The Society of the Sacred Heart Today  
Part I  

Given at the AASH Meeting  April 19, 2007  
by Kathleen Conan RSCJ

I want to share with you this morning something of the life of the Society of the Sacred Heart today. This is a daunting task – and impossible to do in a comprehensive way but in humility I offer my perspective. I will do this in two parts, one now concerning a broader view of our membership, our mission and our spirituality, and another at lunch when I will talk more specifically about our elder sisters, some concretes of our mission, our financial situation and our plans for the future.

Membership:
Who is the Society today? We are just under 3000 women living in 32 provinces, in 44 countries and an even greater number of cultures in the world. Of these 3000, just over 200 are in various stages of initial formation – the approximately ten years before final vows. In the United States we are 400 RSCJ, living in 18 “areas” or cities with an average age of 73 and 9 women in initial formation.

In reflecting on our membership, I will use a phrase which the international provincials included in a statement to the Society several years ago: 

_We regard the present moment as a grace:_
seeing that we are decreasing in number and increasing in age  
_having fewer vocations, yet having more and more persons join the big family of the Sacred Heart._  
(International Provincials 2003)

Yes, we like many women’s congregations are decreasing in number and increasing in age in many provinces, for example in Europe, Australia/New Zealand, Japan and North America.

The Society is also growing in provinces of Africa and some parts of Asia and Latin America. The largest numbers of vocations are in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Kenya, India, Korea; in Latin America, some provinces such as Peru which had seen a gap in numbers entering, are now experiencing new growth.

The Society has moved into new countries; approximately 15 years ago we opened communities in Indonesia and in Moscow; and now a woman from each of these countries has professed first vows. More recently we established a community in Haiti where, although we are only 4 RSCJ, we are already considering how to respond to several Haitian women who would like to join us.

Notice the last part of the quote:

yet having more and more persons join the big family of the Sacred Heart

Who are these persons in the big family of the Sacred Heart?

_Alumnae / alumni:_ Yourselves certainly – women and men who have been educated in the charism of the Sacred Heart and choose to continue to let it shape your lives.

_Associates:_ Our Associates, whose number has been growing, are women and men who desire to deepen their baptismal consecration and are attracted to the charism and spirituality of the Society – who commit themselves formally to living the spirituality of the Society through personal prayer and responsiveness to the sufferings and hopes of our world. The growth of the
Associates is not unique to the Society but is part of a larger movement of lay people in the Church who want to commit themselves to a life marked by prayer and service. At present there are approximately 120 Associates in the US in 13 groups.

Colleagues: Additionally there are many lay people with whom we share mission and ministry in our various ministries. For over 35 years we have been developing the programs that assure that our mission continues to be lived in Sacred Heart schools, that both religious and lay persons have the resources, formation and inner spirit which will enable them to educate the school community with the vision of Sophie. That this is bearing fruit is attested to by the comments of Sisters Clare Pratt and Jane Maltby of our General Council in their letter to the province after their visit last month:

“Everywhere we went we met lay people who resonate with our mission and the spirituality that fires it, who are enthusiastic about being with us in a variety of contexts, often in situations where RSCJs are in the minority. It seems that what used to be seen as our “diminishment” is rather a growth that could not have been imagined some years ago…. the image we came away with was that it is together with our lay sisters and brothers that we are discovering and manifesting the love of the Heart of Jesus.”

Context for our Educative Mission

What is the context for our mission? Madeleine Sophie’s context was post-revolutionary France, a time of turbulence, in a society ravaged by war, where faith seemed damaged and violated. It was also a time in which the hopes of the new democracy were inspiring new generations of young people. During her lifetime, the Society was influenced by the movements of colonization and spread to the new world and beyond. These and other contexts influenced the way she understood the mission of the Society.

Between 2003 and 2006 RSCJ around the world were engaged in what we called our Emerging Vision process, reflecting on the world in which we live and the vision that is emerging among us concerning our response as RSCJ. As I share with you my own synthesis of the responses from the 5 regions around the world, I invite you to listen for resonances in your own experience and elements which are missing; as we reflect these days on what it means to be One Heart, One World, let us ask to hear the calls of our times in the characteristics of our world as described by RSCJ from around the world:

1. A world torn by division / war / oppression / violence in many places.
   From the experiences of our communities in Colombia and northern Uganda of ongoing war there, to the daily news of violence in so many place, including the experience this week at Virginia Tech, we come to know the complexity of violence and the search for peace.
3. A globalized world in which we are more connected than ever before, and yet the economic gaps continue to widen.
4. The diversity of cultures - several examples:
   a. Experience of immigration – movements of people northward for economic reason or to move out of violent situations;
   b. Construction of the European community;
   c. the Catholic Church in the US which in 20 years will be 50% Hispanic.
5. New cosmology – new ways to understand our universe as inter-related; that the human person is part of a much bigger cosmic story.
6. Feminism: the place of women in society; gender issues; the need for values which are traditionally called feminine; for structures which are more relational, circular, less hierarchical.
7. Care for the environment – sharpened conviction about our responsibility for the world in which we live and the challenges this brings.
8. Thirst for spirituality, interest in religion – while at the same time some parts of the world are experiencing de-Christianization.

**Reflection:** What are the elements/forces/intuitions/experiences which are shaping your context and which offer glimpses of the future?

**What is our response as Religious of the Sacred Heart in this context?**

Madeleine Sophie’s desire was to renew in her people Christian faith and to transform society that it might express the values of Christ. In all that she envisioned – education in the academies, the poor schools, retreat work, conversations with lay people (the four means of the Society), her purpose was to help people grow to fullness in God and to shape society – directly or through their influence on their husbands!

At our General Chapter in 2000 we said: *We are called to participate in God’s work of transformation.* It is heartening to know that this is God’s transformation and that we need only cooperate with it! As I describe an overview of our ministry internationally, I will comment also on how we live that in the United States.

- Internationally, we educate in places where education is not a given. The US province, along with those of Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean, has a commitment to Haiti where two from the US province serve; one of their ministries is to help begin a teacher training program.
- Wherever we are, and certainly in situations where access to education is the norm, we want to ensure that we educate to a global vision based on Gospel values. We have come a long way from a school rule in which education at the Sacred Heart was the same no matter what country we were in. In the 1970s and 80s we realized that if our educative works are to have the impact we hope for, we needed to be clear about our purposes and accountable for our living of those purposes. This desire for shared vision and commitment is at the root of:
  - *Goals and Criteria of Sacred Heart Schools* which govern Sacred Heart schools in the United States;
  - Red LAC – Latin American network of educators, discussing curriculum and programs to support Sacred Heart values;
  - Meetings of international heads of school: the 3rd such meeting will be hosted in St Charles at the end of this week.
Over half the active members of the province are directly engaged in education, in Network schools, in higher education and in other educative settings.
- We invite people to personal transformation in healing ministries, therapy, pastoral care.
- We help people become aware of their own inner resources and develop these in themselves and in their peoples as we gather with them in small faith sharing groups, parishes and retreat work.
- We work in education projects which enable people to bring about social change, in social work and in literacy classes for newly arrived peoples.
- We try to influence our governments in ways which are appropriate to our situations. In the US province, for example, we have a corporate stance process through which, after serious study and reflection, we take a particular stance and find ways to act on it. At the international level we have established NGO status at the UN; you will hear more about this in tomorrow’s program.
- Many of the above concerns and efforts are challenging and require multifaceted approaches. Yet it is most often in the daily choices we make to reach out in love and justice that we live our mission. While we support and want to be part of the larger transformation of our world, we believe that our daily life lived in the light of these values
also helps create transformation. We think of Philippine of whom we often say that she is saintly because she was a woman of simple duty daily done.

Spirituality

In today’s world there is much talk about spirituality. As I use the word, it includes our experience of God, our understanding of God, our lives lived in response to God.

For any of us, as believers and as Christians, our spirituality is at the core of who we are, for it centers our life and orients our choices. As alumnae/i of the Sacred Heart we have all been shaped by a spirituality of love, of God’s loved poured out and en-spiriting all of creation; at the same time, a love which is personal and touches the heart of each one. In a time when the understanding of God had been so marked by the harshness of Jansenism, Sophie’s experience of a love which is accepting, welcoming, warm, healing -- compelled her to give her life so that others may know that love. It was the love coming from the open heart of Jesus; and it was also the love flowing from the pierced heart -- a love which knows woundedness and pain and is not overcome; a love which is alive beyond sorrow and devastation and is experienced as new life, resurrection. How needed in the post-Katrina experience are people who know this kind of pierced-open love; how needed are such people this week in the Virginia Tech community!

In each age there is a re-articulation of spirituality as we experience new situations, new needs, new cultural experiences, new generational experiences. Our times are no different. In the year 2000 as the RSCJ gathered in General Chapter, we had a sense that we needed a new articulation of our spirituality, not because the insights of our Constitutions were not valid, but because our context was changing. We were again aware of the great spiritual hunger in our world, the search for religious experience, the growth of fundamentalisms; the dawn of the new millennium was heightening our awareness that globalization, technology, new generations were shaping our world in ways that called for spiritual depth and courageous action; and our sisters in various countries were becoming more inculturated and the insights of their cultures were shaping all of our experience and understanding of God. Thus, spirituality is the theme for our next General Chapter in 2008. Our preparation is to be in dialogue – with one another and with others who share our spirituality; below is an excerpt of the preparatory material with some questions for reflection:

General Chapter 2008
RSCJ Spirituality

Purpose: We desire to continue in a process which enables us to explore, express and dialogue amongst ourselves and with others who share our spirituality about:

- how the contemplative dimension of our spirituality leads us to discern and respond to our prophetic call today.
  How do we experience the contemplative dimension in our lives today? What nourishes this contemplative approach to the world? Who is the God we experience today? What face of God am I coming to know at this moment in my life? How does this experience of God influence how I live?

- how our context (cultural, socio-economic, political, religious, a world in transformation…) shapes our spirituality which is expressed in all aspects of our life
  Our context might be a transition in our family or professional situation; we may be caring for aging parents, dealing with illness, changing jobs. How does this context shape our spiritual life at this moment? Or we might reflect on the characteristics of US culture which Sisters Pratt and Maltby shared in
their letter to the province and ask how they influence our spirituality: hospitality, generosity, courage, frontier spirit, hard work, perseverance, attention to the individual, grass-roots initiatives and desire for participation.

- how justice, peace and integrity of creation are at the heart of our spirituality and our educative mission.

Tomorrow’s experience at the United Nations will be one opportunity to reflect in this way. As we come to learn more about the UN and the Millennium Development Goals, we might ask ourselves how they shape our spirituality and our mission.

We do not have, nor expect to have, all the answers, but this spiritual journey which links our experience of God and our choices for the sake of our world is the journey of our heart. It has shaped our lives and continues to call us to respond with courage and integrity at THIS moment in our history. You, women and men of the heart of Christ are part of that journey. We invite you to be in dialogue with one another and with us during the coming year, sharing your spiritual journey, what you see God doing among us and calling us to in our world today, that together we may truly be ONE HEART – God’s heart, ONE WORLD – God’s world.