

# Priestless parishes: Hope for the future

By Mary Ellen Donovan, OSF

For women religious, the present time is both challenging and inviting. The current upheaval and transformation in our Church could only be the work of the Holy Spirit. New forms of worship and new roles are emerging within the life of the Church, in response to the spirit of Vatican II. Although conservative forces fear the Spirit's work and cling to the *status quo*, the fact remains that male, hierarchical privilege is crumbling – a welcome change for those attentive to God's Spirit.

Women religious today have a prophetic calling: to become God's hands and God's feet, bringing to justice the many structures of sin that have grown up in our Church over the centuries. The Scriptures are full of stories in which God's people, through sin and greed, turned from the voice of the Lord. In every age, the role of the prophet is to bring the people of God to a new way of seeing and living.

We truly live in a *liminal* time—a time both of “not yet” and “already”—which pushes us out of our comfort zones to proclaim the presence of the Lord in our midst. We must proclaim the new realities being born among us: models of Church that are communitarian, not hierarchical; feminine, not masculine; inclusive, not exclusive; affirming, not

condemning; peace-bringing, not violence-making.

We cannot expect male leadership in the Church to endorse this work of God, although there are some sympathetic bishops. Make no mistake – we will experience persecution as we call to justice male structures of sin and establish new forms of power and leadership in the Church.

Rather than confronting the present structures head-on, which would doom our work to failure, we must adopt another approach: From our positions of power, we must work in solidarity to starve out of the Church all that is oppressive. Remember, we *are* the Church.

If we want the bishops to face seriously the injustice of an all-male priesthood, our best strategy is to participate vigorously in the life of vocation offices and to establish a rapport with the rectors of our seminaries. We must network with each other, sharing our stories of success and learning from our failures. Whatever we can do to further the crisis in priestly vocations will force the hand of the bishops to consider alternative forms of leadership – particularly an ordained priesthood that welcomes women.