

HELEN SHEAHAN, 1898-1985

Helen Sheahan was a courageous and strong woman, one of the outstanding visionary leaders of the Society of the Sacred Heart in the United States. Her full story will be told some day when the history of the changes of the last twenty years is written.

But she has already addressed us by her life and by her death. She was always a leader and a teacher. During the last seven months she has shown us how to die, lovingly, courageously. With longing and with peace, she welcomed her passage to the Lord.

When she thought that death would come soon, last November she wanted to invite her friends to a liturgy that would celebrate God's gift of eternal life. In it she included the gospel that tells the story of Bartimaeus. The blind man is urged by his friends: "Courage, get up; (Jesus) is calling you!" When Helen was told she would die soon, she accepted that knowledge as a gift from the Lord, sure that she would see the kingdom in the allotted six weeks. But the time dragged into months and she again learned the need for patience, even in matters of the ultimate. "How long do you think it will be?" she would ask. The Lord answered her longing very quietly at Oakwood, where the community had welcomed her just a week before. She died peacefully and without great pain on the evening of May 14, 1985.

We feel her presence with us now. Helen was born in Winnetka, Illinois, one of the northern suburbs of Chicago. Her father was James Sheahan and her mother Mary Gary Sheahan. Helen was the fifth child of eight. She went to school at the Sacred Heart in Lake Forest and Omaha, graduating from Duchesne College in 1918. She entered the noviceship at Kenwood on August 14, that same year. Helen had Mother Gertrude Bodkin as Mistress of Novices, and in Rome five years later Mother Manuella Vicente prepared her for profession, which she made in August, 1926.

Helen was superior in St. Joseph, MO, at Duchesne in Omaha, Sheridan Road, Chicago, in Lake Forest at the Academy and Barat College. She helped to build a new academy at Woodlands, a place she loved dearly, and moved into it as superior in 1961.

Today, we need to to share a special part of Helen's story, so that we who lived it with her will remember and rejoice. Helen had been a teacher, principal, and superior for many years when she was asked to be Provincial of the Chicago Province in 1966. She remained in that office for six years, years of turbulent change in the Society as well as for all religious orders. She was sixty-eight years old when she began her service as provincial, a time when most of us would be thinking of retirement.

Helen was particularly sensitive to what religious in the Middle West were experiencing after Vatican II. She once explained in a letter to Rome:

"I realize that ideas that are potent here in the Middle West have scarcely touched other [places] . . . Yet, in time, they always become influential everywhere. . . Many renewal movements have begun here [in Chicago] and are still evolving here. We are a pragmatic people, I suppose, and of course this environment affects our religious also. But our ideas are true and our desires sincere."

As the newly appointed Provincial, Helen attended the significant General Chapter of 1967 that began such far-reaching change in the Society. When she returned home, she called all the members of the Province together at Lake Forest (some of us will never forget that moment), and shared everything that had happened, including the story of the painful resignation of our Superior General, with its attendant grief. By that act of gathering her sisters, Helen was telling us that she trusted us to grow, to help the Society meet the challenge of a new era in its development. She said in a letter to the new Superior General in Rome in 1968:

". . . We want to conserve and to strengthen this spirit of loyal love for the Society and we believe that the best way to do this is to trust. We have seen during the past months of innovation, that trust brings forth far more maturity and responsibility and Christian concern for others than of less desirable results. . . .

Dear Mother, can you and your Council say to us: We trust you who are on the scene, closest to the situation and so most capable of judging the needs, we trust you enough to allow you to conduct this experiment as you think best?

This mark of confidence would be a tremendous spur to greater loyalty and love on the part of everyone in the province. . . Trust us and count on us to be true."

She analyzed the various groups that were emerging in the communities:

"We saw that there are three groups of persons in the Province (and in all areas considering change, but we were addressing ourselves only to this province). Group 1: These people are traditional in vision and in emotion. They are not ordinarily in positions of decision-making. Group 2: These are forward-looking in vision but traditional in emotions. They keep looking back, fear radical change, want to see ultimate results of change before accepting it, and cannot accept risk. Group 3: These persons (and they are not only the young) direct their vision to the future and are ready to take the necessary risks involved in any action which is seen to be necessary. These are the people we think we must get into positions of decision-making so that they can give the Province the forward thrust that it must adopt if we are not to lose the most gifted members of the Province, perhaps as many as fifty percent.

By gifted members I am not speaking of . . . uncommitted, immature persons but of religious who want an authentic religious life, to live in a prayerful, loving community situation, dedicated to serving the needs of the world by showing forth Christ's love in whatever apostolate they may

be engaged. These are the women, the religious, both young and older, who are the real hope of the Society today. If we lose them because of inaction, fearful half-measures, I think the Society in this country is doomed."

One story needs to be told, that of the Chicago Provincial Chapter meetings of 1970, in preparation for the crucial General Chapter of that year. It was a time of questioning and anguish. Our world seemed to be shifting under our feet, and only suffering would produce the vision necessary for the future. Helen stood up in the midst of a turbulent meeting and suggested, stated firmly as only she could do, that the structures of the Province should be dissolved so that the necessary changes could go into motion. In the light of that time it was a revolutionary act.

The COST Committee was formed, with the rather pretentious title: Committee Open to the Spirit Today. Its task was to reformulate the principles of government, in the light of present experience. The COST Committee, under Helen's leadership, held five or six meetings in various cities of the province. When Rome began to hear echoes of what was happening, Helen had to fly there to give an accounting. Excerpts from her letter, written before she left for Rome, show us a woman who was straight, clear about what was happening, and strong enough in her own convictions to believe in the good judgment of her superiors:

"At the Provincial Chapter we spent the first five days of the second session formulating the principles on which our lives as religious of the Sacred Heart must be based. We worked in three groups--Religious life, Apostolate and Government. We formulated the principles and arranged them in order of priority but when we tried to make decisions according to them we accomplished nothing.

Finally, the big obstacle became clear--we had not decided how far we were ready to go to change the status quo of our works. Many conflicting emotions were involved, and emotion, not reason, was hindering clear thinking about decisions. The main issue came into focus: are we willing to build anew or are we going to adjust the present? We decided that if we are to build for the future we must build a climate of creative leadership. It was evident during the chapter that we have much talent for leadership in the province, much of which is not being used in any position of government.

It is not, dear Mother, that we are planning a new form of Provincial government simply for the sake of change. We do want to begin our work with a completely new and free attitude of mind which will allow us to create an instrument which will enable us to live according to the principles which we have chosen as guiding principles for the future. I shall enclose a copy of these principles. This is all that we want. We want to do our part to make the Society the beautiful instrument for God's work in the world that it can be. What the new plan will be none of us has any idea. We are praying, reading, taking counsel. . ."

The Superior General had expressed her great concern that "the spirit of the Society" was endangered in the Chicago Province. Helen responded that she was sorry to hear that such rumors were being bruited about.

". . .but I really have no idea what these things that cause you anxiety may be. I would greatly appreciate your telling me. We are all living in a time of anxiety, of grave decisions, of many problems. We can only live according to our consciences, in faith and hope, with great love. I think that during our meetings we have worked toward some solutions."

Maturing processes were validated by the decisions of the General Chapter of 1970, re-shaping the Society and building anew for the future.

In these letters, Helen has expressed her own deep convictions in her own words. They illumine for us her combined openness and forthrightness, simplicity and strength. It is astonishing to hear this older religious, schooled in tradition and accustomed to responsibility, say: "What the new plan will be, none of us has any idea." She expressed the daring of youth in risking change, while at the same time she suffered deeply from the restlessness of those who wanted change to come more quickly than was prudent. Helen loved the youth of the Society and agonized over so many that left during these difficult years. The suffering deepened her but never changed that inner core of optimism and youthfulness that marked her spirit. She was to many of us sister, teacher, leader and beloved friend.

The last comment on her life should fittingly be her own, in the words of a poem she wrote:

Day Thoughts in Woodlands Chapel

Heaven seems opened.
The rosy glow of myriad sunset diffuses all the air,
Tinting the bronze of tabernacle door.
And does it soften love-etched lines of pain?
The hush of those far evenings
When God walked through all created beauty
Rests on us --
Swift glimpse of the new world which is to come.