

## Human Rights and Direct Service

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It all started with dented cans. Growing up in New Jersey, our public school asked students to bring in cans of food for the poor. I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. My parents told me to go to our cupboard and fill up two big bags of food. Anything I wanted.

I returned home next day upset that many dented cans had been donated. In those days, the metal in dented cans was considered dangerous and should be thrown out. In unison my parents said to me, "Joan, you always give your best to the poor."

Sixty years later I am asked to reflect on the topic of how Vatican II changed the mission of the Society of the Sacred Heart and how we came to address human rights and direct service to the poor.

I am a child of the '60's, a political science major and a devotee of the adage "youth can make a difference." In college as President of the Young Democrats, I organized our participation in the March on Washington in 1963. Entrance into a cloistered community of the Society of the Sacred Heart at that time appeared to be an abrupt denial of the world, a running away. Upon telling my treasured political science teacher of my decision to enter the Society, he looked me square in the eye and said, "What a waste!"

Hardly that. Although I experienced the tail end of a cloistered life with 5 hours of daily prayer, rules of silence and not leaving the grounds except for medical or educational reasons, my novice mistress allowed me to post the NY Times news on the bulletin Board when the paper was on strike so we could at least pray for the world if not living in it! She sent us among the first little band of white veiled novices to work with Fr. Howie Hubbard, latter to become Bishop of Albany, in his store front in Albany where I had my first experience of children in the cold of winter who didn't have socks.

Cloister dropped and although we could now leave the grounds to do all sorts of ministries, most of us were then serving in one of our Sacred Heart schools throughout the country. Finances in those days were weak, the schools were now competing with the finest prep and boarding schools in the country, the Society needed true salary income, not contributed services for RSCJ works so all salaries no longer supported the school budget for financial aid but went out the window. These salaries provided much needed help to support the Society's care of our elderly and those serving without salaries in direct service to the poor. Many alumnae and donors left us for other schools and we met criticism as the Society closed many schools nation wide . Causes were related to lack of financial support, low enrollment, fire code issues and resistance of some parents to our abrupt and at times too hasty racial integration our schools.

I taught and administered in Network schools and spent summers in Harlem helping schools who were directly engaged with very low income children. Often network children and alumnae joined in these endeavors. After final vows I spent a short time in Upper Egypt working with Sr. Bea Brennan in very poor Arab villages where half the children died of dysentery by the age of 5 and many became blind from flies carrying disease from camel dung. It broke my heart.

I sat on a rooftop in the village watching little girls pick the bugs off the cotton hour after hour. No schooling, no future. I resolved if I ever administered a Sacred Heart school I would never forget those little girls not would the girls in my tutelage forget them.

Over the next 32 years I was headmistress in two Sacred Heart schools in Princeton and Greenwich. We along with my sister Sacred Heart schools in the United States had robust programs for the girls to serve the poor, many workshops for faculty to understand and support diversity and raised millions of dollars for financial aid.

But we headmistresses, then all rscj running 23 Network schools across the country, often thought of ourselves as the “dinosaurs.” We felt we were on the wrong side of the gospel as the Society promulgated our mission to be a “preferential option for the poor.” We believed the students in our schools had to help build the bridge from both ends and that Madeleine Sophie’s adage from the gospel “Those to whom much is given, much is required” had to be seared deeply in their hearts and consciences.

A watershed moment came when all 23 rscj heads met with Sr. Concha Camacho our Superior General from Rome. Sr Peggy Brown a senior head speaking for us all, looked intently at Concha and said “Tell us Concha. Are our schools following the mission of the Society of the Sacred Heart. If not, we can plan ahead.....” Concha shot back with immediacy: “Our schools are central to the life of the Society. Keep them strong, continue your efforts for social justice and direct service to those in need...”

That meeting gave us “battered dinosaurs” a new life. We sharpened the Goals and Criteria, each school developed a direct reciprocal relationship with an institution supporting those in need. That link was to be on going and distinguishable to all of our institutional commitment to the poor.

The last ten years I have been overseeing inner city Catholic schools in Bridgeport, one of the poorest cities in the nation. 900 children rely on our guidance to have quality Catholic education available to them, just as the thousands in our Network schools. Whether their worries are as diverse as fear of getting shot to global warming, the call is the same.

It is still about those “dented cans.” Vatican II opened our eyes to embrace the world, not be cloistered away from it. It also firmly embedded in our hearts the call of the Church to continually open the windows and let the wind, sometimes more like a violent storm of the Holy Spirit to rush through our hearts, hallways, parishes, community life and world so as to bring fresh air and new hope. “Only give your best to the poor.”