BOOK REVIEW

Staying in the Fire offers candid exploration into the impact of change

Staying in the Fire: A Sisterhood Responds to Vatican II
By Phyllis M. Kittel; WovenWord Press, 2009

Reviewed by Sisters Benita Volk and Joyce Lehman

After nine years the project originally called the Jubilee History is now completed. Phyllis Kittel (the former Sister Mary Harold) has done an amazing job of listening to the stories of Precious Blood Sisters, reflecting on our experiences and articulating our CPPS journey since Vatican Council II.

Curious about how the many changes she was observing had occurred since she left our community in the late ’60s, Phyllis approached the congregation’s general council with the request to explore and write about how CPPS women had implemented the Second Vatican Council’s directives for change. The council accepted her proposal and gave her unprecedented access to both the congregation’s archives and members. Originally begun as an oral history, the book evolved into our story told through Phyllis’ voice.

As you read Staying in the Fire, you will recognize the lived experience of Sisters of the Precious Blood in ways that were not previously articulated. What you might not find in this book is a detailed explanation of specific events with their particular nuances. But what you will find is a unique insight into and overview of the progression of the lives of Sisters of the Precious Blood illustrating the change from what we were to what we are.

It’s a pleasure to read “our” story from Phyllis’ fresh perspective. Particularly enjoyable are the individual — and often inspiration-

al — stories, many of which you may never have heard before.

In her foreword to Staying in the Fire,(see sidebar), IHM Sister Sandra Schneiders, a respected theologian and analyst of religious life, says that “Phyllis Kittel has written an extremely important, very timely work that is badly needed in the Catholic Church today.” The reader will find this book especially helpful in answering their questions about what has happened to the “good Sisters.”

Phyllis herself says, of the congregation and her discoveries about it for Staying in the Fire: “Having kindled the spark and come to live within their own renewing fire, the Precious Blood sisters are becoming more of what they have always been, women of prayer. From the overflow of their prayer, they offer — in witness and in ministry — their gift to a needy world: the bread of life first baked by Maria Anna Brunner.”


Excerpts from the Foreword

As... a former member and continuing friend of the congregation she studies,... Dr. Kittel collected 40 focused, intensive-extensive oral histories of members of the community who have lived through the renewal of religious life in response to Vatican II.

Weaving these first-person testimonies into an integrated living history she describes in depth, often in the sisters’ own words, their experience in regard to prayer, ministry, community life, the vows. With their help she analyzes the community’s remarkable journey from a fervent pre-conciliar convent life of sacralized routine, uniform prayer and observance, generous collective works, minimal individuality in life and ministry to the vibrant life of a renewed religious congregation....

Kittel probes all the areas in which religious have struggled and won through to new and deeper understanding of their life and commitment to it (and) she does not avoid the challenging issues... She gets her finger on the pulse of the process as well as the results of renewal...

The reader is allowed to witness, firsthand as it were, how the reciprocal interaction between the theology of renewal and day-to-day living have generated the actual experience of corporate re-creation in one... religious congregation over the four decades the process has been underway.

[Staying in the Fire] puts warm flesh (and Precious Blood) on the theoretical skeleton and illuminates the sometimes dark process of creating a path where there are no maps....

It should be read by lay people who know by experience that the sisters are on the right track but do not know how to answer the nostalgic traditionalists pining for the habited nuns of their youth.

It should be read by young people attracted to religious life today who wonder if there is any way to live this life authentically that does not require dropping out of the real world by a return to some medieval lifestyle.

And it will be read, I am sure, with delight by many people who are just curious about “what makes nuns tick.”

—Sister Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM
Monroe, Michigan