



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Mangion, Carmen M. (2019) A new Internationalism: endeavouring to 'build from this diversity, unity', 1945-1990. *Journal of Contemporary History* 55 (3), pp. 579-601. ISSN 0022-0094.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/26551/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

### INTRODUCTION

Unity in purpose, unity in spirit, unity in administration, unity in following the Rule, unity in behaviour; in one word, unity in everything, everywhere and at all times.<sup>1</sup>

Again and again one could easily hear that each country differed much from the other. With respect and appreciation for that which is one's own, the Novice-mistresses endeavoured to build from this diversity, unity.<sup>2</sup>

Catholic women's religious institutes as religio-cultural networks increasingly crossed national borders. Often, as with religious sisters who taught and nursed, their relocation was done for the sake of evangelisation and mission. But even enclosed, contemplative nuns crossed national borders in founding new communities to expand their mission of prayer. Both modes of religious life were influenced by their international connections and transnational encounters but the meaning and consequences of their internationalism came into sharp relief from the 1940s. This article uses the example of one congregation, the Dutch Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy (*Zusters van Liefde*), to tease apart the changing understanding of religious internationalism. It analyses how internationalism was communicated and encountered on an individual and corporate level from 1945-1990.<sup>3</sup> Unity in uniformity, as reflected in the first epigraph, was a recurrent trope found in annals and in published histories and reflected in sermons and conferences of both enclosed and active religious institutes. Discourse had begun to shift by the mid twentieth century, as reflected in the second epigraph. So had praxis, but, as this article suggests, this was a more difficult and complex journey weighed down as it was by mind-sets that reified forms of cultural superiority. New understandings of internationalism acknowledged the national diversity of their membership and worked to develop unity from cultural difference through governance and interrelationships. International religious

---

<sup>1</sup> Found in Zwijsen, *Familiar Discourses*, 293-4 cited from Annemiek van der Veen and Dolly Verhoeven, *We Agreed to Be Different: Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy 1960-2000* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2005), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> 'Chapter 1964: A report of the committee meeting on "Training and Formation" held in the Netherlands Province', p. 3: Erfgoedcentrum Nederlands Kloosterleven, Sint Agatha, Archiefinventaris Zusters van Liefde (henceforth SCMM- ENK), 52.

<sup>3</sup> In considering the new internationalism, I am using the term corporate identity to reflect the institutional message being communicated by the centralising body of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy.

institutes around the world were rethinking their internationalism in response to the social consequences of post-war modernity and later, the spirit of *aggiornamento* of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

This research employs a combined methodological approach using archived documentary sources and oral testimonies. The repositories accessed, diocesan and congregation archives in England, Wales and the Netherlands, primarily hold official documents pertaining to issues of governance and in the authoritative voice of those who led the congregation. Committee meeting notes, reports and circular letters found in these archives reveal the institutional story of decisions made and only rarely hint at tensions that may have surfaced at the local community level. Convent diaries and local newsletters found primarily in local convent archives were more likely to suggest the conflicts and hostilities that should also be a part of the historical record. Oral narratives were utilised to move past the official decision-making and corporate ideals of the archived documents. They can offer more emotive and subjective meanings, and a view from those 'ordinary' sisters who would be unlikely to create corporate documents.<sup>4</sup> All this, of course, gives oral sources their value, but also leaves them open to questions of reliability, authenticity, subjectivity, marginality and representativeness. (As do, I might add, documentary sources.) The audio recordings re-used for this research were created in 2004 to support a commissioned history of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy. The interviews were not unproblematic; they were collected to contribute to a commemorative history. This explicit aim may have encouraged sisters to frame their stories in ways that underscored their loyalty to the congregation but also, as historian Marjet Derks suggests, engage with memory politics which emphasised an ahistorical past inferring sisters were overwhelmingly in favour of renewal. Derks suggests a hegemonic memory where selected groups and narratives are given more legitimacy than is warranted. Given this context, it is all the more important to interrogate the documentary sources and the oral testimonies, reading (and listening) for more diverse narratives.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> I am thankful to the Pantasaph community of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy who welcomed me into their archives and whose lunchtime conversations spurred my interest in the post-war world of religious life. They did not wish to be interviewed but permission was granted to re-use interviews gathered by Annemiek van der Veen and Dolly Verhoeven for their commissioned volume.

<sup>5</sup> Marit Monteiro, Marjet Derks and Annelies Van Heijst, 'The Stories the Religious Have Lived by since the 1960's', in *Religious Stories We Live By: Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies*, ed. by R. Ruard Ganzevoort, Haardt de Maaik and Michael Scherer-Rath (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 221–40, p. 236; Joanna Bornat, 'A Second Take: Revisiting Interviews with a Different Purpose', *Oral History*, 31 (2003), 47–53. M. E. B. Derks, 'The Gospel of the Old. Media, Gender, and the Invisible Conservative Dutch Catholic in the Long 1960s', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift Für Religions- Und Kulturgeschichte*, 104 (2010), 135–54.

Interactions between nations form the core of the usual understanding of internationalism as international relations, diplomacy and global economics. Internationalism, though, has a broader constituency, one that encompasses social, cultural and religious movements.<sup>6</sup> This expanding scope has spawned a large, growing body of literature where transnationalism and internationalism are often inter-twined.<sup>7</sup> Women have been marginalised by much of this historiography, but a growing number of studies engage with a feminist internationalist agenda which included the 'woman question' as well as political and humanitarian debates of liberal internationalisms.<sup>8</sup> This article expands our understanding of internationalism by featuring women without an explicitly feminist or political agenda negotiating how internationalism was defined, lived and experienced.<sup>9</sup> It identifies internationalism as a means to 'create international identities, and to reform society and politics by way of transnational co-operation, and the process of internationalizing cultural, political and economic practices'.<sup>10</sup> This essay interrogates the first part of this definition: the creation (or in this case study, the (re)creation) of a corporate international identity. The objective of this essay is to peel back the many layers that were specific to Anglo-Dutch interactions, while recognising that the parameters of internationalism was also dependent on relationships with other national members of the religious family of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy. This form of Catholic internationalism was part of a broader phenomenon that acknowledges the interconnectedness between these religious congregations and the social movements of a postwar Catholic and secular world.

Scholars have often interpreted internationalism as a liberal and secular project, and thus according to historian Vincent Viaene, 'social scientists on global civil society have long ignored religion, often because it did not really fit their preconceptions about what a public sphere should look like.'<sup>11</sup> He notes that even today the 'ineluctable

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann, eds., *The Mechanics of Internationalism: Culture, Society, and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Jessica Reinisch, 'Introduction: Agents of Internationalism', *Contemporary European History*, 25 (2016), 195–205. Patricia Clavin, 'Defining Transnationalism', *Contemporary European History*, 14 (2005), 421–39.

<sup>8</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton University Press, 1997); Glenda Sluga, 'Women, Feminisms and Twentieth-Century Internationalisms', in *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History*, ed. by Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Few British women religious, in this time period, acknowledged an explicitly feminist identity. Mangion, *Catholic nuns and sisters in a secular age*, Chapter 8.

<sup>10</sup> P. Wende, 'Foreword', in Geyer Paulmann, *The Mechanics of Internationalism*, p. v.

<sup>11</sup> Vincent Viaene, 'International History, Religious History, Catholic History: Perspectives for Cross-Fertilization (1830-1914)', 38:4 *European History Quarterly* (2008), pp. 578-607; S. Conrad and D. Sachsenmaier (eds), *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Akira

presence [of religion] has predominantly been construed as a challenge or a problem, if not an embarrassment'.<sup>12</sup> This belies the significance of religious internationalism to the reframing of religious identities on a world stage. Viaene, in his explanation of the nineteenth-century Catholic International, linked the decline of the Roman Catholic Church's influence in local and national politics to the globalisation of the Catholic Church. The Church's concerted efforts to strengthen religious identities and to re-assert its authority was demonstrated by stronger church hierarchies, increased doctrinal focus and a more controlled devotional culture. Viaene argued that the 'threat of secularization focused identities and disciplined structures; multiplying and mobilizing the force of organized religion'.<sup>13</sup> Another transformation of religious internationalism occurred in the last half of the twentieth century. Most emblematic of this shift was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), a global event attended by over 2,000 cardinals and theologians from all over the world and with media coverage that created 'mediagenic' Catholic priests, theologians and social scientists. As an event, and in its message of 'renewal', it sought to remain relevant in a modernising world. This case study is also framed by the evolving post-war cultural changes including those of the 'long 1960s', with its questioning of institutional structures, its democratising tendencies and its emphasis of relational links between people.<sup>14</sup>

Religious life fits neatly into both the broader understanding of internationalism and the narrower Catholic international. From the nineteenth century, the transnational engine of the Catholic International was the armies of male and female religious that traversed the globe to recruit and form 'good' Catholics via the building of a Catholic infrastructure of schools and hospitals. The crossing of national borders was a usual feature of these networked religious communities. Religious institutes became international as a result of their expansionist strategies. Unlike many of the organisations discussed in internationalist histories, they were not national organisations that came together under an international umbrella with internationalist aims.<sup>15</sup> Their internationalism was a by-product of

---

Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (University of California Press, 2002), pp. 2-5.

<sup>12</sup> Abigail Green and Vincent Viaene, eds., *Religious Internationalists in the Modern World: Globalization and Faith Communities since 1750* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Vincent Viaene, 'International History, Religious History, Catholic History: Perspectives for Cross-Fertilization (1830—1914)', *European History Quarterly*, 38 (2008), 578–607, p. 584.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Jonathan Harwood, 'National Styles in Science: Genetics in Germany and the United States between the World Wars', *Isis* (1987), 390–414; Christine von Oertzen, *Science, Gender, and Internationalism:*

their growth not a purposeful coming together. Very explicitly, Catholic religious institutes minimised national and cultural identities emphasising a corporate identity that bound sisters of different national identities together. The governance and interrelationships between women religious was often dominated by the national identity of the motherhouse especially in centralised religious institutes. In the last half of the twentieth century, many religious institutes took their first steps to moving from a universalist model of religious life that equated unity with uniformity to a more pluralist model that acknowledged cultural diversity. Articulating this ideal was an important step; but to live it in practice was more difficult. As religious institutes began to engage more fully with the diversity of the members of their own religious families, they permitted local customs, liturgical practices and even governance. This reflected a more dynamic transnational model of religious life, one where transmission, connection and exchange become more lived, explicit and multi-directional. This transformation was accompanied by a variety of emotional responses: from excitement to resentment and almost always the discomfort of radical change. As this research will demonstrate, the recognition of cultural diversity was much easier than addressing its dissonance.

This article explores how the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy reworked 'being' international scrutinising alterations in discourse and praxis from both the centre (the motherhouse) and periphery (the British houses). The first section illustrates the transition from an internationalism based on uniformity to one that was grounded in pluriformity highlighting the discourse of the new style of internationalism. The sisters self-identified as 'citizens of the world'<sup>16</sup> and such shifts were necessary to remain relevant to a modernising world. The second and third sections examine praxis, the attempt to 'build from this diversity, unity' through participatory and consultative governance and an emphasis on communication and encounter. The final section underscores the reception of these changes, and places in high relief local British dissonance.

---

*Women's Academic Networks, 1917-1955* (New York: Springer, 2016); Davide Rodogno, Bernhard Struck and Jakob Vogel eds., *Shaping the Transnational Sphere: Experts, Networks and Issues from the 1840s to the 1930s* (Berghahn Books, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> 'Reflections on the Meeting between the General Board and the Provincial Board of the Netherlands, Rome, March 11<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> 1974': SCMM-ENK, 79.

## FROM UNIFORMITY TO PLURIFORMITY

### Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy

The Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy were founded in Tilburg in 1832 by parish priest (later bishop) Joannes Zwijsen (1794-1877) along with Maria Leijsen (1779-1852), later Mother M. Michaël.<sup>17</sup> The congregation's growth in the Netherlands was nothing less than meteoric. Twenty-seven foundations were created in its first twenty years. Expansion outside of the Netherlands began experimentally, first in 1840 with an 'Annex' in Belgium. In the 1860s, the Dutch Sisters of Charity expanded to England and Wales (1861), the United States (1874), and then to the Dutch colonies of Indonesia (1885) and Surinam (1894). By the end of the nineteenth century, there were 2,724 sisters.<sup>18</sup> The next spurt of international growth, in the 1950s and 1960s, was to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) (1957), Germany (1961), Brazil (1962) and the Philippines (1966). Throughout this geographic expansion, the congregation remained linked by the Dutch language, Dutch traditions and a Dutch charism. It was also numerically Dutch. By the 1960s, of 3,800 sisters, 84 per cent of them were born in the Netherlands.<sup>19</sup> Novices travelled to Tilburg for some (if not all) of their formation as religious sisters and much of the leadership of the non-Dutch communities remained in Dutch hands until the 1960s.<sup>20</sup> This was a model of centralisation found in numerous religious congregations.

By the 1930s, the tenor of Dutch Catholicism had changed from the separateness of a minority sect (35-40 per cent of the population) to a 'dynamic and vital socio-religious system'. Pius XI's *Hollandia docet* (Holland leads the way), reflected the prominence of Dutch Catholicism particularly in the mission field. Women's labour was integral to *Hollandia docet* both at home and abroad. The Sisters of Charity were the largest of the 168 religious institutes in the Netherlands by 1900. Their growth was spurred on by the Dutch Catholic church's need of women's labour: they ministered as nurses and teachers, managing hospitals, parish schools and specialist institutions such as schools for the deaf. By the 1940s, the numbers of entrants had declined and the average age of sisters within convents increased.<sup>21</sup> The largest class of novices, 155 in all, were in place in 1938. The numbers of professed sisters reached

---

<sup>17</sup> Alix van de Molengraft, *It all began with three beguines: History of Ten Thousand Sisters of Charity, 1932-1964* (Preston: Nemco Press, 1992), p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Molengraft, *It all began with three beguines*, pp. 220-4.

<sup>19</sup> Van der Veen and Verhoeven, *We Agreed to Be Different*, p. 338.

<sup>20</sup> During the first and second world war, special arrangements were made for professions in Britain and a temporary novitiate in Pantasaph. At the end of both wars, the novitiate returned to Tilburg. Van der Veen and Verhoeven, *We Agreed to be Different*, pp. 34-8.

<sup>21</sup> Jan Roes and Hans de Valk, 'A World Apart? Religious Orders and Congregations in the Netherlands' in *Religious Institutes in Western Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. by Jan De Maeyer, Sophie Leplae and Joachim Schmiedl (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004), pp. 135-62, p. 141, 145, 150.

an all-time high in 1950, at 3,951 and by 1962 had dropped to 3,447.<sup>22</sup> Scholars have posited numerous reasons for declining vocations: the new Dutch welfare state had taken responsibility for education, health care and social welfare; overseas missionary activities became more localised; others point to the demise of the 'Catholic pillar' and the deterioration of a Catholic identity.<sup>23</sup> The 'why' of this decline is less pertinent for this essay than the responses of the Holy See and the Dutch Sisters of Charity.<sup>24</sup> The awareness of decline was not limited to the Netherlands. Europe was also facing a 'crisis' of vocations. Religious communities were, like many social groups, unsettled (both literally and figuratively) by wartime upheavals and austerities. This phenomenon was addressed in various ways. Pope Pius XII's apostolic constitution *Sponsa Christi* (1950) and subsequent international congresses advocated modernisation of women's religious institutes. In December 1955, the Holy See assigned an *assistens religiosus*, sociologist and Carmelite Jan van Galen, to 'support' the sisters in their 'renewal' of religious life, this 'modernisation' was a means of 'adapting the[ir] way of living, governing and working' to the modern world.<sup>25</sup> Van Galen was initially the driving force of change but his ideas were championed by renewal-oriented, more educated sisters and by 1964, the new General Superior, her council and many of the newly appointed provincial superiors embraced a modernising agenda.<sup>26</sup> By this time, modernisation was linked to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), a worldwide ecumenical council aimed at the spiritual renewal of the Church. It introduced a new vocabulary to religious lexicon: *aggiornamento*, *ressourcement*, collegiality and experimentation. These words were intended to encourage clerics, laity and religious to rethink the essence of the aims and objectives of Catholicism. Religious life, and female religious life in particular, re-made itself in ways that swept away much of what was familiar to insiders and outsiders of religious life. Renewal was a source of new-found energy for some, but for others, loss, of what

---

<sup>22</sup> Molengraft, *It all began with three beguines*, pp. 221-2.

<sup>23</sup> Roes and de Valk, 'A World Apart?', p. 143; Carla Risseeuw, Rajni Palriwala, and Kamala Ganesh, eds., *Care, Culture and Citizenship: Revisiting the Politics of the Dutch Welfare State* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2005), pp. 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> Annelies van Heijst, Marjet Derks, and Marit Monteiro, *Ex caritate: Kloosterleven, apostolaat en nieuwe spirit van actieve vrouwelijke religieuzen in Nederland in de 19de en 20ste eeuw* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2010), p. 52.

<sup>25</sup> Van der Veen and Verhoeven, *We Agreed to be Different*, p. 45. There was (and is) much debate on what 'renewal' meant precisely. Most argued it meant rethinking the communicating and living of Gospel values in ways that were accessible to the modern world. Some interpreted this as an impetuous 'catching up' with the times that did not critique the cultures of modernity. Others saw renewal as a panacea for all the challenges faced by religious institutes, in particular the issue of declining numbers of entrants.

<sup>26</sup> 'History of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy' by Sister Thérèse Quant, SCMM (1972?), p. 28: SCMM-ENK: 1780. Renewal in the 1950s was more modest than renewal after the Second Vatican Council. For a rather optimistic sociological study see John A. Coleman, *Evolution of Dutch Catholicism, 1958-1974* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). For more on 'progressive' Dutch nuns see Derks, 'The Gospel of the Old'.



they had known, believed, understood and loved about their vocation and about their Church. The Dutch Church with its enthusiastic bishops and theologians was pivotal to *aggiornamento* in the Netherlands; though many had 'traditionalist' sympathies, what played out on the world stage was their ultra-progressive stance.<sup>27</sup> The shifts in internationalism occurred at the time of great change, spurred by both the decline in religious vocations and the impetus of renewal.

The Dutch General Council in Tilburg began to relinquish some control over everyday life in their convents. This led to dramatic changes in the look and feel of religious life within individual communities. Modification to daily life began slowly in the 1950s when sisters were allowed annual visits to their family and dorm rooms were fitted with electric lights and washbasins. In 1955, the religious habit was altered for the first time; subsequent alterations were made in the 1960s and sisters were free to wear a religious habit or secular clothing by the end of the 1960s.<sup>28</sup> With regards to their religious ministry, some of the educational and health care institutions which competed with similar establishments managed by the state sector were perceived as redundant and closed.<sup>29</sup> Sisters were encouraged by the Dutch Church and the Holy See to address unmet social needs especially in the overseas mission field. This re-focus of ministry resulted in significant upheaval, and was met with enthusiasm as well as discord. A series of three histories commissioned by the Dutch Sisters of Charity reveal solidarity with this aims, but also the divisions between clergy and sisters; between Dutch and non-Dutch sisters and between sisters within individual communities.<sup>30</sup> As the analysis of the relationship between the Dutch motherhouse and the British convents make clear, modernisation brought into high relief changing understandings of religious life. This shift in understanding of internationalism occurs within the context of a changing Catholic and secular world.

### Unity as uniformity

The history of the Dutch Sisters of Charity in Britain was modest compared to the spectacular growth in the Netherlands. On 17 September 1861, Mother Syncletica (Joanna Maria) Smarius (1827-1897) and four sisters arrived in rural Pantasaph, Wales. By the end of the nineteenth century, 51 sisters resided in three convents that managed

---

<sup>27</sup> John A. Coleman, *Evolution of Dutch Catholicism, 1958-1974* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 1-2; Michel van der Plas and Henk Suer (eds), *Those Dutch Catholics* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967); Derks, 'The Gospel of the Old'.

<sup>28</sup> Bernadette Steele, Dolores Heys and Marie Wallbank, 'The History of the Sisters of Charity of our Lady Mother of Mercy in Britain and Ireland 1861 to 1982' (1998), p. 69: SCMM-ENK: 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Convent closures were also influenced by the declining numbers of sisters.

<sup>30</sup> Molengraaf, *It all began with three beguines*; Jan Brouwers, *It Did Not End with Three Beguines: History of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy: Foundations outside the Netherlands* ('s-Hertogenbosch: Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy, 2001) and Van der Veen and Verhoeven, *We Agreed to be Different*.

orphanages, parish and boarding schools and a hospital. In 1962, there were 97 sisters in four convents.<sup>31</sup> The small numbers of entrants in England and Wales was always a concern.<sup>32</sup> Sister Bernadette Steele in her 1998 history of the English Province reported that women shrank from entering their congregation because it was so Dutch.<sup>33</sup> Until 1960, novices were trained and professed in the Netherlands and were expected to have at least a working knowledge of the Dutch language. Despite the congregation's international expansion, the motherhouse insisted that only Dutch sisters could convey the original spirit of the congregation. Convents were often managed by superiors from the Netherlands which re-enforced the dominance of the Dutch language within British convents.<sup>34</sup> The material culture and customs of British convent life contained a strong Dutch element: sisters ate their meals with plates and cutlery that were identical to those in Dutch convents; they folded their religious habits in the same manner as their Dutch sisters before going to bed.<sup>35</sup> Convents in England and Wales celebrated Dutch national events: The Pantasaph annalist recorded the celebration of the 1938 birth of Beatrix (the first child of Princess Juliana and Prince Bernhard) and a decade later the coronation of Princess Juliana.<sup>36</sup> Dutch sisters in convents in Britain would likely have accepted British national celebrations; but they certainly would not have occurred in the Netherlands. Dutchness was not simply a matter of practice, but it was a moral category that emphasised Dutch superiority. Such practices echoed the discourse of unity enshrined in Zwijsen's *Familiar Discourses* (1847): 'Unity in purpose, unity in spirit, unity in administration, unity in following the Rule, unity in behaviour; in one word, unity in everything, everywhere and at all times.'<sup>37</sup> Uniformity was the glue of the definition of internationalism and was unquestioned by the leadership and sisters of the congregation. This was not unique to the Dutch Sisters of Charity. It was a ubiquitous characteristic of centralised women's congregations for very practical reasons.<sup>38</sup> It eased the load of managing such large organisations. When sisters were moved by the motherhouse from one community to another, it reduced some of the burden of assimilation. And, as Susan O'Brien has found from her work on the

---

<sup>31</sup> Figures are calculated from the 1901 census. The four convents were: Pantasaph, Preston, Dartford and Orpington.

<sup>32</sup> Brouwers, *It Did Not End with Three Beguines*, pp. 14-5.

<sup>33</sup> Steele et al, *History: SCMM-ENK*, 2006. In most documents, the province is referred to as the 'English Province' which is misleading as the founding community (with the largest numbers of sisters) was located in Pantasaph, Wales. There were also Irish-born sisters in the 'English' province and in 1977, a house in Limerick was opened. I have opted to refer to the British province to acknowledge that not all identities were English.

<sup>34</sup> Steele, *History*, p. 108: SCMM-ENK, 2006.; Van der Veen and Verhoeven, *We Agreed to be Different*, p. 47.

<sup>35</sup> The material culture of the Sisters' lives is displayed at the Museum Zusters van Liefde in Tilburg, the Netherlands.

<sup>36</sup> Pantasaph Diary (1861-1961): Archives of the British Province of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy (henceforth SCMM-P).

<sup>37</sup> Found in Zwijsen, *Familiar Discourses*, 293-4 cited from Van der Veen and Verhoeven, *We Agreed to be Different*, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> Mangion, *Catholic nuns and sisters in a secular age, Britain 1945-1990*, Chapter 6.

French-founded Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul, it also expanded personal identity. Uniformity strengthened international connections with easily-imagined communities of Daughters of Charity in faraway places.<sup>39</sup>

### Towards unity as pluriformity

By the 1960s, the Dutch Sisters of Charity were openly discussing the cracks found in the unity of uniformity: they suggested that the 'inward bond' between sisters was lacking. In her commentary of the 1964 Chapter, the General Superior Wilhelme de Jong remarked:

We learned to do everything in the same way, working, eating, praying, having recreation, indeed dressing and undressing. This gave rise to an external uniformity. In addition, the superior preferred all the sisters always to follow all the community exercises. Indeed, the sisters were always together. But outward uniformity does not always mean that there exists an inward bond between the members, that they form a real unity.<sup>40</sup>

Such uniformity ran counter to the sixties age of individuality.<sup>41</sup> Though religious institutes did not embrace such modern values as 'doing your own thing', the *zeitgeist* of the time militated against unthinking uniformity and towards greater flexibility in how religious life was lived.<sup>42</sup> In its search for an authentic unity, the General Council questioned the terms of an internationalism that relied on uniformity to Dutch traditions. Uniformity was rejected in favour of a unity that underscored cultural difference and linked to a new understanding of internationalism. Jan van Galen asked 'What would Christ mean NOW with our term internationalization"?' He suggested a scriptural consideration of 'internationalization' where sisters moved past governance structures to 'strive for one great human community [sic] in Christ'.<sup>43</sup> By the end of the 1960s, the General Council of the Dutch Sisters of Charity explicitly rejected the uniformity that had been the linchpin of their corporate identity as internationals and replaced it with pluriformity.

---

<sup>39</sup> Susan O'Brien, *Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul: Catholic sisters and the mission of the Church in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (2017), pp. 115-132.

<sup>40</sup> 'Conference on the General Chapter' [1964] by Wilhelme de Jong, General Superior: SCMM-ENK, 52.

<sup>41</sup> Marwick, *The Sixties*, pp. 45.

<sup>42</sup> For the Dutch context see Erik Sengers, "'Although We Are Catholic, We Are Dutch"—The Transition of the Dutch Catholic Church from Sect to Church as an Explanation for Its Growth and Decline', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 43 (2004), 129–139, pp. 136-7. For more on individualization of Dutch religion see Anton van Harskamp, 'Simply Astounding: Ongoing Secularization in the Netherlands?' in *The Dutch and Their Gods: Secularization and Transformation of Religion in the Netherlands Since 1950*, ed. by Erik Sengers (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> 'The Chapter Report of 1969-70': SCMM-ENK, 80.

Pluriformity offered a *volte-face* after almost two centuries of centralising legislation emphasising uniformity as a means of reinforcing the universality of the Catholic Church. It suggested that 'unchangeable faith' could be achieved through diverse cultural traditions and acknowledged national Catholicisms.<sup>44</sup> Its cautious unveiling in early conciliar texts reflected the hesitant awareness of a unity of religious plurality with local Catholic identities embedded in indigenous cultural traditions, customs and rituals.<sup>45</sup> In 1975, pluriformity was embedded in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and it became a duty; evangelisation and mission incorporated a respect for indigenous cultures.<sup>46</sup> Catholic internationalism became more vibrant after the Second Vatican Council becoming a 'nongovernmental force for global social and political transformation' incorporating both lay movements and religious institutes.<sup>47</sup>

The Dutch Sisters of Charity embraced the term pluriformity in transforming the internal dynamics of their organization. Chapter reports, meeting and correspondence addressed understandings of internationalism. Though most sisters were Dutch, they were also Belgian, English, Irish, American, Indonesian, Surinamese; and recently opened convents welcomed Africans, Germans, Brazilians and Filipinos. Unity on a deeper, spiritual level, it was explained, could be found in pluriformity: 'We leave more room for pluriformity. We should encourage each province and region to become more Dutch, more American, more Indonesian, etc.'<sup>48</sup> Theoretically, this discourse offered flexibility in line with national preferences. In the General Chapter of 1964, General Superior Wilhelme de Jong suggested that African sisters could sing the litany in honour of Our Lady rather than say rosary.<sup>49</sup> In echoing the political language of the time, Sister Thérèse Quant writing in 1972 identified with the significance of pluriformity by exclaiming: 'Solidarity in Pluriformity!'<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> The concept of pluriformity had developed out of discussions of the tensions between the independence of local churches and the Holy See's insistence on uniformity.

<sup>45</sup> Particularly in *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Liberty) (1964). R. Scott Appleby, 'From State to Civil Society and Back Again: The Catholic Church as Transnational Actor, 1965-2005', in *Religious Internationals in the Modern World: Globalization and Faith Communities since 1750*, ed. by Vincent Viaene and Abigail Green (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 319–42, p. 321

<sup>46</sup> Walter Bühlmann, 'Incarnating the Message of Christ in Different Cultures', in *A New Missionary Era*, ed. by Pdraig Flanagan (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), pp. 174–80; Appleby, 'From State to Civil Society', p. 321.

<sup>47</sup> Appleby, 'From State to Civil Society', pp. 319-20.

<sup>48</sup> 'Meeting with Father Mehr (Procurator General - Crosier Fathers)', 31 January 1972: SCMM-ENK, 80.

<sup>49</sup> 'Conference on the General Chapter' [1964] by Wilhelme de Jong, p. 2: SCMM-ENK, 52.

<sup>50</sup> 'History of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy' by Sister Thérèse Quant, SCMM (1972?), p. 22: SCMM-ENK, 1780.

On a discursive level, the concept of pluriformity expanded the meaning of internationalism and replaced the uniformity that had been the bedrock of unity for the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy. But putting these ideals in practice was difficult. The discrepancy between theory and practice was reflected in the painful process of working towards pluriformity. In January 1971 Provincial Superior of England and Wales Ignatius (Maud) Stirzaker exhorted:

May this year see us growing towards a greater understanding of the principles laid down in the chapter - namely - pluriformity, subsidiarity, internationalization. Not only should we understand these principles, but should try to put them into practice... Let us all try, sisters.<sup>51</sup>

This next two sections address Stirzaker's plaintive plea 'Let us all try, sisters' by demonstrating some of the ways pluriformity and internationalism were put into practice and both welcomed and resisted.

## **PARTICIPATORY AND CONSULTATIVE GOVERNANCE**

New governance structures were needed to reflect this revamped understanding of internationalism. The larger cultural impetus for participative democracy of the long 1960s (and particularly '1968') could be seen in the Vatican Council's call for collegiality which was interpreted as decision-making based on consensus and collaboration rather than authoritative structures often linked to hierarchical or clerical relationships. Historian John O'Malley calls this collegiality the 'lightening rod' at the Council.<sup>52</sup> Vatican Council documents also encouraged a more shared role and responsibilities of 'being Church' between the ordained and the laity with an emphasis on the 'People of God' sharing in evangelisation.<sup>53</sup> Many women's religious institutes translated these cultural and ecclesial influences into more participative styles of governance and experimentation (sometimes radical, sometimes cautious) in managing

---

<sup>51</sup> 'Internationalisation' by Sr Lea Vandickelen, 28 June 1976: SCMM-ENK, 80. The concept of subsidiarity suggested that decisions would be made at the appropriate level. In theory, this meant local decisions would be made locally and decisions that impacted a province would be made by a provincial body. On an individual level, this meant that individuals tasked to complete a job would be responsible for its completion. It reduced interactions and interference from higher authorities.

<sup>52</sup> John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 163.

<sup>53</sup> Patrick Pasture, 'Christendom and the Legacy of the Sixties: Between the Secular City and the Age of Aquarius', *Revue d'histoire Ecclesiastique*, 99 (2004), 82–117, p. 85.

convents and religious institutes was commonplace in convents all over the world. This did not occur without backlash, from the Holy See, diocesan bishops and sometimes sisters.<sup>54</sup>

From its foundation in 1832, the General Council of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy consisted of the Superior General and her council of four residing in Tilburg. This was a simple, direct, top-down authoritative hierarchy without intermediate layers of authority. The Superior General and her General Council were typically Dutch-born.<sup>55</sup> The new internationalism, with its emphasis on pluriformity required more consultation and participation from Dutch and non-Dutch sisters and aimed at new ways of governing. The key means of instituting consultative practices was through decentralisation. The quasi-provinces of the United States (from 1956), Belgium, England, the Netherlands (all from 1958) were formally instituted as provinces with provincial councils in 1961.<sup>56</sup> One of the aims was to 'bring out more clearly the unique characteristics of the sisters of a certain country'.<sup>57</sup> The houses of England and Wales became a province under the leadership of Provincial Superior Mother Ignatius (Maud) Stirzaker and her four councillors. This was decentralisation in name rather than function; initially, the Provincial Team were tasked to execute the decisions of the General Chapter.<sup>58</sup> Later, they were given limited (but expanding) provincial authority and independence in making routine decisions that involved the British communities. The province would eventually manage the formation of the postulants and novices, financial administration and daily living; all functions that had previously belonged to the General Council. The division into provinces was explained to the sisters as a directive from the Holy See meant to encourage a more cultural expression of religious life:

because every person and every country could then show itself to better advantage. Every nation has its own, that which belongs only to its own country, its religious life, in speech, science and

---

<sup>54</sup> Permission was given by the Holy See to change *ad experimentum* the norms contained in its Constitutions with the caveat that the 'aims, the nature and the character of the institute is not altered' (*Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae*, 1967). The Decree *Ad instituenda experimenta* (1970) granted faculties to religious institutes to make these decisions rather than ask for approval by the Holy See. In 1971, Paul VI responded to the 'anxiety, uncertainty and instability' shown by some with the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio* where he simultaneously reiterated 'Adaptations must be made' but he also warned against 'the boldness of arbitrary transformations, an exaggerated distrust of the past'. Of course, bishops exerted pressures on religious congregations especially on diocesan institutes. Mangion, *Catholic nuns and sisters in a secular age*, Chapter 4.

<sup>55</sup> The first non-Dutch sister to be elected onto the Council was the English-born Agnes McKinley.

<sup>56</sup> 'Development of Autonomy in the Provinces 1961-1987' by Thérèse Mary Barnett, January 1988: SCMM-ENK, 2678.

<sup>57</sup> 'Internationalisation' undated: SCMM-ENK, 80.

<sup>58</sup> Steele, Heys and Wallbank, 'The History of the Sisters of Charity': SCMM-ENK, 2006.

culture. Every country has its own way of living, its own cachet, in intercourse with people. In short ever country has its diversity of possibilities, which must be given a chance to develop.<sup>59</sup>

Franciscan Capuchin Father Malachy in his sermon at the centenary celebration of the founding of Pantasaph in 1961 suggested that such decentralisation was crucial to 'progress':

And now about the future. A religious congregation is a living thing. It must develop, it must progress or alternately deteriorate, and die. Your order realised this and therefore, the General Council has made you, given you Provincial Status in order that for your own national convenience you may be able to operate more easily for the Church and according to the needs of the time.<sup>60</sup>

By using the term 'national convenience', Malachy intuits that though members of a Dutch congregation, the sisters would meet the needs of Church in England and Wales. In this expression, the new internationalism was linked to national circumstances. Often international organisations develop from national groups which united to achieve internationalist aims.<sup>61</sup> Religious congregations operated differently. The internationalism of a congregation like the Sisters of Charity had been reliant on one national culture, in this case a Dutch one. The new internationalism introduced the national culture and customs and re-interpreted corporate objectives to meet the needs of 'national convenience' through de-centralisation and eventually self-management through local national leadership.

This reframing towards a national authority structure was not embraced by all sisters. The report of the 1966 Provincial Chapter rationalised their discomfort: 'This meant a breaking away, in a certain sense, from Holland and from the Motherhouse where most of the sisters had received their training.' Some sisters described feeling cut-off and abandoned.<sup>62</sup> In addition, the desire to include all the sisters in the provincial and local decision-making process was not always welcomed. Sisters expressed feeling overwhelmed by the numerous and often long-winded reports they were expected to read (coming from the motherhouse as well as the province) and time-consuming collaborative decision-making was seen to take valuable time away from their ministries.<sup>63</sup> One change coming out

---

<sup>59</sup> 'Chapter 1964 Report of Activities Term of Government 1958-1964', p. 1: SCMM-ENK, 52.

<sup>60</sup> 'Sermon preached by the very Reverend Father Malachy O.F.M. CAP on the Occasion of the Centenary of St Clare's Convent, Pantasaph - 1861-1961', p. 3: SCMM-P.

<sup>61</sup> Rupp, *Worlds of Women*.

<sup>62</sup> 'Report of the Provincial Chapter 1966', pp. 9-10: SCMM-ENK, 1273.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to All the Sisters of the English Province from Provincial Superior Sister Marie Wallbank dated 15 June 1976. She suggests 'If there are sisters who feel they are getting bogged down with pink papers you are quite at liberty to

of decentralisation was welcomed wholeheartedly: local leadership. One English sister recalled 'once we got a Dutch superior who couldn't speak one word of English; she suffered and we suffered'.<sup>64</sup> Sisters welcomed local leadership with enthusiasm. One interviewee enthused: 'The first superior I had was Dutch and she was great, I really liked her very much. But when an English superior came along, we said: "oh, we've got one of our own!"'<sup>65</sup>

In 1969 the unthinkable happened: the first non-Dutch General Superior was elected. English woman Thérèse Mary Barnett had entered the Sisters of Charity in the 1930s at age 17. She became an adept Dutch speaker when in the novitiate and was hand-picked in 1966 by General Superior Wilhelme de Jong to join the General Council.<sup>66</sup> She was elected in 1969 after the sudden death of De Jong and was *au courant* with De Jong's aims of renewal. One English sister suggested she was a safe pair of hands, someone likely to continue the thrust of renewal.<sup>67</sup> Her election was a political one in a congregation that was riven by disagreement at the speed of renewal. Electing her signalled an important move towards internationalism, as she was already an insider in a progressive circle that was advocating renewal. Barnett followed the path that de Jong had initiated. She instituted further changes in the governance structure at the level of the General Council by creating new committees that broadened the base of consultation and shared the load of governing. From 1970, the newly created bodies included the International Consultative Body and the International Communications Committee. In 1976, the International Congregational Contacts committee was established. Non-Dutch members of the congregation became part of this larger inner circle of decision-makers.<sup>68</sup> Though welcomed as a means of increasing consultation and participation, these new bodies added layers of bureaucracy to a previously very simple governance structure. Making decisions became more unwieldy. Resentment materialized at the local level. At a time of declining numbers, it appeared more sisters were being sucked into a growing bureaucratic apparatus.

The new internationalism embraced decentralisation and new governance structures became more participatory and consultative. Decentralisation distributed decision-making to the provinces and regions, encouraged local leadership and increased participation of ordinary sisters. This process reduced the influence of the Netherlands on

---

destroy the other two drafts which are a paler pink than this one....'. In her interview she states 'People are tired of my meetings. All those meetings, meetings, meetings.' : SCMM-ENK, 332.

<sup>64</sup> SCMM 001 interviewed by Annemiek van der Veen (2003).

<sup>65</sup> SCMM 002 interviewed by Annemiek van der Veen (2003).

<sup>66</sup> SCMM 003 interviewed by Annemiek van der Veen (2003).

<sup>67</sup> SCMM 004 interviewed by Annemiek van der Veen (2003).

<sup>68</sup> International committees were originally replicated at the provincial level but this proved cumbersome and, in some cases, unnecessary.



the British (and other) provinces and regions.<sup>69</sup> But, even with a more pluriform General Council with an English woman at the helm, a renewal-centred Dutch influence remained powerful in both formal and informal structures and changes were not always enthusiastically welcomed in the British Province. Not all sisters were anxious to participate in decision-making. The new consultative bodies and the proliferation of local meetings diverted much needed resources away from the mission of the congregation.

## COMMUNICATION AND ENCOUNTER

The new committees not only provided for participatory and consultative governance but also offered the second means of implementing internationalism, by encouraging 'communication and encounter'.<sup>70</sup> This new internationalism was intended to be centred on a unity embedded in mutual trust and interrelationships rather than through the authority of a Dutch General Council. The report from the 1985 Consultative Bodies mentioned above indicated in its introduction: 'Never before were the members of Consultative Bodies at all levels of the Congregation invited to share their lives as Sisters of Charity in the context of their own cultural world.'<sup>71</sup> Committees encouraged personal and working relationships between sisters of different national identities.

Interrelationships were to be built through personal contact. The Provincial team encouraged sisters to correspond with members of other provinces and accept invitations to visit. Sisters were expected to break down barriers which hindered unity and develop relationships in order to encourage 'true communication', remove 'negative attitudes' and encounter diverse mentalities'.<sup>72</sup> Sisters of Charity were urged to share their private lives by engaging in correspondence and visiting each other to encourage cultural and interpersonal ties with the aim of unity.<sup>73</sup> The General Chapter of 1964 anticipated that by 'Promoting unity of spirit by mutual contact',

They will then be no longer strangers to each other and form no longer wrong judgments of each other. For instance, would a Batak Sister be inferior as a religious, because as an Indonesian she has no idea of time and therefore has difficulty with the daily horarium which lives by minutes?<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> 'Spirituality' Chapter III, undated: SCMM-ENK, 52.

<sup>70</sup> 'Internationalisation', p. 3: SCMM-ENK, 80.

<sup>71</sup> 'Report from Consultative Bodies Meeting July-August 1985 Part I', November 1985: : SCMM-ENK, 1244.

<sup>72</sup> 'Sisters of Charity Now and in the Future', 1986: SCMM-ENK, 1273.

<sup>73</sup> This directive was welcomed by many, but contradicted how older sisters had been trained. Many religious communities, including the Dutch Sisters of Charity had forbidden 'particular friendships' and valorised emotional distancing as part of the vow of chastity.

<sup>74</sup> 'Notes on "Report of the General Chapter 1964"': SCMM-ENK, 332a.

The letter above emphasises the elimination of ‘wrong judgments’ but still highlights cultural tropes: Indonesian sisters had ‘no idea of time’. Though suggesting acceptance, this excerpt foregrounds cultural difference and suggests a Dutch superiority embedded in European attitudes towards colonial encounters and racial hierarchies.<sup>75</sup> It reflects how the Catholic Church’s relationship to the non-European world and a more diverse European religious landscape was in flux in the last half of the twentieth century due to geopolitical shifts and the questioning of the meanings of universality and a ‘church for all’.<sup>76</sup>

The parameters of internationalism were dependent on the tenor of national relationship. In the British context, implementation of ‘communication and encounter’ emphasised the perception of the Dutch as bulwarks of Catholicism (*Hollandia docet*). Prior to 1960 (with the exception of during the first and second world war), novices had travelled to Tilburg for their novitiate. In 1960, the province operated its own novitiate and suggested that after the profession ceremony, ‘brides’ should travel to the Netherlands, ‘in order to make acquaintance of the Motherhouse and the different works of the Congregation’.<sup>77</sup> The provincial leadership team also developed more direct contacts. One sister noted ‘I was in Holland in ‘63 for a short time to get some ideas ... I got sort of some help there to understand something of what was happening’.<sup>78</sup> The former General Superior Thérèse Mary Barnett suggested that visits from older sisters to Holland ‘renewed for them their links with the Motherhouse and memories of their early years in the Congregation’. Visits from Dutch and American sisters were observed as ‘bringing new contacts and strengthening the bond of unity’.<sup>79</sup> Another means of re-enforcing internationalism was through correspondence:

Our first step towards internationalization has been the putting up of world maps in most of our communities; all our young sisters are eagerly awaiting replies to their request for penfriends in various parts of the congregation. Immediately there has been a greater interest in articles which

---

<sup>75</sup> Indonesia was part of the Dutch East Indies until it declared its independence in 1945.

<sup>76</sup> Patrick Pasture, ‘Religious Globalisation in Post-War Europe. Spiritual Connections and Interactions’, *Archiv Für Sozialgeschichte*, 51 (2011), 63–108, p. 71; Néstor Medina, *Christianity, Empire and the Spirit: (Re)Configuring Faith and the Cultural* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 254-310; Pasture, ‘Christendom and the Legacy of the Sixties’, pp. 87-90.

<sup>77</sup> ‘Notes on “Report of the General Chapter 1964”’: SCMM-ENK, 332a.

<sup>78</sup> SCMM 003 interviewed by Annemiek van der Veen (2004).

<sup>79</sup> ‘Report on the Three Months April to June 1989’ for the General Council from the English Province by Thérèse Mary Barnett, July 1989. There was no mention, at least in the 1970s and 1980s, of Indonesian or Belgian visitors to Britain perhaps because there were fewer direct links to these communities: SCMM-ENK, 2708.

have been published in the different magazines and which relate to our mission areas ... We should like to thank the American sisters for their news-letter [...]<sup>80</sup>

Penfriends were an alternative means of creating links between sisters of different national identities, particularly between the younger sisters. There is some irony, though, in that when the common novitiate in the Netherlands was replaced with national novitiates, it removed one means of linking together Sisters of Charity of different national contexts.

The magazine mentioned above was one of a series of new publications circulated from the 1960s within many religious institutes. They were meant as a means of communicating and exchanging news locally and nationally as well as internationally. In the Province of England and Wales, the functionally-named *English Province News-letter* (renamed *Meeting Point* in 1971 and *The Beam* in 1978) was published from 1964. Four to eight page newsletters issued four to five times a year sought to explain the changing nature of religious life with articles that reported on convent study days, considered issues of renewal and offered personal reflections. Some articles emphasised the links to the Dutch motherhouse. Sister Teresinie Rimmer's 'My visit to Holland' was one of many that recounted a novitiate reunion. Rimmer was explicit about the differences in how religious life was lived within the congregation but she implied that notwithstanding these differences unity existed:

Despite differences in dress and interpretation of religious life I must say that all the sisters work very hard[,] pray hard and put their heart and soul in what they do, their faith, love for each other and their spirituality is very deep and great.<sup>81</sup>

Written by members of British province, articles were intended as a means of promoting commitment to the international congregation as well as reinforce a sense of belonging. The newsletters were distributed to the communities in England and Wales but also found their way to Tilburg, and, likely, to other English-speaking countries. The sharing of newsletters among the English language communities was another means of (re)connecting to the (now) less easily imagined international community of Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy.

The efforts towards communication and encounter offered another means to foster relationships between sisters (especially younger sisters) by broadening horizons and encouraging relationships amongst women of different

---

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Sisters Maud, Bernadette, Anne Marie, Marie to Sister Richarde dated 9 February 1970: SCMM-ENK, 333a.

<sup>81</sup> *English Province Newsletter*, 'My Visit to Holland' by Teresinie Rimmer, May 1970, pp. 3-4: SCMM-ENK, 1728.

nationalities. It encouraged a further development of the new internationalism of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy.

## RECEPTION

This final section highlights how this new internationalism was received by the British communities. Three intertwined issues are integral to understanding its reception by the British sisters. First, the process of renewal was engineered from the top. It was thrust on the sisters first by Jan van Galen as *assistens religious*, and then taken on board by the new General Council in 1964.<sup>82</sup> Despite the discourse of pluriformity, the British community received unilateral directives from the motherhouse in the Netherlands with regards to renewal. Second, the culture of obedience was integral to the early reception of these changes. The Dutch Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy acknowledged the diversity and the internationalism of their wide-spread congregation. Yet, old mindsets that derived from over a century of religious centralism that valued obedience and the authority of the General Council in decision-making, remained persistent. This can be partly explained by Dutch numerical dominance but also by an institutional culture that was not so easily shaken off. Third, and most strikingly, was the persistent emphasis on cultural differences.

Internationalism and pluriformity were presented to local communities by the General Council as objects of study and discussion.<sup>83</sup> Study days were seen necessary in Britain as communities were riven with internal conflicts: not all sisters welcomed all aspects of renewal. Pluriformity, in theory at least, offered a means of neutralising fundamental conflicts on how renewal would be enacted by proposing a way of 'opting out' or at least mitigating some of the diktats coming from the General Council. The British provincial team, writing to General Council member Sister Michael Marie Keyes explained that after having discussed the outcomes of the 1969 Chapter with each community the

[...] concept of pluriformity made [a] greatest impression and allayed some of [the] fears that all sisters would be expected to adopt the new mentality propounded through all the Chapter papers. We found this fear particularly in the older sisters and this caused much apprehension and distress. Now that we have assured them that the principle of pluriformity will enable each and every sister

---

<sup>82</sup> 'Vergaderingen met Pater van Galen', Lecture notes from 4 June 1956: : SCMM-ENK, 813.

<sup>83</sup> The General Council consisted of the Superior General (from 1961 renamed the General Superior) and four assistants elected at a chapter meeting every six years. Van der Veen and Verhoeven, *We Agreed to be Different*, pp. 27, 55.

to interpret her particular vocation in the way which seems best suited to her age and circumstances, there is greater peace and tranquillity.<sup>84</sup>

Archival documents and oral testimonies hint that permission to experiment with small communities, personal and experimental prayer and further modifications to the religious habit were of concern. Institutional documents suggest the progressiveness of renewal experiments whilst diminishing dissent and labelling those who questioned such experiments as 'negative' from holding on to old ways.

Pluriformity, at least in theory, now allowed for an acceptance of national differences. But, there were limits. This 1965 letter from General Superior Wilhelme de Jong to Sister Bernard Vigar conveyed a mixed message:

You wonder that the Dutch sisters seem to find you different. My dear Sister Bernard, you have the right to be different, because you are English. Even if you will have the same opinions, ideas and spirit as the Dutch sisters you will live them in your English way. The same thing we observed in America. It is very nice to see that this difference is possible in our Congregation. Perhaps you think that the renewal of the General Chapter is still difficult for some English sisters. In Holland too some sisters think the renewal is too difficult for them. But we have to try to be patient. By talking about the renewal, bij [sic] good conferences, etc., the sisters will learn the good renewal.<sup>85</sup>

De Jong suggested that cultural difference was acceptable, but was it really? She assumed that, like the Dutch sisters who found renewal difficult, British sisters would fall in line and 'learn the good renewal'. The General Council acknowledged they needed to be patient; but sisters were expected to accept that a 'good renewal' was in line with the mandates of the General Council.

These tensions were not simply between the English and the Dutch. Other provinces and regions within the Sisters of Charity found renewal difficult. Some members of the United States province split and formed a separate religious congregation.<sup>86</sup> Belgian recalcitrance was interpreted as the Belgian sisters being too 'work orientated' and in opposition to 'real renewal'. General Superior Thérèse Mary Barnett responded: 'they have a right to be Belgian, they have the right to go in their own direction but within the framework of the congregation and as members of the

---

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Sr Maud, Sr Bernadette, Sr Anne Marie and Sr Marie to Sister Michael Marie [Keyes] dated 9 Feb 1970: SCMM-ENK, 342.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Morder Wilhelme to Sister Bernard dated 25 June 1965: SCMM-ENK, 333a.

<sup>86</sup> Van der Veen and Verhoeven, *We Agreed to be Different*, pp. 98-105.

congregation'.<sup>87</sup> Despite the General Council's progressive renewal with its new provincial structure and the ideals of pluriformity, larger decisions were still made in the Netherlands though through a more international General Council. One English sister revealed:

Some of us had the feeling that the general chapter had spoken and that we, since we belonged to a Dutch congregation, had to obey. We were pleased with the abolition of a number of convent customs, though the change from the long habit to the short in 1966 did cause some unrest in the province, since we had worn the adapted habit of 1955 for only ten years, and we were the only congregation in Britain to make such changes.<sup>88</sup>

This top-down approach meant that despite new lines of authority, the mind-set of the sisters in England and Wales remained centred on 'obedience'. Sister Marie Wallbank in 1965 talking about experimentation declared: 'So we said well, it's come from Holland and we have to do what Holland wants. So that didn't pull down very well. But eventually we came around and accepted it.'<sup>89</sup> The annalist writing in February 1966 echoed this sentiment:

All the Superiors were summoned to the Motherhouse in Holland to discuss the change of habit, and to receive instructions on it. It was a marked change compared with former days, but it has got to be accepted.

And when the modernized habit was received in August 1966, the same annalist stated: 'It was accepted with mixed feelings, but obedience triumphed'.<sup>90</sup> Despite the move to a provincial leadership led by British sisters that was meant to allow for the expression of cultural norms, the General Council expected obedience and British sisters, well versed in the discourse of 'holy obedience', reluctantly complied to the Council decrees.

In documents as well as oral histories, national characteristics were emphasised and thought to influence the reception of renewal: the Dutch were seen as 'progressive' and the English as 'slow'. Dutch Sister Willibalde Rademaker, on her visit to the convents in England and Wales to discuss upcoming changes, identified national differences of opinion about renewal. She reports that in Preston, Sister Bernadette Steele was enthusiastic about renewal and wanted more contact with the Netherlands because she thought it was necessary 'for England'. In Rademaker's notes and other internal documents, England was consistently represented as 'backward'. Even English

---

<sup>87</sup> 'General Board meeting', 1 May 1972: SCMM-ENK, 80.

<sup>88</sup> Molengraft, *It all began with three beguines*, pp. 191, 198.

<sup>89</sup> 'Verslag v/h Werkbezoek van Zr. Willibalde aan de Engelse Provincie', 30 October 1965: SCMM-ENK, 98.

<sup>90</sup> Preston Diary (1872-1974), pp. 299-300: SCMM-P.

sisters noted differences: 'Now in Holland, they were blowing the clouds away before the rest of the church was. And they had a very advanced policy. And we arrived from this country, which is more traditional [...]'.<sup>91</sup>

Renewal was not always seen in a favourable light. The community in Orpington was concerned that Dutch 'progressive' policies would lead to a sort of 'lawlessness' in religious life. The British sisters disapproved of 'extremes' of experimentation within the Dutch Province and what they perceived as the Dutch sisters' freedom to try anything. The 1965 visitation report closed with the Dutch visitor's comment that renewal (*vernieuwing*) and adaptation (*aanpassing*) were occurring slowly in England and that 'One has to keep in mind the specific nature of the country'.<sup>92</sup> Even British sisters supportive of renewal were sometimes stunned at how quickly experimentation was implemented. Sister Marie Wallbank recalling the 1969 chapter, indicated they were given permission to experiment with the habit after the first session; they returned after Easter for the second session and

all the Dutch sisters were just in ordinary clothes, with earrings and everything else. And we got such a shock! Because I think the English were intending to keep the law very much. And we thought we could experiment, not come in lay dress and we didn't like it. We were still in the habit [...] And then you see I think we were one of the first congregations in England to experiment anyway. And we had a bishop in North Wales from Pantasaph and he couldn't understand why we wanted to change everything.<sup>93</sup>

It was not just the local bishop who was critical; Cardinal of Westminster John Carmel Heenan spoke derisively about 'the gospel of Holland'.<sup>94</sup> Writing about Catholicism in England after the Second Vatican Council in the 1970s, sociologist Michael Hornsby-Smith acknowledged the slow pace of post-conciliar change.<sup>95</sup> Traditional attitudes were often blamed on a conservative ecclesiastical hierarchy:

---

<sup>91</sup> SCMM 003 interviewed by Annemiek van der Veen (2004).

<sup>92</sup> SCMM-ENK: 'Verslag v/h Werkbezoek van Zr. Willibalde san de Engelse Provincie', 30 October 1965: SCMM-ENK, 98.

<sup>93</sup> SCMM 004 interviewed by Annemiek van der Veen (2003).

<sup>94</sup> 'Verslag v/h Werkbezoek van Zr. Willibalde aan de Engelse Provincie', 30 October 1965; 'Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Council of Major Religious Superiors held at the convent of La Sainte Union, Highgate, on 5th and 6th March, 1965': SCMM-ENK, 98.

<sup>95</sup> M.P. Hornsby-Smith, *Tradition and Change in the Roman Catholic Community in England* (London: SSRC, 1977).

The attitude of the English Church affects the sisters strongly. The very slow adaptation of customs, etc. within the English Church, the attitude of Bishops, clergy and laity to religious and the absence of much real contact with like-minded religious all make renewal difficult.<sup>96</sup>

Some sisters felt judged: one sister recollected that 'Other congregations looked down on us and thought we were ready for hell-fire ... specially the Irish. They are very traditional, the Irish.'<sup>97</sup>

The emphasis on internationalism, which encompassed the revision of governance structures and the encouragement of interrelationships, assumed an acceptance of the aims of renewal as defined by the General Council. The top-down decision-making, the mind-set of obedience and the recurring cultural stereotyping that posited the Dutch as 'progressive' and the England as 'slow', were contrary to the ideal of internationalism that was being promulgated.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the process of (re)creating a corporate international identity, the General Council of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy discursively moved from a Dutch-centric model of internationalism embedded in uniformity to a model that recognised the value of nationality based on unity in diversity. The General Council took practical steps to encourage this new form of internationalism fostering participation and consultation through new governance structures which allowed more input from non-Dutch members of the congregation. Efforts towards communication and encounter were encouraged to build relationship and understandings of cultural difference. The reception of these ideals of internationalism was aided by a conventual mind-set that was trained in obedience. But this was a two-edged sword and the new internationalism, in some ways, fell short of their ambitions. The rhetoric of unity from pluriformity was easier in theory than in practice. The ideal of inclusiveness was offset by the cumbersome mechanisms of governance. Deeply-felt objections about the pace of renewal and the changes it required were voiced by concerned sisters. Discontented constituencies remained wedded to the traditions of religious life. They voiced their disapproval through insisting they had no choice but to obey and heralding the Dutch as 'progressive'. There were ironies throughout. The motherhouse had a central role in promulgating internationalism, despite its aims at decentralisation. This 'new internationalism' recognised the significance of the national; internationalism promoted 'national convenience' and the rise of local power though the motherhouse remained the site where knowledge was produced and where policies were developed, negotiated, influenced and dispersed. Internationalism, of course, had its limits. It was ultimately dependent on a hierarchy of relationships

---

<sup>96</sup> 'Reflections on the Meeting between the General Board and the Provincial Board of the Netherlands, Rome, March 11<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> 1974': SCMM-ENK, 79.

<sup>97</sup> SCMM 004 interviewed by Annemiek van der Veen (2004).



with the Dutch as the dominant actor; and remained reliant on cultural stereotyping. Perhaps not unexpectedly, conflict and community travelled together.<sup>98</sup>

The Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother of Mercy were not alone in their struggles to move from an internationalism of uniformity to one of pluriformity. In some ways they were exceptional: the persistent numerical dominance of Dutch sisters led to a strong emphasis of Dutch traditions and customs. Yet, they were part of a larger movement of international religious institutes around the world rethinking their internationalism by adapting themselves to local circumstances, encouraging more local decision-making and increasing participation and active responsibility.<sup>99</sup> Many congregations questioned the value of unity as uniformity, chose decentralisation as a means to encourage more consultation and participation and promoted communication and encounter as a means of encouraging more unity. And they too faced similar challenges of dissent and discord. This new internationalism offered new structures, but reproduced power relations that remained (for a time at least) autocratic and expected obedience to the diktats from a central authority. Reception of a new internationalism was difficult given that the participation was antithetical to how the majority of sisters had lived their lives. Despite its limitations and the challenging of implementation, 'being' international did eventually come to mean something new. It led to transnational exchanges via revised practices of governance that were both consultative and participatory and that were attentive to communication and encounters. It paved the way for a rethinking of religious life that transformed what it meant to be an international religious congregation. Importantly, it acknowledged, the difficult and complex journey travelled by religious in negotiating a world between tradition and modernisation. This case study of religious internationalism broadens our understanding of internationalist thoughts and actions, reminding us that despite opportunities for social interactions, inequalities of power remained. It places female agents at its centre: women's religious institutes were also rethinking their internationalism as a feature of their corporate identity. 'Being' international was a precursor to the 'doing' of internationalism. These internationalist activities did not occur in a vacuum, they were aligned to the larger social movements of the post-war Catholic and secular world.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

<sup>98</sup> Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, p. 6

<sup>99</sup> John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 140.