Cornelia needed and deeply desired the Church's assurance that she and her sisters were in a way leading to holiness. She also wanted to complete her mission by giving to the Church a congregation on which it could depend in perpetuity 'to meet the wants of the age'. Throughout her struggle to win ecclesiastical approval, she was conscious that her foundation had been mandated by the Church for its own purposes, not hers. If she wanted approval it was so that the Church might confirm its own mission *in perpetuum*.

Today perpetuity is challenged on all sides. The challenge has been abetted from within by the general supposition that charism is very closely identified with apostolic works, and apostolic works with mission. As our apostolic works, our institutions, have cracked or crumbled, we have undergone a crisis of identity. Can we remain who we are without this or that school, place, function, sphere of influence? We have been forced to conclude either that the charism is dying out and we with it, or that it is seeking a reincarnation under some other appropriate form, so that we may live and proclaim the surprises of the Lord. The idea that we justify our existence as an approved body in the Church by remaining nurses, teachers or administrators is no longer tenable. We justify our existence, present and future, by the degree to which we are available for God's purposes, by the quality of our lives, and by the degree of our participation in the ministry of Christ as people marked by a particular gift in common. Constitutions can no longer promise the Church our presence in classroom or hospital. They can tell us *how* to be present wherever we are sent.

It has become more common for apostolic religious to wonder if the life-span of their particular community is reaching its natural end. The dwindling of vocations seems to point in this direction. Once resigned to this possibility, a congregation will be hard put to it to find the rationale for perpetuity. The renewal of constitutions will have little appeal for a group which sees itself as ephemeral. In my own community, where vocations are no longer numerous, I count

even one genuine vocation as an eloquent sign from God that we are meant to do something more for the kingdom and must set our sights accordingly. To draft constitutions with a view to channelling the tradition through even one young person is to keep faith with the future and with the Lord who goes before us.

Certainly there were compelling existential reasons why Cornelia had to press for approval for her community through constitutions; but there were deeper imperatives at work as well. Though she was baptized in America, her initiation into the everyday life of the Church had taken place in Rome under the benevolent eye of Gregory XVI and the patronage of outstanding ecclesiastics and lay Catholics. The roman Church was in her convert's blood stream; it was her life-line. It mediated her experience of God and was the ambience of her religious vocation. Identification of her congregation with that Church by means of official approbation was a necessary constituent of her own vocation and that of her Society.

In the last fifteen years we have witnessed a series of sudden shifts of attitude towards the Church on the part of her members. The embattled stance, especially in english-speaking countries, led to a post-war triumphalism which began to crack before Vatican Council II. Overnight, self-examination became self-criticism, as the servant-Church took a beating from itself. For over ten years, both the nostalgic and the more liberal-minded Catholics found little to like in the Church. Some left, sick from an overdose of cynicism; some stayed to fight: some won through to better times and mellower humours.

It is not surprising that many religious who were alive to a new spirituality and theology should have found themselves at odds with a slower-moving church institution, and disposed to discount initiatives coming therefrom. More recently, there has been a climactic change induced by the Church's bold official backing of moves for social justice, and its less ambiguous identification with the multitudes in need or under oppression. The public image first of a smiling pope, then of an energetic worker-pope have combined with instances of resistance unto blood under evil régimes to create a new feeling of pride in and solidarity with the Church. It is providential that my community and others have had time to try out a whole range of attitudes toward the Church before re-writing constitutions. We are more capable now of a balanced, faith-informed stance toward the Church than we have been for years. If our constitutions can be made to reflect the point we have reached, we will find ourselves building on the ground where our foundress stood.

Cornelia spoke of the will of God as the only thing worth living for. She had to be sure she was doing what God wanted; and it was natural for her to look to the authority of the Church to confirm her. Her dialogue with the Church over constitutions was a kind of discernment — a testing of her spirit to discover if what she was hearing for her community echoed the authentic voice of the Church. If this were the case, the obvious imperative would be fidelity and constancy to a God who had made his will manifest in the 'rule'. Today, perhaps, we would not see our work on constitutions as a process of discernment within the Church. We would be more inclined to see it as an exercise in self-expression which is our right and duty. *Ecclesiae Sanctae* and the draft schema of the revised Canon Law for religious would support this position. If, however, those who approve constitutions and we who submit them were to approach the review as a discernment of what the Spirit is saying in and to the Church through our congregation, there would be a new manifestation of communion and a new stage of growth achieved.

Cornelia, like all founders, had a dream, a vision of how life in her community was to be lived, how God was to be glorified, how his people might be touched. She had a personal experience of what was to animate and inspire her sisters. Her instincts were sure, even though she was a newcomer to the Church and had no knowledge of religious life prior to her conversion. A spirited innovator, she was never quite finished mining the constitutional texts of other communities to find ideals and expressions that were at home in her own formulations. As she grew in depth of spirituality and breadth of mind, she needed new words by which to express her insights and make them available to future generations. The persistent effort to capture in words the depths she had glimpsed produced the few passages that are the unique constitutional patrimony of her congregation.

Since Cornelia's time, her sisters too have dreamed. We have struggled and worked our way through the *aggiornamento*. We have a wisdom to add to Cornelia's wisdom, and an experience which she could not have acquired. It is good that we should have an opportunity to hand it on in constitutional texts; it is illuminating to have reflected on our experience in order to transmit it. Cornelia superintended the drafting of her constitutions almost single-handed. Now the whole community is called on to enlarge the patrimony of the next generation.

It seems that the Holy Spirit compels founders to leave behind them a constitutional testament precisely because the grace they

have been given is a founding grace, meant for others. The instinct of the founder is to guide his followers in the way that he has gone, with the presumption that the Spirit gives to those drawn to a particular community graces closely resembling the founder's, with the one exception of the founding grace. From the outset, Cornelia knew herself to be foundress, charged by the Church with setting up a new community. Her task was to establish the unity of the community on a common pursuit of a common ideal, with common adherence to legitimate authority in the community. According to her understanding, only an approved constitution had the force to achieve this once she had died.

The challenge today is to recapture the conviction that God's purpose in calling us to life is greater than our hearts or minds, and that we are servants of that purpose. Having been given power to determine the shape of our own lives and the character of our ministry, we now have to motivate ourselves to put all that power to work for the One who sends us. We are a way God has, among many ways, of coming close to his people. We are the means of his mercy, the fruit of his compassion for the world. The constitutions we write will reflect this awareness of being gift for others only if we feel in our bones that we belong to the Lord for his own loving purposes. Ultimately it is not for ourselves that we write constitutions. We write them in the name of God, to further his interests and on behalf of those for whom he cares.

My door is still shut, but now the typewriter is clacking. On the other side of the door a hundred things could absorb my attention, engage my emotions. I remind myself that the Holy Spirit came to renew the face of the earth, and raised us up to help him do it. I see that the task is unfinished and that nothing is more worthy of my attention, of the energy of my being, of the concentration of my whole congregation than to get on with it because that is what God wants. He wants to renew faces and hearts, to see his own image reflected back by the world and its ways, to return his creation into the Father's hands as a revelation of himself. As we spend time writing new constitutions, let it be for this.