

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Governance Structures of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy: Becoming One by Mary Lyons

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New Books

Governance Structures of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy: Becoming One. Mary Lyons. Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press. Pp. 274. Price £69.95.

The history of religious life in the Catholic Church is one of ups and downs, starts and finishes. The ecclesiastical climate of the time of a religious congregation's foundation often marks its organisational structure, and for that reason not many religious congregations last more than two centuries without some sort of renewal. For instance, many female congregations had to be set up within the restrictive Church rules in effect at the time of their foundation, even though a foundress initially may have had something quite different in mind. This book, based on original archival material, is an erudite yet interesting study of the evolution of the governance structures of a particular female religious institute, the Sisters of Mercy, from their origins in early nineteenth-century Ireland to the situation today.

Catherine McAuley (1778-1841) was a fascinating woman of vision, who gathered about her in Dublin a group of like-minded devout women, dedicated to helping the poor. In doing this, it was not her intention to establish a religious congregation, but faced with criticism from within the Church that is what she ended up doing, founding the Sisters of Mercy in 1831. It was to be a group with simple vows and no 'enclosure', not a centralised institute, but rather having each house subject to the local diocesan bishop. So the original Rule and Constitutions adopted by Catherine McAuley and later approved by Rome in 1841 stressed the autonomy of each convent and the authority of the diocesan bishop. While this valued the apostolate of the local Church and was a highly decentralised system, it also placed the houses of her congregation in a vulnerable position in regard to the vagaries of the exercise of local episcopal power. The complete independence of each house also had implications for the training of novices. Indeed, as the Mercy Sisters spread, with new foundations throughout Ireland and right across the English-speaking world, often it was Church leaders who urged a more co-ordinated unified approach, especially given the wider societal developments in education and health-care. In the USA, amalgamations were urged in the late 19th century by the Apostolic Delegates. This book concentrates on the evolving Irish situation. In Ireland, there were five diocesan Mercy unions before Vatican II, and by 1985 each Irish diocese had such a union of houses, with a superior and diocesan chapter, thus formalising a different type of diocesan independence, while there was a looser

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national link between the various Mercy diocesan unions. However, the need for formal unification was widely felt, and in 1994, a single national congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, including overseas provinces and units, came into being. This happened after a process of consultation and discernment.

This is a well-written book, with a simple, clear, and accessible style. It is a historical study of religious life which demonstrates the interplay between canon law and evolving ecclesial needs. The author's approach is always nuanced, and she is not afraid to note newly-discovered weaknesses in the revised Mercy structures. Finally, this work indicates in a concrete way how the wider contemporary Church may have something to learn from some of the decision-making processes found in religious life since Vatican II.

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From Trent to Vatican II. *Historical and Theological Investigations.* Raymond Bulman and Fredrick Parella (eds.). Oxford University Press. Pp. 344. Price £17.99.

Voices from the Council. Michael Prendergast and M. D. Ridge (eds.). Portland, Oregon: Pastoral Press. npg.

Vatican II: Facing the 21st Century. Dermot Lane and Brendan Leahy (eds.). Dublin: Veritas. Pp. 246. Price €14.95.

These three books deal, from their various perspectives, with what is generally agreed to have been the most important religious event of the twentieth century, i.e. the Second Vatican Council, held in Rome in the autumn months of the years 1962-1965. The first volume, though published by the Oxford University Press, originates from the USA. It is a collection of essays by American scholars on the theme of the relationship of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) with Vatican II, and of comparison and contrast between them. The book provides considerable nuance to the perception that Trent was a purely dogmatic Council and Vatican II a pastoral one. We are reminded that Vatican II promulgated two Dogmatic Constitutions, and that disciplinary concerns of Trent e.g. the residence of bishops in their sees, and the provision of a well-educated clergy, were motivated by pastoral concern for the *cura animarum*. The final essay by John W. O'Malley has some enlightening material on the style of language used by the two Councils: legislative-juridical at Trent and what is described as poetic-rhetorical at Vatican II. The literary background of both types of discourse is explored, and the historical reasons outlined for the use of the different types at the respective Councils. The essay by Joseph Komanchek on 'The Council of Trent at the Second Vatican Council' is particularly informative and insightful regarding how ideas enunciated at Trent were developed and refined at Vatican II.

The second book, *Voices from the Council*, is a series of interviews with thirty-four people who were involved in the Council as bishops (e.g. Cardinal Franz Koenig) or as *periti* or staff (e.g. Gregory Baum) or theo-