

# Unexpected Adaptability: The Cenacle Sisters Navigate Changing Times

by Jere Pfister

*It is not the strongest of the species that survives nor the most intelligent, but rather the one most responsive to change.*

—Charles Darwin

A group of Roman Catholic Sisters has greatly influenced most of my adult life by teaching me to meet life's challenges head on. Their example of acceptance of life's realities served as an important guide in my struggle to find meaning as I confronted a world and life that demanded changes in my thinking and ways of being. It may seem unexpected to use the word adaptation and begin an article about a congregation of religious women with a quote from Charles Darwin, but read on to learn about this exceptional group of women.<sup>1</sup>

I first met the Cenacle Sisters at their retreat center in New Orleans in 1961. I was twenty years old, already married for a year, and struggling to find my role in life. I had concerns about being a better Catholic and a good wife. A miscarriage earlier that year caused me great sadness in a world that said, "Don't cry, you'll have plenty of babies." But I knew that this one baby was my specific loss. I needed a place to grieve and learn to trust again.

The retreat was silent. The sisters' religious clothing included pleated caps that surrounded their faces and long



Srs. Rosemary Reid and Elizabeth Mozina welcome two guests for a regular weekend retreat made possible by the opening of the new Cenacle Retreat Center in 1968.

Photo courtesy of Cenacle Sisters.

veils that trailed down their backs. They looked mysterious as they moved in silent strides and appeared to hover like gentle spirits over the floor. Their long black skirts barely rippled as they moved forward with their short purple capes covering almost immovable shoulders. The sisters sat in a special part of the chapel for the Mass and other times of prayer called the Divine Office.<sup>2</sup> The only man at the retreat was the rather stern priest who gave talks, said the Mass, and served communion. The sisters spoke very little. I found peace and order in the house and gardens—a place apart, a place to heal from the loss of my first pregnancy and to nurture the longing for order and peace in my life apart from my husband and friends.

In 1987, when I arrived for my first weekend experience at the Houston Cenacle Retreat Center, the sisters greeting me were dressed in blouses with skirts or slacks. I wanted to know more about these sisters, grounded now in sturdy Birkenstocks and SAS tie shoes. Though they wore no makeup or earrings, they had fashionable hair styles. Their only identifiable sign as Religious was the

small gold cross all the sisters wore pinned to their lapels or hung from a gold chain around their necks. The Cenacle Sisters worldwide wear a simple hammered gold square cross with “I came to cast fire upon the earth. Luke 12:49” engraved on the back.

Learning to recognize that particular cross took a while. It took me longer to realize that identifying who was a sister held no relevance for them or me, and longer still to see that they remained as intriguing in secular garb as they had been in those long dresses that gave the illusion of levitation.<sup>3</sup>

In 1996, I began an oral history project with the Cenacle Sisters to capture what many describe as a dying culture. They proved to be natural storytellers. But as I listened and interviewed and dug, I discovered a group of women very much a part of the present culture as they consciously and deliberately allowed their community to evolve into whatever the times and place demanded.

Sr. Emily Katz, one of the first sisters interviewed, was in her eighties, trim and fit with a firm body that she exercised regularly in a health club pool. She had a long Middle-Eastern nose with a slight hook, and she delighted in introducing herself to people by announcing she was born a Jew. Her father was Jewish; her mother, an Irish Catholic, died when Emily was still a child. In her early teen years, she was baptized at her own request. Her favorite stories centered around her childhood and her friend Hannah who introduced her to God.

Sadly, Emily had begun to show the classic signs of dementia by 1996. She made lists to remind herself of her day’s activities; but her sense of humor remained intact and she seemed incapable of feeling sorry for herself. As I verified her stories with the other sisters, they would tell wonderful new stories about the Sr. Katz who had headed Cenacle Houses in the East and was educated at Fordham University. She made friends throughout Houston through her connections to the C. G. Jung Center, and the Theresians as well as the Cenacle.<sup>4</sup>

One of Sr. Emily’s lay friends told me the following story, which demonstrated the sister’s openness and desire to help others:

*I was only forty-five, the mother of five children who were still way too young to have me die. I had just had a radical mastectomy. The year was 1985. After surgery, the doctor had been reassuring . . . that he had removed all of the cancer, but I was devastated. There had been so little time to prepare myself. I knew Sister Emily from the Theresians. She entered very quietly and pulled the curtain around my bed. She did this very strange thing. She began to unbutton her blouse.*

*“Now Dear, I know you’re afraid and worried about how you are going to look now. Most people don’t know this, but I had a mastectomy too. I remember the way my imagination played on me. ‘What will it look like?’”*

*Opening her blouse and removing her bra, she said, “Look darling, it’s not bad. See how the scars have healed. Is that so ugly?”<sup>5</sup>*

Sr. Emily had a passion for God. From early childhood, she sought to know this stranger. As she learned about Him, she grew to love God with an intensity that allowed

her to be comfortable with herself. That gift of love and acceptance of self seems to be the common attribute of the Cenacle Sisters. When Sr. Emily Katz died in 2007, she was remembered as a woman who loved to laugh and led by example.

The name Cenacle refers to the “upper room” where tradition says Jesus and his disciples celebrated the last supper, and where Mary and the other women and friends and followers aided in prayer and instruction after the resurrection and ascension. Here the Holy Spirit came to empower the disciples with knowledge of their mission in this life. Since their early founding days, the Cenacle sisters sought to provide such a place for women seeking that same spirit in their lives.

A young laywoman, Marie-Victoire Couderc, later Therese, and Fr. Stephen Terme at La Louvesc in the French Alps, founded the Sisters of the Congregation of the Cenacle in 1826.<sup>6</sup> In the beginnings of the congregation, their mission filled a simple need, to provide women a safe place to lodge while on pilgrimage to the holy shrines dotting the landscape. Gradually the community built retreat houses throughout the world. The growth of the Cenacle paralleled the emancipation of women.<sup>7</sup>

In 1955, a small contingent of sisters, dressed in traditional religious habits of the time, arrived in Houston at the invitation of Bishop Wendelin Nold.<sup>8</sup> The Cenacle Sisters, known on the East Coast and Midwest for work in the cat-



*At the groundbreaking of the new Cenacle Retreat Center on Kirkwood in 1966, Srs. Dorothy Irvin Superior of Houston, Ida Barlow (holding shovel), and Rita Foy, and Bishop John L. Morkovsky.*

Photo courtesy of Cenacle Sisters.





*Dressed in the modified habits of the late sixties, the sisters pose at the newly finished Center on Kirkwood. Seated are Srs. Jackie Baker, Rosemary Reid, Petra Arredondo, and Emily Katz. Standing, Srs. Celina Schulte, Jean Murdock, Catherine Quinn, Roseanne Cronin, Elizabeth Mozina, and Mary Dennison.*

*Photo courtesy of Cenacle Sisters.*

echesis of children, and the spiritual and religious formation of women who came to their houses, accepted his invitation.

Bishop Nold, feeling a sense of urgency over the rapid growth of Houston and its Catholic population as well as the growing popularity of the Catholic Women's Retreat Movement, invited the sisters to establish a house in Houston. Because of the Church's rapid growth, Nold and later Bishops John L. Morkovsky and Joseph Fiorenza realized the newly established parishes would need catechists educated in the tenets of faith and capable of accessing their spiritual roots to train lay volunteers.<sup>9</sup>

On arrival, the sisters needed a temporary home. Bishop Nold provided an old home in Arcola, Texas, south of Houston, which was part of the Scanlan family estate. While the house and property looked beautiful, the structure had little space for the large retreats provided in other Cenacle locations. They built a small chapel, and Catholic women began coming for days of prayer and other programs as an introduction to the spirituality of the Cenacle.<sup>10</sup>

In those early years, the University of St. Thomas offered a dormitory as a temporary retreat center during summer break. Houston's Catholic women filled every retreat. They stayed in the un-air-conditioned dorm and brought their own linens and fans.

In 1959, a new pope, John XXIII, announced the second Vatican Council. He used the metaphor of opening a window for fresh air to help the Catholic Church address the changing needs of the post modern world. As Catholics studied the theological and spiritual questions the Council

raised, they began realizing the extent to which the changes demanded a collaborative view of church, demanding greater responsibility and collaboration on the part of the laity. The Cenacle sisters were instrumental in providing education and reflection on the Vatican II documents as Houston's laity sought to understand the unfolding changes.

Feeling the proper time had arrived, the sisters procured a site on North Kirkwood in the Memorial area, nestled between a suburban neighborhood and a wide easement of land that runs along Buffalo Bayou. The generosity of many Catholic women and families and funds from the Cenacle's United States province finally enabled the sisters to build. In 1967, they opened the new facility with several public and private meeting rooms, a small chapel, and the ability to sleep forty-eight guests. With the larger space and growing interest in spirituality, the retreats now opened to women and men.

In the early 1950s, Pope Pius invited leaders of the men and women's religious communities to Rome. He asked them "to revitalize their communities and to enhance the theological and professional credentials for those teaching and doing other professional work." He also called for "the elimination of outdated customs and clothing that estranged them from those they served."<sup>11</sup>

The sisters of the Cenacle, under the direction and guidance of Pius and later John XXIII, as well as the fathers of Vatican II, listened to their own leanings and modified their habits. They did this for practical reasons but largely to remind people that the Religious were very much in the



secular world and that all people are holy. This evolution in thinking and changing dress took time and did not occur without conflict.

In a 1971 St. Louis Globe interview, Cenacle Sister Margaret Byrne addressed the criticism by some clergy who claimed that the “changes in the religious women — making the community rules less stringent — were nothing more than polishing the sinking ship.” In response to the sinking ship, she said that a “distinction should be made between the religious communities as large social organizations such we have seen as effective in the past few centuries and communities of committed Christians...serving the real needs of the contemporary world.”<sup>12</sup>

The changes called for discernment as the sisters studied to know how to make the changes this time of transition required. Like so many women, the sisters found that returning to school and entering the work world brought further adjustments to their lives.

Sisters Elizabeth Mozina and Mary Dennison took jobs

in the Diocesan Confraternity of Christian Doctrine office. They trained catechists and religious education boards. Sr. Dennison worked there from 1964 to 1970 and then joined the University of Saint Thomas faculty to work in the Masters of Religious Education (MRE) program set up in conjunction with the Catholic Diocese. Her primary duties were to train directors of religious education. During this time, she earned a doctorate in education from the University of Houston.

In 1984, Sr. Dennison became the associate director of the MRE program, which had expanded to include liturgical ministers, youth ministers, and social ministers as well as spiritual directors. In 1985, the Diocesan CCE Office created the Spiritual Direction Institute (SDI), located at the Cenacle Retreat Center, to train spiritual directors.

Although the graduate program closed in 1992, the SDI continues. With the class of 2008, 395 women and men had graduated from the program. The sisters had not limited the Cenacle retreats and programs to women for a number of years. The classes have become more ecumenical over the years, with twenty to twenty-five percent of graduates representing religions other than Roman Catholic. As an outgrowth of the Houston SDI, Episcopalians and Methodists developed similar training programs.<sup>13</sup>

Sr. Elizabeth Mozina, a Cenacle Sister for more than fifty years, was instrumental in updating and presenting a popular spiritual seminar, Effective Living, that fostered personal growth psychologically and spiritually. Since her death in 2009, the program continues under the direction of the sisters and staff.

As the Cenacle sisters age and their numbers decline, they have tried to prepare for the future by sharing responsibility for running the houses with trained laity. In 1997, the Cenacle's Provincial House in Chicago collaborated with several other religious congregations to build a retirement home for sisters needing assisted living or skilled nursing care. The sisters discovered that caring for their elderly and infirmed at home while doing the work a family or thriving ministry requires is impossible. It has proven a bitter pill to swallow for the Religious as is the case for any family.

Money has always presented concerns for the sisters. They receive no financial help from the Diocese. They keep



*The SDI Class of 2010 gave a new sculpture and patio in honor of their deceased classmate, Debra Macomb. In the background, the reforesting and landscaping work of Loretta Coussirat who volunteered her time and talent has greatly enhanced the beauty and sense of peace that prevails when visiting the Center.* Photo by Jere Pfister.



*Station of the cross number “IV Mary Meets Her Son” on the way to Calvary is depicted in wood and metal by artist Mary Ellen Rouen. Visitors to the grounds can wander through the grounds praying or visiting each of the fourteen sculptures.*



*A lovely patio is offset by the sculpture known as Lou's Angel, given by the spiritual direction class of 1996 to commemorate the life their deceased classmate Lou Philleaux.*

Photos by Jere Pfister.





*The Scanlon family's old summer home served as temporary housing for the newly arrived Cenacle sisters. They built the small chapel seen in the back ground for women who came for days of prayer.*

Photo courtesy of Cenacle Sisters.

fees for the retreats low to make them affordable to all. Like many retreat centers around the country, hospitality groups provide some of the support. Despite that, the constant need for fundraising persists.<sup>14</sup>

While some Catholics feel the main body of the Church has regressed from Vatican II, the Cenacle Sisters still live out its spirit of reform and deep commitment to the ideals set forth in the Council documents. They have remained faithful to that ideal of church as a collaborative commitment to make God's love known in a world whose values often differ from their own.

Whatever their future brings, the Religious of the Cenacle have prepared numerous women and men of many faiths to face their own futures with clear-eyed fortitude and a belief that the power of love prevails. One could not ask for a greater legacy.

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*A wooden crucifix is silhouetted by the late afternoon light coming through the stained glass windows of the small chapel in the main building of the Cenacle Retreat Center. Visiting priests regularly celebrate mass for the sisters and their weekday guests in this quiet setting.*

Photo courtesy of Jere Pfister.