

*THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE
CONSECRATED LIFE TODAY*

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PREFACE	2
CALLED AND SENT: REFLECTIONS ON A THEOLOGY OF APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS LIFE TODAY	5
<i>Sr. Mary Maher, SSND</i>	
THE RADICAL NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF CONSECRATED LIFE	22
<i>Sr Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM</i>	
CHALLENGES TO AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE FROM THE WORLD AND THE CHURCH OF TODAY	30
<i>Fr. Antonio M. Pernia, SVD</i>	
MAKE THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE POSSIBLE	48
<i>Br. André-Pierre Gauthier, FSC</i>	
SOME THEMES AND CHALLENGES FOR APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THE THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN THE REGIONAL CONTEXTS OF AMERICA	52
<i>Sr. Maricarmen Bracamontes, OSB</i>	

PREFACE

Original in Italian

As in the previous issue, this UISG Bulletin offers some of the contributions presented at the Theological Seminar on Religious Life, organized by UISG and USG in Rome from February 7 to 12, 2011. After the Congress on Consecrated Life in 2004 which had so much repercussion in the religious world and in the Church, this event marks the beginning of a journey of study and theological research to keep alive the forum on the identity and significance of Consecrated Life in the plurality of social and cultural contexts today.

The theological reflections that we have chosen to publish in this issue offer a clear and accurate reading of the apparent impasse in the reality of religious life in a context which is global, pluralistic, polycentric and ever changing. The invitation to deepen a theological reflection that considers the various components at stake: religious congregations, the Church, the world, is combined with the daring proposal for new ways that, somehow, seem to overturn traditional beliefs to which we have been accustomed. The result is a composite picture which rouses the readers' interest and encourages them to open minds and hearts.

The American theologian Sr. Mary Maher, SSND opens this issue with her reflection entitled "*Called and sent: a Reflection on the Theology of the Apostolic Consecrated Life Today*". To fully understand the meaning of Consecrated Life in the world, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of being *called and sent*, which characterizes the life of all baptized Christians and which also defines the fundamental identity of the Church. Sr. Mary repeatedly reiterates the need for a *theology of the world*: "*There is a key that opens the door to a theological framework capable of clarifying the identity of the Apostolic Religious Life in the Church and in today's world... the key is the discovery of history...I think the post-modern apostolic religious life should be more clearly defined by the call to combine the ancient wisdom of Christianity with a new justice in a world marked by radical pluralism and the inability to deal with the difference*".

The theologian Sr. Sandra Schneiders, IHM follows suit with her "*Radical*

Nature and Meaning of Consecrated Life". She develops her reflection from a double affirmation: "First, the apostolic religious life fundamentally consists of the total and permanent religious consecration to God, actualized and expressed through the perpetual profession lived in the community and in the mission. Secondly and simultaneously, religious life is inherently shaped by the historical context - including the charism of the founder – in which she was born and continues to live.

For Sr. Sandra, the evolutive path of consecrated life, from the "fuga mundi" to the new historical form of the non-cloistered religious apostolic life and the non clerical form of the 16th century and established today, emphasizes the importance of the paradigm shift in the conception of the relationship between Church and the world, which is the primary and fundamental originality of the Second Vatican Council.

Fr. Antonio Pernia, Superior General of the Society of the Divine Word, offers a reflection on the theme "*Challenges and Opportunities for the Religious Life from the World and the Church of Today*". On the one hand, secularization in a globalized world has provoked a deep crisis in the consecrated life, which is expressed primarily in the decline of membership and a perceived lack of significance. On the other hand, we are witnessing the emergence of a global Church, a Church which is polycentric and therefore, characterized by the disappearance of the identification of Christianity with the western world. Among the challenges presented by a global Church, Fr. Antonio highlights two, namely a multi-cultural composition and multi-directional mission. Among the opportunities, he highlights: an intercultural membership, inter-congregational ministry and a partnership with the laity in the mission.

Br. Pierre Gauthier, a member of the Congregation of the Christian Brothers, focuses his discussion entitled "*Make the Future of Religious Life Possible*", within the educational mission of the school, a privileged place to observe the profound changes in lifestyle and thinking typical of the younger generation. Br. Pierre identifies three challenges to the apostolic religious life: the challenge of community life, the challenge of intelligence and heart and the challenge of attention to young adults. "*Our daily presence among the young, men and women, more or less distant from the Christian faith, calls us to freedom and audacity. This implies living in places and forum where they develop their ways of thinking and acting. In accepting the grace to stay close to young people, of patiently accompanying them and discovering the right word suited to their situations, we can serenely give witness to the presence of the Spirit throughout our life, to the joy of the sacraments and the happiness of belonging to the Church.*"

Sr. Maria del Carmen Bracamontes Ayon, co-foundress of Pan de Vida

Monastery in the city of Torreon, Coahuila, Mexico, situates her reflection on the *Apostolic Consecrated life in Latin America*. She offers five movements to find alternative solutions and creative responses to current challenges: to create new relationships in a creative way, starting from the work of a conscious **deconstruction** of dominion-submission model which we have internalized, to intensify the **construction** of human equality in the diversity that characterizes us, to express, in our everyday praxis, our **right to interiority**, prayer, depth and serenity; to promote and accompany the processes of the **transformation of the traditional roles** attributed to men and women and **go beyond the images of God** from the anthropological parameters which are exclusively masculine.



*CALLED AND SENT: REFLECTIONS ON
A THEOLOGY OF APOSTOLIC
RELIGIOUS LIFE TODAY*

Sr. Mary Maher, SSND

Sister Mary Maher entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1968. She has Masters and PhD degrees in Theology from the Catholic University of America. Prior to her election to congregational leadership, Sr. Mary taught Fundamental Theology, Christology and the Theology of Mary for 20 years on the graduate level. In the past 10 years, she has written and spoken on the challenges of post-modernity for apostolic religious life in a variety of contexts.

Original in English

I want to thank the coordinators of this seminar for the invitation to share some reflections on a theology of apostolic religious life today. It is especially gratifying that you have brought together theologians and general superiors to work collaboratively to achieve the aims of the seminar. We need each other. On one hand, we have a number of significant things in common; on the other hand, the focus of our day-to-day intellectual and ministerial efforts is often quite different. Together, hopefully, we can make a contribution toward unleashing the power and effectiveness of consecrated life in the world, for the life of the world, which is the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

I was asked to highlight “main new thrusts” in the theology of apostolic religious life and “issues that are still open and being debated.” In this way, it is hoped, “a theological framework” will be presented that provides some insight into our overall theme. I want to make clear that I approached the task as a general superior who happens to be a theologian and not the other way around. I believe the difference is important. It is from this stance that I hope my reflections add something useful to our common concerns.

Where to begin?

The question of starting point in theology is a critical one. This is especially true with regard to a derivative reality such as a so-called *theology*

of religious life. The latter depends upon a host of elements which would need to include a theology of God and God's action in history, a Christology, a theology of the world, an ecclesiology and theology of mission, as well as a coherent foundation for the following of Christ in biblical theology and spirituality.

Because all of these aspects of a theological vision are interrelated, one would think it might be possible theoretically to begin anywhere and eventually touch on all the rest. In actual fact, however, one's starting point provides already a perspective, a point of view, on all that follows. How one enters a discussion is already a decision among alternatives. One's starting point anticipates the range of possibilities concerning the contributions one might be able to offer.

This insight has been confirmed for me numerous times in the past few years as I have read, reflected, and prayed over the increasingly harsh debates about the present and future of apostolic religious life, especially in North America and Europe. Far too often the point of entry into these debates is ecclesiology or canon law. Far too often the range of possibilities is limited by remaining exclusively there.

Please do not misunderstand me. I believe that apostolic religious life is an ecclesial vocation. In fact, this morning I hope to highlight something of the deeper meaning of that assertion. However, I believe that sometimes we get locked into debates about where we religious "fit" in the context of the various vocations in the Church or we focus simply on canonical discussions about essential elements of religious life, that we do not see beyond these issues. Again, let me be clear. I agree that these conversations are important and I hope we engage in some of them during these days together. I simply want to suggest that they might not be the best place to begin. If we begin only there we might end up remaining there, blinded to other theological perspectives which have potential to clarify the present and open up the future. Sometimes starting elsewhere can enable us to return to these important ecclesiological questions with freshness and inspiration.

Perhaps an example may help illustrate the point. As a general superior whose congregation has a substantial presence in the United States, I understandably have followed very closely the Apostolic Visitation of religious institutes of women in that country. Among the many articles and books I have read related to this matter are the presentations given at the "Symposium on Apostolic Religious Life," held at Stonehill College, Massachusetts, in September of 2008. In particular, I would like to lift up the well-argued address by Sister Sara Butler, MSBT, Professor at St. Joseph's Seminary in the Archdiocese of New York. Of all those who are reputed to have asked for a

formal visitation, Sister Butler is the only one I know who put the idea in a public document.¹ I am grateful for this because it is helpful to have at least some of the issues behind the call for a formal visitation clarified in such a clear, if unofficial, manner.

Professor Butler examines contemporary apostolic religious life in relation to three challenges presented by the Second Vatican Council (clarifying the nature of religious life in light of the “universal call to holiness;” adapting aspects of our life to meet apostolic needs of the day; and expanding our apostolic concerns in view of the Church’s teaching on social justice). She then goes to the heart of her argument which is to show how the inadequate responses of apostolic religious to these challenges can be explained in relation to what she calls an unexpected development: the rise of differing, competing ecclesiologies, that is, by the “advent of unprecedented theological pluralism and public dissent within the Catholic Church.”² This is the lengthiest section of her paper. The crucial issue on which everything turns is described by Professor Butler as a polarization which she finds among religious with regard to acceptance or rejection of the Church’s hierarchical structure. What follows is the conclusion to her talk which is both instructive and poignant. In answer to the question about what constitutes the treasure that has been lost and which apostolic religious long to reclaim, she writes:

The ‘treasure’ many of us would like to reclaim, perhaps, is the possibility of living the religious life fully, in peace, according to the charism of our communities, in communion with the hierarchy and collaboration with the laity, that is, according to the ecclesiology of communion, ‘one in heart and soul’ with the Church. . . . We would like to get beyond the stress of being suspicious and being under suspicion . . .

[We] long for the rebirth of relationships in which our place in the Church is clear and unambiguous. ...³

As I pondered carefully the full import of Professor Butler’s paper, I was left with an existential wondering and a theological question. Existentially I wondered: who of us in the contemporary Church and postmodern world has a “clear and unambiguous” place or can live fully “in peace” in face of the searing problems confronting the Church and the human community today? Could this be a summary of the longing of one whose analysis stayed in boundaries too narrow to illuminate sufficiently the issues at hand?

This led to a theological question. How would the analysis have been different, and perhaps more illuminating, if it focused not primarily on differing and competing notions of the structure of the Church or on canonical questions, but on questions of Fundamental Ecclesiology,⁴ that is, on the identity of the Church in the world? This focus would lead necessarily to other critical

questions, such as: How would the analysis be more illuminating if it addressed differing and competing theologies of the world, or differing and competing theologies of mission, or differing and competing understandings of the following of Christ and the ideal of holiness – all of which also have characterized the post-conciliar period, all of which also are fundamental ecclesiological questions, and all of which also bear a direct relationship to the identity of apostolic religious life? Perhaps beginning here would give us a fuller picture of the challenges facing apostolic religious today. Perhaps only then might we illuminate the contributions and the mistakes, the identity and the potential, of this unique vocation in the Church.

To this effort I would like to devote my time this morning. With sincere openness to the dialogue that will follow, I would like to offer my reflections in three steps:

- I. I will describe the identity of apostolic religious life. What is it as a form of religious life in the Church? This will require also clarifying from the perspective of fundamental ecclesiology why it is difficult for us to have a consensus today regarding the identity of apostolic religious life.
- II. I will lift up the single most critical issue which divides us in the Church today and impedes our movement forward together.
- III. I will highlight four significant elements of a theological framework which can guide and support the future direction of apostolic religious life. True to the starting point used in Part I, these elements will reflect some of the most significant and fundamental issues confronting the Church today and will require taking a position with regard to the critical issue raised in Part II.

I. Apostolic Religious Life and Fundamental Ecclesiology

In 1983 the *UISG Bulletin* published a paper which was the fruit of the work of a theological study group that included members of both the USG and UISG. The paper was entitled, appropriately enough, “Theological Reflections on Apostolic Religious Life.”⁵ The authors articulate a vision of the foundations and distinguishing features of this form of religious life. They place apostolic religious life at the center of a centuries-long effort to divest of a monastic overlay onto the demands of dedication to apostolic works. In their words:

One can speak of a new form of religious life because since the sixteenth century the Holy Spirit has raised up in the Church orders of clerics regular, then congregations of men and women, both clerical and lay, in which typically monastic or conventual elements were abandoned so as to allow their members to dedicate themselves *entirely* to works of evangelization or charitable activity.

Thus, a quite new type of religious life came into being: the apostolic religious life.⁶

I have not seen a better description of the distinguishing feature of this new form of religious life than the one articulated by these authors. What distinguishes apostolic religious life is

that it is *a call to be with Christ as he is intent upon carrying out his mission as the One sent by the Father*; a call to union with him who lives with and in the midst of people and who spends himself for them; in a word, to live in union with him who ‘went about doing good’ (Acts 10: 38) and who ‘gave his life for the redemption of all’ (Mt. 20: 28).⁷

So, basically, apostolic religious are called and sent. This is to say that apostolic religious give their all, responding in love to a call to follow Jesus Christ into the world, to become part of a community of disciples who pour themselves out in service to those in need, as He did. In other words, *in a unique way because it is the all-consuming, defining character of their lives*, apostolic religious are akin to the disciples for whom Jesus prays to the Father in John’s Gospel: “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth. I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me” (John 17: 18-21).

For a variety of reasons (not only ecclesial but also cultural, social, and political), we have not arrived at a level of comfort recognizing a truly apostolic, and not monastic, religious life, especially for women. We do not seem to be able to grasp a consecrated life *in the world* – the very definition of apostolic religious life. We know well consecrated life separated from the world and we can see plainly the lay vocation as living out the baptismal commitment in the world. But we do not yet have a sufficiently evolved theory and praxis of consecrated life in the world. This is at the root of our inability to come to consensus about the identity of apostolic religious life as being called into a community of disciples and sent in mission for the life of the world.⁸

Fundamental ecclesiology can help illuminate this dilemma. The dynamic of being *called* and *sent* characterizes the life of all baptized Christians. This dynamic also captures the fundamental identity of the Church itself. The Church is the people gathered, structured, enlivened by the Holy Spirit and sent forth to proclaim the Good News to the whole world. *Communio* and *missio* – two poles held in tension by which the Church has always known itself and through which the Church has always expressed itself. Neither one

is more important than the other. Communion and mission. Being and doing. Breathing in and breathing out. One cannot exist or function without the other.

The truly amazing reality revealed in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is that this dynamic of *communio* and *missio* exists not merely in us or in the Church. This dynamic describes the revelation of the inner life of the Trinity – the Godhead as a communion of persons pouring forth the fullness of love. This is the life into which we are baptized – the inexhaustible bounty of love and livingness that is the triune God. The Church is called to be a sacrament in the world of this dynamic of God’s self-giving and unifying love.

While the mutually-defining relationship between *communio* and *missio* has always characterized the Church, the meanings and emphases of the two concepts have shifted and developed throughout history. In the same 500 years that apostolic religious life has been struggling to develop, these shifts and developments in the self-awareness of the Church have been staggering in their depth and breadth. The coincidence is not accidental.

With regard to the *communio* of the Church, as institution and as communion of persons, we are all aware of the debates at the Second Vatican Council which produced its final documents as well as of the significant developments since the Second Vatican Council in “communion ecclesiology.” It is important to recognize something too often hidden or ignored. Basic to these developments is the slow, centuries-long evolution from being a Euro-centric Church to becoming a world-Church. *Communio* is rich and multi-faceted, bringing together an abundant and irreducible pluralism into a dynamic unity of life and mission. The thorny question regarding episcopal collegiality is more than relevant here.

Regarding the *missio* of the Church, we are aware since the Council’s decree, *Ad Gentes*, of the recovery of the Trinitarian origins of mission. What needs to be recognized and acknowledged is that, basic to this recovery, is the way in which the pluralism of religions and cultures has challenged the Church’s understanding of its relationship to the world and its peoples, as well as its own theory and praxis of evangelization. This challenge also has been evolving for centuries.

Apostolic religious life has often been a significant factor in these developments in the fundamental ecclesiology of the Church. In fact, in the past 500 years, from the missionary colonization by Europe of the “new world,” to the Counter-Reformation, to the emergence of the modern world and the age of the Enlightenment, to the postmodern situation in which we find ourselves today, the evolution of apostolic religious life has been a good bellwether of these developments.

The struggle for the identity of apostolic religious life is closely linked with the evolution of the Church's self-understanding at the most basic levels. It is worth all the energy we have given it. It is essential that we press on.

II. The Critical Issue

There is a key which unlocks the door to an adequate theological framework for illuminating the identity of apostolic religious life in the Church and world today. Everyone knows about this key. Some are reluctant to use it. Others use it to open the door but they remain at the threshold, thereby seeing what is on the other side only in a limited way. Others use it to enter fully, but also bring with them all that they held before they opened the door. Still others use it to enter fully but forget what they held before entering.

The key is the discovery of history, the epochal shift to a radically historical consciousness which has characterized the modern and postmodern eras. Attending this rise of historical consciousness is an appropriation of the world and of human experience in a pluralism of ways, with fundamentally secularized views of reality, and within cultural, religious, and social traditions that are mediated always and only historically.

This has enormous implications for theology and for the life, prayer, and praxis of the Church. Simply put, it means that everything has a context. To understand, for example, a dogmatic statement proclaimed in the 4th century, I need to know something of the philosophical, linguistic, social, political, cultural contexts that sparked the question and prompted the answer given by the Church at the time. In other words, *continuity of tradition requires something of us*. As Karl Rahner noted more than once, if we simply repeat it we have not understood it. Something is required of us beyond mindless repetition.

On a deeper level, of course, the threat of thoroughgoing relativism arises from historical consciousness when Christianity is viewed as simply among and alongside many other cultural, religious, and social traditions, each with its own perspectives on the meaning of life and claims to truth. This challenge is of great concern to all of us and is being directly addressed both by the magisterium and by numerous theologians. If a specifically Christian faith and hope is grounded in the conviction that, in Jesus Christ, humanity – and indeed the *whole* of creation – has the bringer of salvation, the final, eschatologically victorious act of God on its behalf, how this faith and this hope for salvation can be sustained in an historicized (pluralistic) world is a question that must be addressed.

Now, what does all this have to do with the theology of apostolic religious

life? It has everything to do with it. Apostolic religious life is inextricably linked with how the Church understands itself and its mission, its evangelization and its core belief in the salvific power of Christ's life, death and resurrection. The challenge of appropriating all this in an historically conscious way is critical for the Church and for the present and future of the ministry of apostolic religious in the world. I cannot help but believe that something of this concern was in the mind and heart of Pope Paul VI when he linked apostolic religious life to what he called a "burning question . . .

How can the message of the Gospel penetrate the world? What can be done at those levels in which a new type of culture is unfolding . . .? . . . Dear religious, according to the different ways in which the call of God makes demands upon your spiritual families, you must give your full attention to the needs of men, their problems and their searching; you must give witness *in their midst*, through prayer and action, to the Good News of love, justice and peace. . . . Such a mission, which is common to all the People of God, belongs to you in a special way.⁹

No doubt the Church needs this evangelical witness proper to apostolic religious life. Does Paul VI's plea not also imply that apostolic religious life is called to help the Church address itself to the exigencies of the contemporary world, to the great needs facing humanity today? How much ink has been spilled over the question as to whether apostolic religious life is a life lived at the margins of the Church or at the heart of the Church? Could it not be that from the very heart of the Church apostolic religious move to the margins, to the forefront of the outward movement of the Church as it is sent by the power of the Holy Spirit *into the world*? In this way are we not in harmony with Pope Benedict XVI's assertion that without the outward movement in mission the Church would face certain death? In the same talk, the Holy Father also said that

In recent years the anthropological, cultural, social and religious framework of humanity has changed. Today the Church is called to face new challenges and is ready to dialogue with different cultures and religions, in the search for ways of building, along with all people of good will, the peaceful coexistence of peoples. The field of mission *ad gentes* appears much broader today . . .¹⁰

Indeed.

III. Significant Elements of a Theological Framework

In this context I would like to suggest four significant elements of a theological framework for apostolic religious life. For sure, there are other

elements to be explicated. However, I want to say that without these four there can be no adequate theological support for this way of life today. The four elements of a coherent theological framework for apostolic religious life can be disclosed as a challenge to theologians and religious alike in the following way, taking our lead from the heart of St. Paul's reflection on ministry in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: "**God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself**" (2 Cor. 5:19):

God was in Christ: The incarnation involves God in history in ways so profound that we are still unpacking them after 2000 years. Like the Church, so, too, are religious *in* history, not above it or outside it. We need theological perspectives on history to help us (1). Also, we are called by God to follow Jesus Christ. We need foundations in biblical theology and spirituality to support our response to this call today (2).

God was in Christ reconciling the world: Apostolic religious, in ways proper to their call, participate in this ministry of reconciliation. We need to know the "needs, problems and searching" of people in the world today (3), so that we can give our "full attention" to them, as enjoined by Pope Paul VI in the text quoted above.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself: Does this not mean that the *mission* of God is *communion*, which is to say that ultimately all creation is destined to be brought back to God? This is the constant teaching of the church and it is imperative that apostolic religious have a solid theological grounding in what it means today (4).

I have developed aspects of these elements at some length in other contexts.¹¹ Here I will describe briefly what is needed by apostolic religious in regard to each of them.

(1) The need for theological perspectives on history: When we referred earlier to the basic elements of the Church's identity, *communio* and *missio*, we used repeatedly words such as "shifts," "development," and "evolution." These words are at the heart of the current debate in the Church concerning the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council. The position one takes with regard to this depends in substantial measure upon the stance taken with regard to the use of the "key" of the impact of history. It is more than interesting that Bernard Lonergan, Professor at the Gregorian University during the Council, is reported to have said that the meaning of Vatican II is the acknowledgement of history. In a similar vein, in the year the Council ended, John Courtney Murray stated that development of doctrine was "*the* issue under the issues at Vatican II."¹²

I believe that we should use the key to enter fully the challenges of the

postmodern world and I believe that we should carry with us all that we have held before this door was opened. In other words, I believe that a mutually critical and mutually illuminating relationship is possible between the contemporary world and the full scope of the faith-tradition we hold dear. I believe that a truly Catholic theology is co-relational in this respect – that what is discovered in such a mutually critical relationship illuminates both realities and produces new insights and calls to conversion to new ways of thinking and acting. I believe it always has and I believe it will for us today.¹³

(2) Called by God to follow Jesus Christ—a need for biblical and spiritual foundations: One thing is so foundational to religious life that we had better not say it goes without saying. We had better say it. Religious life is all about being seized by the living God. Because God first loved us we respond in love, giving our entire lives to faithfully listening to and responding to God. We become religious because God has taken hold of us in such a mysterious and attractive way that we find we can do nothing else but respond with our whole lives. If we make something other than this primary, we are not talking about religious life anymore. This is not to say that there are not a number of other things that, taken together, constitute *apostolic* religious life. There are. But nothing else is primary in the same way. Apostolic religious life is primarily about being called, lured, attracted by the living God to follow Jesus Christ in a community of disciples who are sent into the world to serve and minister in His name.

As the world and the Church continue to be influenced by classical, modern and postmodern worldviews and modes of thought, religious sometimes experience confusion regarding shifts in ways of imaging God and in the ideal of a life lived in response to God.

Some religious live very directly out of what might be called a classical notion of or experience of God. This is an experience that is comfortable with the mystical tradition. It emphasizes the transcendence and holiness of God and focuses on imitating Christ's virtues. Most of the men and women we have known throughout our religious lives have achieved holiness in this understanding. It deserves the label "mystical" in that, as Janet Rufing points out, this way of understanding Jesus draws us into the lifelong effort "to seek the one thing necessary, progressive contemplative assimilation to the Christ mystery."¹⁴ However, it must also be said that this model deserves the label "ahistorical," in the sense that the concrete circumstances in which one lives (where one is, what one is doing, with whom and for whom one is doing it) are not elements that factor necessarily into what really counts for the achievement of holiness. The point is that *whatever* one is doing or *wherever* one is doing it, one must have the proper attitudes, the attitudes Christ had.

Under the influence of modern biblical scholarship, some religious have shifted to a profound sense of Jesus' mission to bring the reign of God to our world. You might say they have shifted to an "historical" model of holiness in the sense that they have different experience of God because of a focus on the life and ministry of Jesus. So, their action on behalf of justice, their ministries, and prayer all evolve out of the prophetic and contemplative grasp of their identity as religious in these terms. It is not necessarily that they have left the classical experience completely behind in this shift. Rather, it is the case that they have come to experience God so differently that their basic intuitions about what is most important have shifted to this justice-making, kingdom-building emphasis.

This ideal has its origins in Protestant scholarship of historical study of the Bible in the late 18th century, but really affects Catholic theology only in the 20th century.¹⁵ We learned that Jesus' whole life – what he said and did, what made him "tick" – revolved around the coming reign of God which Jesus in fact made present. In contrast to the classical model, where, as in the words of the Apostles' Creed, we move from "born of the virgin Mary" to "suffered under Pontius Pilate," here, in an historical model, we pause over the concrete content, style, manner and meaning of the life of Jesus: what he said and to whom; how he behaved; who he favored; what made him angry; how he prayed; what his experience of God was. In this model of holiness the concrete circumstances in which a religious lives, (what she does, where she does it and with whom), make a great deal of difference.

Biblical study along these lines has unlocked tremendous richness in focus for our prayer and in liberating praxis in a variety of ministries. It has enabled the Church to articulate such phrases as "the preferential option for the poor" and "action on behalf of justice is constitutive of the gospel," and so forth. Perhaps most profoundly of all, it has given us a perceptive grasp into the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ not as something abstractly willed by God from all eternity, but as evolving out of the concrete decisions and behavior of his life.

It is fair to say that the very richness of the second model contained within it some of seeds of the move to a third – the liberation, feminist model of the postmodern situation. Here we experience what happens when we attend to the concrete meanings of Jesus and of the Christ-event. We are led to deal with what Edward Schillebeeckx calls "contrast experiences," those experiences of negativity, of evil, of injustice and inhumanity which plague human history in every age and place. In our encounter with these situations, the ministry of Jesus gives us the foundation and grace for the necessary protest: "No, this should not be!"

Many religious have been rooting around for decades in both the mystical and the justice-making traditions in search of ways to express adequately their experience of God which has given them a whole new perspective on what is important for every aspect of their religious lives. We need ongoing help to ground ourselves in solid biblical and spiritual foundations.

(3) The need for sound theological perspectives on the world situation today: I could have, and perhaps should have, entitled this section “the need for a theology of the world” because, indeed, we do need that. I did not do this because I want to emphasize particular aspects of a theology of the world that are especially needed by apostolic religious today.

On one hand, we need to know how to enter the world. On the other hand, we need helpful theological perspectives on the multifarious complex world-situations, struggles and “meta-problems,”¹⁶ and an understanding of the light which the Christian tradition sheds on these realities. Let me say a brief word about each of these aspects of a theology of the world.

First and basically, we need a theological perspective which can help us understand why we no longer die to the world or flee the world. At the deepest levels, what does it mean for us to be called to follow Christ *into the world*, giving our lives for the life of the world? In her forthcoming book, *Buying the Field*, Sister Sandra Schneiders, IHM, offers precisely this perspective. I think we should all look forward to her contribution. She has there an insight I would like to lift up to us now. Professor Schneiders writes:

*For Religious, ... the challenge of incorporating [a new attitude of affirmation of the world as the proper sphere for the living of one's faith] has proved more difficult than almost anything else they have faced in the wake of the Council.*¹⁷

This is a strong statement and I believe profoundly accurate. I am perhaps a little less sanguine than the Michael Buckley, SJ, when 25 years ago he stated that

*many American religious communities of women have transposed their heritage into a modern idiom. . . . These religious communities of women have begun, perhaps for the first time in the Church, a synthesis of religious consecration and an inculturation into forms of contemporary life—a synthesis made in service to their mission.*¹⁸

I think he is correct that it has “begun” and I believe so much good has been done with regard to responsible and courageous efforts to create precisely this kind of synthesis of religious consecration and inculturation. And it is undeniable that much growth in prayer, professionalism, human development and the appropriation of the call of the Gospel has occurred in the past

decades. However, it is also true, I think, that this period of struggle to enter the world reveals some mistakes and dead-ends on the part of apostolic religious in the post-conciliar period. These realities are certainly understandable given the depth and breadth of change. At the same time they need to be acknowledged and explored more fully.

Secondly, we need the good work of theologians who spend their days and years mining the depth and breadth of the Christian tradition for grace-filled knowledge and insight into the world situation in which we are called to minister. Members of our communities are living eclectically out of various combinations of pre-modern, modern and postmodern perspectives and from out of this eclecticism they have differing views about what is important, about the way the world works, and about how we should live, pray, and decide about the future.

This “partiality” or eclecticism regarding interpretations of our life in the world is itself a hallmark of the postmodern experience. We are living our religious lives and making decisions about future directions in a time of profound cultural upheaval, caught up in dynamic tensions whose roots go to the very depths of all we hold dear. The contemporary cultural context of the developed West is almost universally described with such words as “uncontrollable,” “unpredictable,” “chaotic,” “pluralistic,” and “relativized” to the point of being, according to some, “meaningless.” We are challenged in the deepest levels of our spirituality to have the courage to embrace the future to which God calls us in the face of the irresolvable uncertainty and partial grasp of our situation in the world. “Risking in hope” is indeed a quite “postmodern” path to holiness.

It is not an exaggeration to say that, with all this diversity of perspectives, the single most vexing problem facing humankind today is our inability to deal with pluralism, with difference, with the “other,” except by way of violence and hostility and the desire to exclude. From our perspective as religious we may want to see the world as one interconnected community, where everything and everyone is interrelated. However, we cannot escape the fact that the world today is *fractured* by its differences, by conflicts between different ethnic groups and nationalities, different cultures and religions and philosophies of life. The inability to deal with difference except with hostility and violence is destroying families, cultures, societies, indeed, the planet itself.

I believe that postmodern apostolic religious life needs to be more clearly defined by the call to bear the ancient wisdom of Christianity with a new justice to a world marked by radical pluralism and the inability to deal with difference.¹⁹ It is obvious that responding to this call requires the assistance of good theology. Such response also has many implications for apostolic religious

life which I hope we can explore together these days.

(4) The need for ongoing reflection on the theology of mission: In recent centuries, the church has been struggling mightily to shape spiritually, theologically and practically the way we do mission in a world marked by an irreducible pluralism of religions and cultures. In very broad terms, it can be said that contemporary perspectives on mission have evolved out of events over the past 500 or more years since Christian Europe first began to discover that there were “worlds” other than its own – in the Americas, in Asia and in Africa. These worlds had and have ancient cultures and religions in a great diversity and richness that were often not appreciated, but rather ignored, often exploited, and, in some cases, devastated by the European and, later, North American colonization of many of these lands.

Only in this context can we truly receive the understanding of mission which came to explicit expression at the Second Vatican Council and which continues to be developed by theologians and the magisterium, as well as by the reflection on experience of missionary congregations of religious at the annual SEDOS²⁰ conferences, and so forth.

An important step was the promulgation in 1965 of Vatican II’s Decree on Missionary Activity, *Ad gentes*. This text makes clear that mission actually begins in the very life of the Holy Trinity with the sending of the Incarnate Word and Holy Spirit into the world. The roots of *Ad gentes* can be traced to the 1930’s when theologians began to recover the sense of mission based on the theology of the Trinity of the early centuries of the church. This recovery was part of the great retrieval of the literary sources of the early church in the decades which led up to Vatican II. The term “*missio Dei*” came to be used.

In the early church, as the theology of the Trinity was developed, and already we see roots of this in the Gospel of John, mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. In classical trinitarian language, mission is understood most fundamentally in this way: God the Father sends the Son; the Father and Son send the Spirit; the Father, Son and Spirit send the church. Missionary initiative comes not primarily from the command of Jesus to his disciples to go out into the whole world and preach the Gospel. Rather, missionary activity comes even more basically from the very nature of God, a triune communion of love.

Mission, therefore, is not primarily an activity of the church; it is primarily an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. It is in the nature of God to be missionary, to reach out in relationship, to pour forth love. The mission includes the church, of course. In fact, the church *is* mission in the sense that the church exists only for sake of God’s mission. So, there is church because

there is mission, but not vice versa. The Church *participates in the missio Dei*. The church is *part of* God's mission in the world, but it is not the whole of God's work in the world.

It is not without difficulty that the Church's teaching on this continues to develop. The insight that mission is about participating in and cooperating with what the triune God is already doing among all peoples has enormous implications for evangelization. Some of these implications were elaborated by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) and by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990). Obviously, in a few paragraphs it is not possible for us to do justice here to the depth of the mystery we are contemplating – namely, the mystery of the Trinitarian missions in creation and in human history. This mystery is at the heart of our faith and of our very being. The Holy Spirit continues in every age to help the church unfold, appreciate, and live its depths. The point is to say with considerable urgency that apostolic religious need to be nourished by ongoing formation in the theology of mission.

Conclusion:

In these reflections I have offered many challenges to the theologians present among us by expressing the expectations and needs apostolic religious have for their work. A proper conclusion might be to challenge also the general superiors with some suggestions for next steps that we need to take regarding all that has been said. Alas, this is not the purview of the task assigned to me and we are out of time. However, I naturally have a keen interest in becoming clear on what are called to be and to do as apostolic religious today, and I am bold enough to say that I even have a few thoughts on the matter. I hope we get to that in our conversations these days. For now, let me close in a manner consistent with my conviction that starting points are important. If you will allow, I will end by quoting the first paragraph, the starting point, of the Constitution of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. It is most apt.

To each of us at this moment of salvation history, the words of Christ ring clear: “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world . . . May they be one in us . . . so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (John 17: 18, 21). We are called and we are sent.²¹

- 1 The manuscripts of the papers delivered at the conference, including that of Professor Butler, can be accessed at: <http://www.stonehill.edu/x14963.xml>. The reference here is to page 22 of Butler's manuscript, "Apostolic Religious Life: A Public, Ecclesial Vocation." It is important to note that the immediate context of Professor Butler's suggestion that perhaps it is time for a formal visitation is her strong criticism of the leadership of two of the conferences of major superiors in the United States: Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) and Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). One wonders about the relationship of the concerns expressed here to the broad range of concerns of the doctrinal assessment of LCWR initiated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in February, 2009.
- 2 Ibid., page 13.
- 3 Ibid., page 26.
- 4 This is a helpful term. I use it in the sense described by John J. Burkhard, OFM Conv., in his "Translator's Preface" to Ghislain Lafont's *Imagining the Catholic Church: Structured Communion in the Spirit*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), pp. xiii-xxi. "In reading Lafont," Burkhard writes, "I had a sense of the Church as a whole, and that this comprehensive understanding emerged from a close reading of the Church's history and the current human condition. . . . The Church cannot be contemplated in isolation from history. . . . I call this general approach to a theology of the Church a 'Fundamental Ecclesiology'" (pp. xiii-xiv). As Burkhard explains, Fundamental Ecclesiology is a theology of the Church that dialogues with the traditional partners of theology – philosophy, history, and Scripture – but also is sensitive to issues of culture, pluralism of cultures, secularization, indifference to religion, and other factors of the postmodern world which prohibit theology from doing business as usual.
- 5 *UISG Bulletin* 63 (1983). The authors are: Mary Paul Ewen, SSCJ, Silvia Vallejo, ODN, and Paul Molinari, SJ. The article appeared also in *Review for Religious* 43 (1984): 3-25. It was reprinted in *Paths of Renewal for Religious*, Volume 2 of *The Best of the Review*, edited by David Fleming, SJ, (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1986): 337-359. I am using this edition of the text. In addition to the three authors of the text, the study group which produced the material included: Mary Abbott, SSND; Jeanne-Francoise De Jaeger, CR; Mary Margaret Johanning, SSND; Joseph Aubry, SDB; Peter Gumpel, SJ; and Egidio Viganò, SDB.
- 6 Ibid., note 5, page 359.
- 7 Ibid., p. 354.
- 8 One can certainly understand the position of Sister Sandra Schneiders, IHM, who prefers to call the new form of religious life by the name "ministerial religious life." She feels that, over the course of the centuries that it has evolved, women's "apostolic religious life" has become burdened with an understanding of itself as a hybrid of the monastic and apostolic (or ministerial) forms, with expectations of living fully the demands of both. See her article, "The Past and Future of Ministerial Religious Life" in *National Catholic Reporter* (October 2, 2009), a special section, pages 1a- 4a. Connecting apostolic religious life, understood as a whole, with discipleship is well articulated by Sister Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, in "Discipleship: Root Model of the Life Called 'Religious'," originally published in *Review for Religious* 42 (1983): 864-872, reprinted in *Paths of Renewal for Religious*, Volume 2 of *The Best of the Review*, edited by David Fleming, SJ, (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1986): 35-43.
- 9 *Evangelica testificatio*, (On the Renewal of the Religious Life According to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council, 1971), # 52; emphasis mine.
- 10 Homily at Eucharist at Av. dos Aliados Square, in Porto, Portugal, on May 14, 2010.
- 11 "Between Imagination and Doubt: Religious Leadership in Postmodern Culture," Keynote address, LCWR National Assembly, USA, August 18, 2002; "Making Conversations Real: Reflections on Religious Life in Postmodern Times," Keynote address, Religious Formation Conference, USA, November, 2003; "Following Jesus: A Journey Out Far and In Deep," Keynote address, National religious Vocation

Conference, USA, published in *Horizon* (Winter, 2005): 8-20.

- ¹² "This Matter of Religious Freedom," *America* 112 (January 9, 1965): 43. Reference quoted in John W. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" in O'Malley, et al., *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* (NY: Continuum, 2008), page 58 and page 86, note 17.
- ¹³ At times these conversions can feel like a complete rupture, but they are not. They do, however, imply change. They involve development, evolution, genuine shifts of perspective—all of which are included in what it means to live in history. Our faith has nothing to fear from full engagement. We have a rich storehouse and an unimaginably creative God about Whom there is always more to learn and to adore. As the Orthodox Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan famously held: tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. The difference makes all the difference.
- ¹⁴ In a presentation she offered in the United States for Region 2 of LCWR, on models of Christology and their relation to spirituality, October 26, 1993, page 4, manuscript copy.
- ¹⁵ In fact, it has only been since the Second Vatican Council, where this critical method of studying the Gospels was explicitly affirmed and taught, that you have this model becoming operative in the spirituality of the faithful. See *Dei Verbum*, especially paragraph 19.
- ¹⁶ The term is from Paul Knitter, "Deep Ecumenicity versus Incommensurability: Finding Common Ground on a Common Earth," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Human*, (Volume 3 of Religions of the World and Ecology), edited by Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), page 368. In response to postmodern academics who insist that there are no such things as "metanarratives," there is no way beyond language to "reality" and any claim to have the meaning of history must be rejected as oppressive and exclusionary, Knitter posits that surely we must admit that we have "metaproblems." We have "universal, particular problems that affect everyone." In this context he is referring to the ecological peril, the threat to earth of humanity's modes of consumption of resources which raise "ethical issues and [make] ethical demands that apply universally, to all of us." Ibid.
- ¹⁷ I am grateful to Professor Schneiders for allowing me to read the first three chapters of this forthcoming third volume of her trilogy on religious life. These chapters deal with the biblical foundations of a theology of the world that is part of what I believe is sorely needed today. This quotation is from page 22 of the manuscript copy of Chapter One, "Naming the Field: To What Are Religious Missioned?"
- ¹⁸ "The Charism and Identity of Religious Life," in *Paths of Renewal for Religious*, Volume 2 of *The Best of the Review*, edited by David Fleming, SJ, (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1986): 64.
- ¹⁹ The felicitous phrase, "bearing the ancient wisdom with a new justice," appears in the last line of Elizabeth Johnson's seminal work, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 273.
- ²⁰ SEDOS (Service of Documentation and Study on Global Mission) is a forum open to Institutes of Consecrated Life which commit themselves to deepening their understanding of global mission. SEDOS encourages research and disseminates information through its bulletin and website, public conferences, working groups, as well as its annual seminar. SEDOS publications are available in many languages. The homepage can be found at: <http://www.sedos.org>
- ²¹ *You Are Sent*, S.S.N.D. Constitution, approved on March 25, 1986, paragraph 1.



THE RADICAL NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF CONSECRATED LIFE

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Original in English

I. Introduction

When I looked at the topic assigned me I felt a bit overwhelmed. How does one talk about the “radical nature and significance” of *anything* in fifteen minutes or less? And “consecrated life” in Canon Law includes Religious Institutes and a number of other forms of life. So, following the example of the wicked servant in Luke 16:1-9 whom Jesus commended for his wisdom, I immediately took my bill, sat down, and wrote off most of my obligation by placing two parameters on my reflections.

First, following Mary Maher’s lead I will restrict my reflections to Apostolic Religious Life. Second, by “radical nature” I mean not some Platonic essence constituted by certain unchanging “essential elements” but something at the root of Religious Life that is specific and distinctive even though that life can and even must take different forms in diverse historical situations.

II. Starting Point

I agree whole-heartedly with Mary Maher that the choice of starting point in theological exploration is critical because where one stands determines what one can see. My starting point is a twofold affirmation. First, apostolic Religious Life is *radically constituted* by the lifelong total consecration of the Religious to God effected and expressed by perpetual Profession lived in community and mission. Second, and simultaneously, that life is *intrinsically shaped* by the historical context, including the charism of the founder, in which it is born and in which it is lived.

These two features are correlative and determine both the continuity of Religious Life as it has been lived from the first century to the present, and also the discontinuity among various forms of the life that have arisen throughout that same period. This interaction between radical constitution and historical development has produced a variety of charismatically distinct forms of Religious life which are not just superficially but substantially different. When we lose sight of the reciprocal influence of these two features, one of them will emerge as determinative not only of the life as such but also of the form of the life and the result will be either an ahistorical essentialism or a rootless existentialism.

A concrete instance of this problem was the increasingly dysfunctional hybrid form of Religious Life that women's Religious congregations, whose founders clearly intended them to be non-cloistered and apostolic,¹ but which were constrained to a basically monastic form of Religious Life for most of their histories until the 20th century. Although such apostolic congregations were canonically approved as Religious in 1900² and urged to assume their fully apostolic character by 20th century popes and theologians³ and finally by the Council itself, the claiming of their fully apostolic character has caused and continues to cause considerable tension within and between congregations⁴ and between renewing congregations and some elements in the hierarchy.⁵

III. The Mediating Category: World

My hypothesis is that the critical theological category which governs the relationship between the radical constitution of Religious Life as a life of total consecration lived in community and mission and the new historical form of non-cloistered and non-clerical apostolic Religious Life that emerged in the 16th century and is coming into its own today is — “the world.”

We cannot trace, even briefly, the 2000 year history of the Church and

its relation to the non-ecclesiastical reality in which it is embedded. But, essentially, the relationship between the Church and what it defined as the “world,” meaning everything other than its institutional self, was one of antagonism and increasing enmity. Nuance is impossible in a talk of this length, but I think we could say that relations between the two “cities” as Augustine called them, or the spiritual order and the temporal order as the medievals defined them, or eventually the divinely established and unchanging reality of the Church equated with the Reign of God versus the corruption of modernity which, as Pius X declared, was not so much a heresy as the “synthesis of all heresies,”⁶ were habitually characterized by alienation and rejection.

Religious Life, at least from the inception of desert monasticism, was the purest expression and form of the Church’s repudiation of the world. Flight from the world, death to the world, renunciation of the world, separation from the world was central to the self-understanding of Religious and to the Church’s understanding of the life. This world-repudiation took the form of physical separation by actual geographical relocation into the desert, monastery, or convent. Conspicuous clothing, daily common horarium requiring the nearly continuous physical presence of the Religious in the house, and papal cloister estranged and protected Religious from the “worldly” life which surrounded the convent or monastery.

Furthermore, for Religious the world was not only everything outside the Church but everything outside the cloister, even other Catholics. This physical and social world-rejection was so universal, so deep-seated, and so long-standing in the history of Religious Life that it came to be seen as belonging to the very essence of the life itself. Even after Leo XIII recognized apostolic congregations as an authentic form of Religious Life, these world-renouncing features, because they had come to be seen as essential to Religious Life itself rather than characteristic of a particular form of the life, remained characteristic of non-clerical apostolic Religious Life until the renewal of Vatican II.⁷ And the recent investigation of apostolic congregations of women Religious in the U.S., insofar as any intelligible reason for it was given, was motivated by the perceived “secularism”, i.e., the “worldliness,” of these Religious which was a thinly veiled reference to the issues of enclosure, i.e., habit, group living, horarium, cloister, and strictly institutionalized apostolates.

IV. Vatican II and the World

Scholars have identified various, though not unrelated, characteristics, topics, outcomes, teachings, even style and spirit as the defining feature of

the Second Vatican Council.⁸ From the standpoint of Religious Life, I would suggest that the primary and pivotal originality of Vatican II was the paradigm shift in the Church's self-understanding of its relationship to the world. The Council reached a kind of inspired crescendo in the unprecedented pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, "The Church in the Modern World." In it the negative understanding of the Church-world relationship, of which the ultramontane anti-modernism of the 19th and early 20th century was a kind of apotheosis, gave way to an understanding of "world" as that which God so loved as to give the only Son" (see Jn. 3:16). Even if the document is overly optimistic in places, its ringing preamble affirming the Church's solidarity with all humanity and unreserved commitment to the common human project, like Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, announced the dawn of a new age.

Vatican II, in short, not only modified but actually reversed the stance of animosity between Church and world. This created a profound theological and spiritual challenge, even disorientation, for Religious Life for which world-denial had been and still was, at the close of the Council, a central feature of its self-understanding. How could Religious, who had always seen themselves, and been seen by the Church — precisely because of their separation from the world — as the vanguard of the faithful, the "more illustrious portion of the flock of Christ,"⁹ a if not *the* primary incarnation and instrument of the Church's self-understanding as the antithesis of the world, re-conceptualize their vocation in terms of the Church's new espousal of solidarity with the world without renouncing their very identity? Much of the struggle today among Religious themselves and certainly the misgivings of some of the hierarchy about the conciliar renewal of the life centers precisely on the suspicion that contemporary Religious have become "secularized," thereby renouncing their true identity and vocation in the Church.

I am convinced that what is most needed today if Religious Life, and specifically apostolic Religious Life, is going to remain faithful to its radical nature *and* be significant for our time is a much more adequate, biblically based theology of "world" and an appropriate spirituality of "world engagement." Time prevents pursuing this topic in depth but I want to indicate the direction in which I think we are being called as we continue this project of claiming apostolic Religious Life in continuity with, but fully distinct from, the monastic form.

V. New Theology and New Spirituality

Just as, in the decades between 1950 and 1980, Religious were caught

up in a complete re-imagination of the “self”, so today we are challenged to re-imagine “world.” Both self and world are imaginative constructs, not things. But both had been reduced in the minds of many Religious to quasi-material caricatures resulting from inadequate theological anthropology and cosmology resulting in bad spirituality.

The self, for example, is not simply everything inside my skin, much less the negative dynamics suggested by words such as “selfish,” “self-centered,” or “self-willed.” Under the influence of modern psychology and sociology, in conjunction with renewed biblical and theological anthropology, Religious learned that the self embraced the whole of subjectivity, including especially its relationality. It was at least as challenging and important to develop a true self who could relate maturely to God and to the rest of the human race as to suppress or repress the dysfunctionality of which the distorted self is capable.

Mistakes were made in the process of emerging from a medieval psychology and spirituality of repression and collectivism, proposed under the ideal of “self-denial” and many people feared that Religious had abandoned spirituality in favor of worldly “self-realization.” But few today would question the commitment of Religious to legitimate and life-giving personal development which is the *sine qua non* of a mature capacity for self-donation.

Similarly, the conception of “world” as everything outside my skin, especially anything, satisfying, creative, or productive, is a materialistic reduction that is being challenged by modern physical sciences and the cosmic consciousness it is generating. Universe science is being theologically undergirded by a new appreciation of creation as God’s self-bestowing love, of human history as the context of the incarnation of the Word in whom humanity is called to divinization, and of humanity as the object of God’s Trinitarian mission.

This theological re-imagining of “world” as the universe which God so loved as to give the only Son must give rise to a spirituality of world-engagement. Our commitment to this world-loving God can no longer be expressed by strategies of self-isolation, social distance, non-participation, and elitism in relation to the world and its people.

Just as there is a “self” whom St. Paul lamented as a power within us that is at war with our true self (see Rom. 7:15-24) and that subverts both union with God and ministerial effectiveness, so there is a “world” which is under the influence of Satan, the devil, the “prince of this world,” (see Jn. 8:44; 12:31; 13:2,27; 14:30; 16:11). This evil world is in us and our

communities as well as in the systems, institutions, and social structures of the historical reality in which we participate. The field of this world is God's but it is laced with the weeds of the enemy (see Mt. 13:24-30; 36-43) operating through the "principalities and powers" (see Rom. 8:38; Eph. 6:12) that make the poor poorer so that the rich may get richer, that make violence the solution of choice in all conflicts of interest, that exploit the weak for the benefit of the powerful.¹⁰ And just as mistakes can be made in the commitment to legitimate self-development so there can be naïveté and extremism in the embrace of the world by some Religious. But abuses must never become the excuse for arresting development.

VI. The Radicality of Religious Life

This consideration of the historical context in which a really new form of Religious Life, namely, apostolic Religious Life emerged five centuries ago but is only in our time assuming its charismatic character of genuine ministerial world-engagement brings us back to the other feature of Religious Life, namely, its radical nature. I suggested at the outset that this consists in the total consecration of Religious to God through perpetual Profession. For lack of time, I will simply state, as a possible conversation topic, my conviction that the three vows, the form Profession has taken in most congregations and the substance of which is involved in all forms of Profession, do not necessarily have to be understood in terms of physical flight from the world. They can be understood, and I think much better and more fruitfully understood, not as the assumption of supererogatory obligations and practices, but as the coordinates of an alternate "world," not another place but an alternate imaginative reality construction. By profession Religious create, live in, and minister out of an alternate "world," which they offer to their contemporaries as a real historical possibility.

By the radical stance Religious take toward the three world-constituting coordinates of *relationship, material goods, and power*, through consecrated celibacy, evangelical poverty, and prophetic obedience, they create a living realization in their own community life of the true world of which God dreams while working through their ministry to make it real in history. Religious choose total personal possessionlessness which is only possible in a community in which all things are held in common. And such community is only possible among those who are of one heart and one soul. Religious choose to use power only with and for others, never against or over them, as they discern God's design for themselves and for the world and effect it first in a voluntary community of equal disciples, and secondly by their collegial engagement in full-time and life-long ministry. Religious negotiate

the dynamic tension between the exclusiveness and the inclusiveness of human relationships by the concentration of their love on God alone even as they embrace in that love all their sisters and brothers in this world without exception or distinction.

Apostolic Religious Life today, as I see it, is in deep continuity with the radical nature of Religious Life as it has always been understood and lived in the Church. But it is also a distinct form of that life, substantially different in important respects from other forms of the life, specifically monastic and clerical forms. The continuity is found in the radical nature of a life of total consecration to God by lifelong Profession of the evangelical counsels which is characteristic of all forms of the life. But the discontinuity with preceding forms of the life, which constitutes the significance of the life in our times, consists in the embrace, through the self-gift in ministry which is constitutive of the apostolic form of the life, of the world that God so loved as to give the only Son.

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1. Examples of such foundations are the following: Ursulines founded by Angela Merici (1474-1540); IBVM founded by Mary Ward (1585-1645); Daughters of Charity founded by Louise de Marillac (1591-1660); CND founded by Marguerite Bourgeoys (1620-1700); PBVM founded by Nano Nagle (1718-1784); Mercies founded by Catherine McAuley (1778-1841); Josephites founded by Mary MacKillop (1842-1909). None of these founders intended their Sisters to be cloistered. Some of the orders, such as the Ursulines, were actually forced into virtually complete cloister. Some, like the Daughters of Charity, renounced the status of Religious in order to remain uncloistered. Most of the others spent most of their histories at least “semi-cloistered” until close to the time of Vatican II or even after.
 2. Leo XIII, in 1900, published “*Conditae a Christo*” which officially recognized “Congregations devoted to works of the Apostolate” as Religious institutes.
 3. Pius XI, in 1950 and 1952 was the first Pope to actually encourage women Religious to embrace their apostolic identity and the lifestyle adjustments this would entail. For a brief description of his active intervention for the renewal of apostolic Religious Life see Lora Ann Quiñonez and Mary Daniel Turner, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992) 11-12. Leon Joseph Suenens, in his ground-breaking book, *The Nun in the World: New Dimensions in the Modern Apostolate* (London: Burns & Oates, 1962) provided a kind of charter for the developments which would flow from Vatican II.
 4. The tension between the traditionalist Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) and the progressive Leadership Conference of Women

Religious (LCWR) in the United States has actually been encouraged and aggravated by the Vatican.

5. The current apostolic visitation of U.S. women's apostolic congregations was urged by both traditionalist Religious and by Vatican officials concerned about the apostolic engagement of women Religious which is viewed in some quarters as "secularist".
6. Pius X, "Pascendi", September 8, 1907.
7. I think it is important to realize that the non-cloistered character of clerical orders was not due to a genuine reinterpretation of Religious Life as ministerial but to the precedence that the clerical identity and vocation of the members was given over their Religious character. They were priests (therefore men called to ministry) who happened to belong to an order rather than Religious who happened to be ordained. The earliest male orders, e.g., Benedictines, saw a real incompatibility between the two states of life and proscribed ordination of their members but the foundation of clerical orders, especially in the 16th century and after, changed this understanding of male Religious Life. This is a topic which continues to demand and receive extensive reflection but it is far from solved or resolved (see *A Concert of Charisms: Ordained Ministry in Religious Life*, edited by Paul K. Hennessy [New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1977] for excellent essays laying out the various dimensions of the issue.) To reflect clearly on the ministerial nature of Religious Life as Religious it is helpful to restrict the discussion to non-ordained Religious, i.e., Sisters and Brothers, or to ordained Religious insofar as they are Religious.
8. See John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), especially the Introduction (pp. 1-14) for this great Church historians opinion on the major features of the Council.
9. This expression was used of consecrated virgins by Cyprian in his treatise II on "The Dress of Virgins," par. 3. Available in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (American Edition), vol. 5, translated by Ernest Wallis. The treatise is typical of the early Fathers' in its view of enclosure, veil, and other aspects of world-renunciation as pertaining to the very essence of consecrated life.
10. See Walter Wink, *The Powers Series* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1984, 1986, 1992) on the role of the "powers" in the domination systems of our world. The three volumes are aptly named *Naming the Powers*, *Unmasking the Powers*, *Engaging the Powers*.

CHALLENGES TO AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE FROM THE WORLD AND THE CHURCH OF TODAY

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Original in English

The topic assigned to me for this seminar is “Challenges to and the Opportunities for Religious Life arising from the World and the Church of Today”. As I understand it, the main objective of this first talk is simply to stimulate and provoke reflection and discussion. I would like to do so, following the indications given by the organizers of this seminar, in three steps: (1) first, which is the longer part of this paper, some of the challenges to Religious Life today; (2) then, secondly, some of the opportunities for Religious Life; and, (3) finally, some themes or questions that a theology of the Religious Life today might take up.

There are obviously many challenges to and opportunities for Religious Life today. I have made no effort to be exhaustive. Instead, I have chosen to highlight only some of the more fundamental ones.

Although I have separate sections for the challenges and the opportunities, I do not wish to make a sharp distinction between these two categories. For, as I see it, challenges somehow contain opportunities and opportunities in some way include challenges.

1. Challenges to Religious Life

Let me begin then with the challenges to Religious Life today arising from the world and the Church of Today. Of the many such challenges, I wish to concentrate on those which arise from a globalized world, on the one hand, and from the experience of a world Church, on the other.

1.1. The Emergence of a Globalized World

I believe it can be said that the most dramatic development in the world over the last 20 years or so is the phenomenon known as “globalization”.¹ Globalization refers to the world being experienced as a “global village”. Basically, this is the result of the “revolution” brought about by the epoch-making developments in the information, communication and transportation technology. Distances are cut down drastically. Peoples and places are linked to each other more easily. Living in the world now seems like living in a village. Globalization may thus be defined as the contraction of time and space, resulting in the growing interdependence of peoples of diverse nations and cultures.²

Globalization is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, its “virtues” are extolled – globalization, it is said, is about tearing down borders, uniting a divided humanity, eliminating poverty, and securing world peace. It is hailed as an expression of the anguish and labor pains of all creation groaning to produce a more united and fraternal world (cf. Rm 8:18-23). On the other hand, the seamy side of globalization is underlined – globalization, it is claimed, includes an inbuilt process of exclusion that widens the gap between the rich and the poor. It is criticized for its “one-size-fits-all” approach, allowing existing powers to impose a common or uniform economic system, political ideology, philosophical outlook, cultural value-system, and “religious” mentality.

Globalization is probably most visible in the globalization of the world economy. In this regard, globalization is often viewed as an attempt to impose a single vision of how national economies should function and how they should be structured, and is regarded as a modern neo-colonial process whereby global economic powers secure their hold over both developing and developed countries. In this global economy, the prevailing concern is for profit, and its instinct to “let the market decide” favors the interests of the powerful and leads to the marginalization and exclusion of large groups of people and indeed of whole geographical areas. The relentless pursuit of profit and the disregard of moral and ethical considerations create artificial needs and promote a “consumerist” mentality, reinforcing a secular lifestyle.

International migration is another expression of globalization. While migration is an age-old phenomenon, the global nature of migration today is what gives it a particular prominence. More people today choose or are forced to migrate than ever before, and they move to an increasing number of countries.³ As a result of international migration, societies today are becoming more and more multicultural. People from different cultures not only are in much closer contact today, but also are oftentimes forced to live alongside each other. Many of the world's cities today are inhabited by groups of people of widely diverse cultural origins and religious affiliation.

Global and local migration is not only changing the face of our cities, but has also accelerated the pace of urbanization. By 2008 more than half of the world's population now live in cities⁴. This has led to the emergence of ever-expanding mega-cities which become centers of multiculturalism and supermarkets of plural beliefs and divergent values. Thus, opposing trends of secularization and religious resurgence give rise to divisive social movements of secularism side by side fundamentalism. Between these two spiritual poles, many others simply prefer to walk out of mainline Churches and remain "believers without belonging".⁵ Urbanization also shifts the worst of poverty from rural to urban areas. It is estimated that in developing countries today, one out of three urban dwellers lives in city slums – that is, approximately one billion people or one-sixth of the world population.⁶

Among the main casualties of globalization is "mother earth". The unscrupulous search for profit has led to the irresponsible exploitation of the planet's limited resources, causing grave damage to the ecosystem. Unrestrained economic production and consumption litter the world with environmental waste, leading to the phenomenon known as "climate change". Wars within and among nations are damaging Nature by powerful "weapons of mass destruction". All of this endangers the earth's future and threatens to destroy the planet. Other casualties of globalization are usually those who are most vulnerable and defenseless – the poor in general and, in particular, women, children, and the aged.

Globalization has become a favourable ground for the entrenchment in society and the spread around the world of the phenomenon of secularization which had emerged about a generation or so earlier. Secularization refers to a "turning to the world" as the point of reference for the explanation of the mysteries of life and for the search for its fulfilment. Extreme forms of secularization make the world the exclusive, and reject any transcendent, point of reference. With the rejection of the transcendent come the rejection of any absolute claims and the reign of relativism or, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, the "tyranny of relativism". Secularization manifests itself

more powerfully as a lifestyle than as a doctrine – a lifestyle that shows little interest in or openness to, if at all, the transcendent and relies more heavily, often exclusively, on the world as the source of human fulfilment.⁷

1.2. Challenges from a Globalized World: Crisis in the Religious Life

What challenges does a globalized secular world pose to the consecrated life? There is little doubt by now that secularization in a globalized world has provoked a profound crisis in consecrated life, at least in the secularized countries of Western Europe and North America. Many believe, however, that due to the phenomenon of globalization, a similar crisis will eventually occur as well in consecrated life in other parts of the world. There are two primary indications of this crisis: dwindling membership and perceived irrelevance.

1.2.1. Dwindling Membership

The latest statistics from the 2010 *Annuario Pontificio* reveal a slight increase (+1.7%) of Catholics around the world between 2007 and 2008 (from 1.147 to 1.166 million).⁸ In the period 2000-2008, there was a slight increase (+1%) of the number of priests. This, however, was largely due to increases in Africa, Asia and the Americas. Europe registered a considerable decrease from 51.5% to 47.1% of all priests. In the same period, the number of religious women worldwide fell by 7.8% (from 801,185 to 739,067). And this was largely due to decreases in Europe (-17.6%), the Americas (-12.0%) and Oceania (-14.9%). In contrast, Africa and Asia registered increases (+21.2% in Africa and +16.4% in Asia). Between 2007 and 2008, the number of seminarians worldwide increased slightly by 1% (from 115,919 to 117,024).

A further evidence of the decrease in the number of priests and religious in Western Europe and North America is the ongoing process of merging parishes and provinces of religious congregations. Over the last 20 years, in my own congregation, we have had three mergers (of two provinces each) in Europe, one in the US and one in South America. There should have been more in Europe if not for the resistance of some confreres. In any case, there is an undeniable dearth of vocations in Western Europe and North America. We have a total of 1,057 candidates in temporal vows; of these two are from Western Europe and one from North America. Of our 331 novices, only one is from Western Europe and none from North America. I believe the situation in most other religious congregations is similar. Indeed, vocations are dramatically scarce in Western Europe and North America, and the few that there still are tend to join the newer and more conservative religious congregations.

The lack of new vocations has led to the aging of our provinces in Western Europe and North America. In Western Europe, the average ranges from a high of 75 and a low of 55, for an overall average of 65. In North America, the range is from 60 to 55, with an overall average of 58. These figures would have been much higher if not for the coming in recent years of several younger members from Asia and Africa. With the aging of members, there is also a lack of vitality and creativity and a fear of taking risks and assuming new initiatives. Stagnation sets in and there is great uncertainty about the continued relevance of our life and mission.

The situation is different, of course, in other parts of the world. If we are merging provinces in Western Europe, in Asia and Africa we are splitting provinces and creating new ones. Vocations continue to be abundant in Asia and Africa, and the average age of members is considerably low – 41 in Africa and 43 in Asia. Some say, however, that it is only a question of time until a similar situation develops in these continents. Already now, for instance, there seems to be a shift in the source of vocations in India – from Kerala in the south to the north. Also in the Philippines we seem to be experiencing a drop in vocations.

1.2.2. Perceived Irrelevance

The dearth of vocations in Western Europe and North America is an indication of, among other things, the perception that the religious life is no longer a meaningful life-option. While this certainly has to do with the reluctance or unwillingness of the youth of today to make a lifelong commitment, it also reveals their perception of the irrelevance of religious life today. It is not so much that the youth of today no longer have the generosity and idealism required for consecrated life. Indeed, many of today's youth are committed to such noble causes as the promotion of peace and justice in the world, the defence of human rights, the eradication of poverty, the preservation of the integrity of creation. Many are also involved in the volunteer movement. Several join different lay movements.⁹ Apparently, however, today's youth no longer see the religious life as a relevant option through which they can channel their idealism and generosity.

It does not help either that some prominent individuals and groups in the Church hierarchy think, and sometimes even publicly express the opinion, that the religious congregations no longer have a significant role to play in the Church. "The religious belong to the past; the future belongs to the new lay movements", some say. For these individuals and groups, the new lay movements have replaced the religious as the "special forces" in the Church. Consequently, in some sectors of the Church, there is a certain preference

for the lay movements over the religious congregations – especially those religious congregations which, in the mind of these sectors of the Church, have overemphasized the reforms of Vatican II and have consequently opened up too much to the modern world.

Connected with what has just been said is the effort of some in the Church hierarchy, consciously or unconsciously, to domesticate the religious life by considering religious as simply a “workforce” or employees of the hierarchical Church.¹⁰ In this way, the consecrated life is emptied of its specific character as a charismatic gift and a prophetic voice in the Church. This further undermines the relevance of the religious life. For the religious life loses its relevance when it loses its specific identity and can no longer play its specific role in the Church and in the world.

It is said, however, that the crisis of relevance of the religious life is simply an aspect of the more fundamental crisis of relevance of religion as such, or more correctly, of religion in its present socio-cultural form.¹¹ The present socio-cultural form of religion arose out of the context of a largely agrarian society. This type of society, however, has practically disappeared. Society has undergone a radical transformation and is now largely not only post-agrarian but also post-industrial and post-modern. Thus the present socio-cultural form of religion is no longer an adequate or relevant expression of humanity’s basic religiosity and search for spirituality. There is need, therefore, for a new socio-cultural form of religion, or of a “post-religion religion” – one which can respond to humanity’s religiosity in the post-modern world of the cyber-age.¹²

It is because of this that the religious life today is in decline and is perceived to have lost its relevance in the advanced societies of Western Europe and North America. This crisis, however, is not peculiar to Western Europe or North America as such, but to any society that undergoes the profound socio-cultural change that Western Europe and North America have experienced. The same crisis would or will occur in Asia and Africa if the society in these continents undergoes a similar radical socio-cultural transformation, or even simply because of the cultural osmosis that global communications foster. In fact, if and when it occurs in Asia or Africa, the crisis may even be “schizophrenic” in that it is possible that while its cultural mentality becomes “post-industrial” and post-modern, its economic infrastructures remain “agrarian” or simply “industrial”.

What is needed, if the religious life is to survive, is not just a refounding but a recasting, not just reform or reorientation but transformation or metamorphosis. What is needed is a “post-religious religious life”.

1.3. The Emergence of a World Church

Perhaps the most significant development in the Catholic Church since Vatican II is its emergence as a “world Church”. As we know, this was Karl Rahner’s theological interpretation of Vatican II.¹³ According to Rahner, at Vatican II, for the first time in history, the Church was experienced as a truly “world Church”. While, at Vatican I, there were representatives of the episcopal sees of Asia and Africa, these were missionary bishops of European or American origin. At this time there was yet no indigenous episcopate anywhere in the Church. It was different at Vatican II. The episcopal sees of Asia and Africa were represented by native born bishops. Even if small in number in comparison with the European bishops, still they were present and participated fully in the decision-making process of the Church. At Vatican II the Church was experienced as truly, even if only initially, a World-Church with a world-episcopate acting in consonance with the Supreme Pontiff. Rahner considers this an epoch-making event, equal in importance to only one other epoch-making transition in the history of the Church, namely, the transition from Jewish to Gentile Christianity.¹⁴ Vatican II, therefore, opened a new period of Church history in which the Church is “no longer the Church of the West with its American spheres of influence and its export to Asia and Africa.”

This development implies that the Catholic Church has also become a polycentric Church. Europe is no longer its exclusive center. Other centers are emerging – Latin America, Africa, Asia, Oceania. One expression of this fact is the formation of the regional or continental conferences of bishops, even if their role in the Church is not yet fully recognized or accepted. Another expression of this fact was the holding of the five extraordinary synods in the years preceding the Great Jubilee of 2000 – Africa (1994), America (1997), Asia (1998), the Pacific and Oceania (1998), and Europe (1999).¹⁵ Despite their many shortcomings, the continental synods were a recognition of the diversity of situations and cultures in which the universal Church finds itself. They were an admission of the fact that attention to the variety of situations and cultures is important in determining the shape and form of the life and mission of the Church in the continents. In effect, the message was that it is no longer possible to simply give directives from the center and that it is necessary to take into account the concrete situation of the local Churches.¹⁶

The emergence of a world Church, therefore, entails the disintegration of the identification of Christianity with the West. This de-westernization of the Church is further enhanced by the so-called “demographic change” or “population shift” from the north to the south of the world. At the turn

of the millennium, the “center of gravity” of the Catholic Church has shifted from the “global North” to the “global South” (that is, Latin America, Africa and Asia). While in 1900, just 15 percent of the Catholic population lived in the southern hemisphere, by 2000 that figure stood at 67 percent, or two-thirds of the world’s 1.1 billion Catholics. By mid-century the southern share of the Catholic population is projected to be 75 percent.¹⁷

1.4. Challenges from a World Church: Disorder in Religious Orders

What challenges does a world Church pose to the consecrated life? Among the many, allow me to single out two, under the heading of “Disorder in Religious Orders”, namely, multicultural membership and multi-directional mission.

1.4.1. Multicultural Membership

The multiculturalism of the world Church is being replicated in several religious congregations which are international in its membership either because they were designed to be so from the beginning or because they have been forced to be so due to the drop of vocations in the West. Where the substructure was mono-cultural, a certain order and harmony were assured in the religious congregation. Mono-culturality usually ensured a common understanding of such things as community, prayer, silence, poverty, chastity, obedience. This was particularly true of religious congregations which were culturally homogeneous in membership.

But this was true also of international religious congregations in the period before Vatican II. For, during this period, little attention was given to the specificity of the cultures of members. Instead, the unconscious expectation was that all members learn, or adapt themselves to, the dominant culture of the congregation, which was usually the European culture. Indeed, what usually happened was that the formation program of the “mother province” in Europe was largely transported and copied in the “mission provinces” in America, Asia, Africa, Oceania.¹⁸

This changed with Vatican II and its positive evaluation of the cultures of peoples. Theology began speaking of inculturation and the building up of the local Church. There was no longer just one way of being Church or being Christian in the world. There are as many modalities as there are cultures. Similarly, in international religious congregations, the insight began to develop that there was not just one way of being a religious and that the charism of the Founder could find different expressions among the various cultures of different peoples. Like the Gospel, the original charism of the congregation not only could enrich but also could be enriched by the

cultures in which it incarnates itself. This led to a situation whereby the religious congregation comes to be seen as being composed no longer of members from different nationalities all learning the congregation's way of life shaped by the dominant culture, but of members from different nationalities sharing the richness of their cultural diversity. Gradually the religious congregation becomes not just the home of one culture but the place for the interaction of various cultures.

Order and harmony in religious orders are threatened when they become truly multicultural. When multiculturalism replaces mono-culturalism as the substructure of religious congregations, uniformity and order begin to be jeopardized. A certain kind of "disorder" replaces order, and in a certain sense, religious orders become "religious disorders".

In particular, a multicultural membership raises the question of the differing understandings of elements of the religious life, like prayer, community, use of money, and the vows.¹⁹ For instance, what does voluntary poverty mean when one has been forced to live in poverty all his or her life? What does poverty mean when one has more money or comfort in the religious community than his or her family in the village? What does obedience mean for someone who belongs to a culture where one never decides on his or her own? What does obedience mean for someone who belongs to a culture where one is expected to always obey one's elders?

1.4.2. Multi-directional Mission

A world Church implies the "coming of age" of the local Churches even in the so-called "mission receiving" countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. One expression of this is the emergence of missionaries originating from the South of the world. Europe is no longer the sole or even the primary source of missionaries. I do not have statistics and figures in this regard. But if my own congregation could be an indication, we now have some 600 Asian missionaries working outside their own countries in Europe, the US, Latin America, Africa and other parts of Asia. If we add to that the 50 African, and another 50 Latin American, missionaries working outside Africa and Latin America, this would mean some 700 missionaries from the South only from one missionary congregation.²⁰

This is not only a question of what is sometimes called "reverse mission" – that is, missionaries from the former mission territories going as missionaries to Europe or North America. For missionaries from the South also go as missionaries to Asia, Africa and Latin America. Thus, we also speak today not only of a "south-to-north" but also of a "south-to-south" mission, in contrast to the past where mission was largely a "north-to-

south” phenomenon.

Indeed, in the past, missionaries moved from Christian Europe to the rest of the pagan world in America, Africa, Asia, Oceania. Christian mission was about the white missionary who went to far away lands and lived among the natives. They claimed to bring the Gospel of Jesus, but unconsciously also carried along what was viewed as a superior culture, buttressed by advanced scientific knowledge and developed technology. In this period in the history of Christian mission, missionaries came “on the coattails of the colonizers”, in such a way that often it was difficult to distinguish between missionary activity and colonial rule. At this time, then, mission was an “orderly”, one-way movement from West to East, from North to South, or from the center to the periphery.

In recent years, however, this “order” has been disturbed with the emergence of missionaries from the South. Thus, from an “orderly” one-way movement from North to South, mission has become what appears to be a “disorderly” multi-directional movement, or even a “chaotic” movement from all directions and to all directions – South to North, South to South, East to West, East to East, periphery to center, periphery to periphery. In other words, the world Church is no longer neatly divided into the “missionary Church” here and the “mission Churches” there. Just as the world is no longer neatly divided into the center of faith and the periphery of unbelief, with the “people of God” here and the “gentes” (or the “pagan” nations) there. For, today, there are also “gentes” here and “people of God” there. Today, we speak of mission in all five continents. Mission has become multi-directional – a movement from all directions and to all directions. And this creates “disorder” in religious missionary orders.

In particular, multi-directional mission raises the question of the relevance of cross-cultural mission. For instance, I have often been asked questions such as the following: What is the sense of sending missionaries from non-Christian countries, like India or Indonesia, to Catholic countries in Latin America? Should they not rather remain in their own countries and evangelize the “gentes” there, instead of staffing Catholic parishes in Latin America? And what is really new about this phenomenon? Are we not just replacing European missionary personnel with Asian or African missionaries, while the way of doing mission remains basically the same?²¹

2. Opportunities For Religious Life

As described above, the situation of the world and the Church today offers many opportunities for the religious life. In particular, it offers the

possibility of linking up and networking among religious congregations themselves, and of collaboration and partnership with other groups in the Church and in the world. Of the many opportunities opened up by today's world and Church, I wish to mention just three, namely, interculturality in membership, inter-congregationality in ministry, and partnership in mission with the laity.

2.1. Intercultural Membership

Many religious congregations today have become international in membership. Some are international from the beginning, others have become international only more recently due to a decision to accept vocations from the global South owing to the dearth of vocations in the global North. While there are practical advantages to internationality, its real value is the witness it gives to the universality and openness to diversity of the Kingdom of God. This witness is especially urgent in the context of globalization which tends, on the hand, to exclude and, on the other hand, to eliminate all differences. In view of this, there is particular need today to witness that God's Kingdom is a kingdom of love that includes absolutely everyone and, at the same time, is open to the particularity of every person and people.

At the same time, internationality is also a powerful witness to the fact that, if inspired by the values of the Gospel, it is possible for people of different cultures and nations to live in communion and solidarity, in peace and harmony. International religious congregations can play a prophetic role in a fragmented world and be a source of hope for a world often torn by cultural, ethnic and racial conflicts, violence and wars. And so the search to promote international or intercultural religious communities is based not just on the scarcity of vocations in some parts of the world, but on the fact that at the heart of the religious vocation is the call to witness to God's Kingdom and be a prophetic voice in human society and a source of hope for the world.

The ideal, obviously, is not just "internationality" (or the mere presence in the congregation or community of members from different nationalities or cultures). Nor is it merely "multiculturalism" (or the ability of members from different nationalities or cultures to simply co-exist side by side each other). The ideal, rather, is true "interculturality", that is, a congregation or community which allows the different cultures of community members to interact with each other and thereby mutually enrich the individual members and the community as a whole. A genuine intercultural community is usually characterized by three things²², namely: (1) the recognition of other cultures (i.e., allowing minority cultures to be visible in the community),

(2) respect for cultural difference (i.e., avoiding any attempt to level off cultural differences by subsuming the minority cultures into the dominant culture), and (3) the promotion of a healthy interaction between cultures (i.e., seeking to create a climate whereby each culture allows itself to be transformed or enriched by the other).

Thus, a genuine intercultural community is one where members from different cultures truly feel they belong. Such a community, however, does not just happen by chance, or by simply putting together under the same roof people of different nations or cultures. Rather, a true intercultural community needs to be consciously created, intentionally promoted, carefully cared for, and attentively nurtured. It requires some basic personal attitudes, certain community structures, and a particular spirituality. Consequently, members need a specific program of formation, both initial and ongoing, which prepares them to live effectively and meaningfully in an intercultural community. Indeed, it is essential that members are convinced that interculturality is an ideal to be sought after and a value to be promoted.

2.2. Inter-congregational Collaboration

Our present world and Church also offer the opportunity, or even call for the necessity, of greater inter-congregational collaboration in ministry. “VIVAT International” is an NGO originally established in 2000 by two religious missionary congregations, the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) and Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS), for the purpose of JPIC advocacy at the United Nations. In four years time, it gained accreditation with the ECOSOC and DPI at the UN in New York. In the meantime, six other religious congregations have joined the NGO and two others are waiting to be admitted as associate members. Obviously, there were problems and difficulties which needed to be overcome in terms of organization, coordination, financing. Statutes and guidelines had to be written out and kept on being revised as the project develops.

The SSS project is the “Southern Sudan Solidarity Project”. In response to an invitation from the bishops of Southern Sudan, the USG-UISG have organized an inter-congregational mission in the country, beginning with two specific projects, namely, a teachers’ training college and a health services center. Several men and women religious congregations are collaborating in this mission in terms of finances and personnel. A congregation has volunteered to be the “lead-congregation” for each of the projects. The problems and difficulties of organization and coordination appeared to be big in the beginning simply because this was the first time that the USG-UISG were embarking on an inter-congregational project of this magnitude.

But eventually the initial difficulties were resolved and the projects seem to be advancing with reasonable progress.

It is clear that no one religious congregation would have been able to respond to the appeal of the bishops of Southern Sudan. Inter-congregational collaboration, despite the difficulties, made this possible. In addition, inter-congregational collaboration is bringing a particular richness to the local Church with a different style of presence of the diversity of charisms of the religious congregations. While different religious congregations coming separately and at different times to the local Church always bring about a richness with the diversity of charisms, this particular mission presents the local Church with a coordinated “ensemble” of diverse charisms.

In the end, however, inter-congregational collaboration is not just a strategy for mission. Collaboration is, in fact, a statement about mission – that is, that mission is *Missio Dei*, God’s mission first and foremost, and that our call to mission is but a call to share in God’s mission. This call to share in God’s mission entails a call to collaborate with all others who are similarly called by God. Collaboration, indeed, is an admission of the fact that mission is larger than what each individual or each congregation can do. It is even larger than what all congregations together can do. Collaboration, therefore, is very stuff of mission. It is an essential characteristic of mission. We collaborate with one another not just because we want to be more effective in mission. We collaborate because mission is God’s in the first place and the primary agent of mission is God’s Spirit.

2.3. Partnership in Mission with the Laity

Certainly, one of the characteristics of today’s Church is the emergence of an educated, highly motivated and active laity.²³ There are several factors which have led to the rise of the laity in the Church. One is the shortage of priests both in the north and the south. This has led to an expansion of the “lay ministry” in the Church by which many lay people have begun to occupy ministerial and administrative positions which were once almost exclusively held by priests.²⁴ Another factor is the new understanding of the lay apostolate coming from Vatican II, that is, that the lay apostolate is an apostolate on its own right, based on baptism rather than derived from the ministry of bishops and priests, with the specific mission of “renewing the temporal order”. This has led to the emergence of the so-called “new lay movements” through which many lay people take it upon themselves to evangelize culture and transform society.²⁵

Religious congregations have had always groups of lay people associated with them – third orders, tertiaries, associates, affiliates. These are lay

people who are attracted by the charism of religious congregations and who wish to share in their spirituality and collaborate with their mission. This raises the question of a “lay expression” of the charism of the Founder which goes beyond the confines of a religious institute or even of religious consecration. Another form of religious-lay collaboration is partnership with the autonomous or independent lay movements. This is no longer just the lay collaborating with the mission of religious congregations but religious congregations collaborating with or supporting the mission of the laity.

There is need today to foster both forms of collaboration and partnership with the laity. In the past, religious worked mainly, and at times exclusively, with priests and bishops. This has led to the danger of the religious being active mainly, and at times exclusively, within the ecclesial sphere, and thus the danger of religious being regarded as merely employees or a “workforce” of the Church hierarchy. As mentioned above, this would empty the religious life of its specific identity as a charismatic gift and prophetic voice in the Church. Partnering with the laity reminds religious of their role also in the secular world, thus safeguarding the specific identity and charism of the religious life.

Partnership with the laity also reminds religious that religious consecration is not a “fuga mundi” but entails involvement with the world, and that religious consecration needs to be lived in the context of the daily-life situations of people – family, children, school, neighborhood, workplace, etc. It reminds them that their vocation of witnessing to God’s Kingdom includes a call to transform and renew the world in the light of the Gospel, and that this vocation and mission is to be lived in the midst of the “joys and hopes and griefs and anxieties” of real women and men in an often broken and fragmented world.

The mission of witnessing to God’s Kingdom and transforming the world in the light of the Gospel needs the complement of the expertise of lay people in various fields in the secular world. Advocacy work, collaboration with NGO’s, networking with various groups in “civil society” are all manifestations of the realization that if the mission of “transforming the world” is to become concrete, practical and effective, it will entail getting enmeshed in the socio-political-economic realities of human society. It is here that partnership with the laity becomes crucial.

3. Themes/Questions for a Theology of the Religious Life

Allow me to conclude with some suggestions of themes or questions which a theology of the Religious Life today might take up.

3.1. Theology of Religion:

An elaboration of a renewed “theology of religion”, exploring the impact on religion of the profound socio-cultural changes in today’s globalized world. What socio-cultural form of religion adequately expresses humanity’s fundamental religiosity and search for spirituality today? What are the contours of the religious life in a renewed theology of religion? If the Religious Life has its roots in the monastic life which grew out of a largely agricultural context, what does Religious Life mean in an urbanized world?

3.2. Consecrated Life in the Church:

A reflection on the specific identity and role of the Religious Life in the Church. As a charismatic gift and prophetic voice in the Church, the Religious Life belongs to the “charismatic” rather than to the “hierarchical” dimension of the Church. What does this entail in the concrete? How should the relationship of the Religious Life with the ordained ministry and with the lay apostolate in the Church be conceived today? Are the “new religious communities” referred to in footnote 9 below a genuine development and viable form of consecrated life today?

3.3. Consecrated Life and Mission:

While mission theology speaks of a “paradigm shift” in the understanding of mission (basically from “*Missio Ecclesiae*” to “*Missio Dei*”), can we speak of a corresponding shift in the theology of the Religious Life? How does this paradigm shift in mission impact on the religious life as concretely lived today? Which are the new social situations which require the presence of religious today? Where should religious today be “re-locating” themselves in view of the new social needs?

3.4. The Evangelical Counsels:

Is the present theology of the evangelical counsels still appropriate and adequate today? How should the evangelical counsels be understood in the context both of a globalized secular society and the emergence of non-Western cultures (especially of Africa and Asia)? What new interpretations of the evangelical counsels emerge from today’s crises – ecological, financial, political, sexual-abuse, etc.?

3.5. The God-Experience:

Ultimately, the religious life is based on the personal experience of God. How does a personal experience of God come about today? In which ways do the youth of today encounter and experience God? What does the

phenomenon of “believers without belonging” mean for religious life? How should contemplation be understood today? How can mysticism and prophetism be fostered among the men and women of today? What does religious consecration mean today? Can a religious charism be lived today without a life-long religious consecration?

1. Cf. USG (Union of Superiors General), *Inside Globalization: Toward a Multi-centered and Intercultural Communion*, (Roma: Editrice “Il Calamo”, 2000), pp. 10-21; John Fuellenbach, *Church: Community for the Kingdom*, (Manila: Logos Publications, 2000), pp. 107-108; SVD XV General Chapter, “Chapter Statement”, *In Dialogue with the Word*, No. 1, Sept 2000, pp. 16-20; John Allen, *The Future Church* (NY: Doubleday, 2009), pp. 256-297.
2. Cf. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990). Or, “The growing planetary interconnectedness driven by technology, communications, travel, and economic integration”. John Allen, *The Future Church*, p. 257.
3. International migrants now come from all over the world and travel to all parts of the world. At the turn of the millennium, it was estimated that there were 150 million international migrants worldwide, equivalent to one out of 50 persons (cf. IOM [International Organization for Migration], “Global Migration Trends: An Era of International Migration” IOM Publications, Geneva, [(http://www.iom.int)]. Similarly, also at the turn of the millennium, it was estimated that there were about 50 million refugees or forced migrants, equivalent to one out of 120 persons (cf. Michael Blume, “Il Fenomeno Globale Dell’immigrazione”, Pontificio Consiglio della Pastorale dei Migranti e degli Itineranti, Città del Vaticano, 29 maggio 2000).
4. Cf. United Nations Population Fund, “The State of the World Population 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth”, http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/english/notes/notes_for_boxes.html#2-1.
5. Cf. Grace Davie, “Believing without Belonging: Is this the Future of Religion in Britain?” *Social Compass* 37:4:445-469.
6. Cf. United Nations Population Fund, “The State of the World Population 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth”; UNCHS (Habitat), 2006a, *State of the World’s Cities 2001*. Nairobi: UNCHS (Habitat).
7. There are those, however, who claim that the secularization theory is “essentially mistaken”, cf. Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview” in Elliott Abrams (ed), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent*

Religion and World Politics (Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing, 1999); "Reflections on the Sociology of Religion Today", *Sociology of Religion* 2001, 62:4, pp. 443-454.

8. Catholics now account for 17.40% (from 17.33%) of the world population which has itself grown from 6.62 to 6.70 billion.
9. As well as some "new religious communities" in some countries like France (e.g. the *Communauté Saint Jean*, the *Fraternités monastiques de Jérusalem*). Cf. Msgr. Pierre Raffin, "Thoughts on the Present and the Future of Religious Life in France and Western Europe", talk given at the 75th Semestral Assembly of the Union of Superiors General (USG), 27 May 2010, Rome.
10. This, indeed, is one interpretation of the apostolic visitation ordered by the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) of the religious institutes of women in the United States. Cf. Sandra Schneiders, "Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form", <http://ncronline.org/news/women/religious-life-sharing-jesus-passion-resurrection> (January 04-08, 2010).
11. Cf. José María Vigil, "Crisis de la vida religiosa en Europa, Llamado a la Vida Religiosa mundial", <http://www.redescristianas.net/2010/03/14>.
12. Thus, according to José Vigil, the problem is no longer just that Vatican II has not been implemented. For the "modern world" which was the context of the reforms of Vatican II is no longer there. We are, instead, confronted with a "post-modern world".
13. Cf. Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II", *Theological Studies* 40 (1979), pp. 716-722.
14. We can therefore speak of three major epochs in the history of the Church, namely, the relatively short period of Jewish Christianity, the period of Gentile Christianity (or the Church in the culture of Hellenism and European civilization), and now the period of the World Church.
15. Cf. USG (Union of Superiors General), *Inside Globalization: Toward a Multi-centered and Intercultural Communion*, (Roma: Editrice "Il Calamo", 2000), pp. 22-23.
16. In a certain sense, the continental synods were also an acknowledgement of a certain autonomy of the local Churches. Additionally, the synods could likewise be seen an acceptance of the legitimacy of episcopal conferences and even of the continental federation or association of episcopal conferences. The continental synods, in other words, were a manifestation, even if only provisionally or tentatively, of the Church as global, pluralistic, and culturally diversified or multicultural. In one sense, however, Vatican II and the continental synods were rare shining moments in an otherwise dark history of continuing Eurocentrism. While with these two events we were privileged to glimpse at what the Church can and should truly be, the Church seems to continue to be very European and Western. The weight of tradition and history seems to hang heavily on the Church and the force of convention seems to push the Church to continue on the road of mono-culturalism rather than break out into the path of multiculturality. It even seems that today there is a trend towards Roman centralization and a restoration of the pre-Vatican II model of Church.
17. Cf. John Allen, *The Future Church*, pp. 17-21.
18. Thus, as one observer noted: "Doing the novitiate in Japan or Chile did not make much of a difference. Studying theology in Buenos Aires or Bombay was about the same thing. One studied the same subjects and consulted the same authors. The prayers followed the same so-called 'universal' methods, and everywhere the same norms of religious life applied, i.e. those of the post-Tridentine Catholic tradition." Carlos Pape, "Esperienza di internazionalità nella Congregazione del Verbo Divino", *Il Verbo nel Mondo 2001-2002*, (Steyl: Editrice Steyl, 2002), p. 11.
19. For instance, once I was speaking with the European formator of sisters in a particular country in Africa. And she was complaining about how difficult it was to teach the novices the value of silence. It is hard for them, she said, to keep the "magnum silentium" (the "great silence" from around 10:00 PM to 7:00 AM). If one of them hits upon an idea or hears a news

or receives some information, she rushes to the other sisters to share the idea, news or information, even during the great silence at night. They cannot wait for the following morning to share the story.

20. Cf. also Rose Nkechi Uchem, "Shifting Perceptions of Mission", *SEDOS Bulletin* 41/11-12, November-December 2009, pp. 261-270.
21. Or, consider the change of image of the missionary. If, in the past, Western missionaries came side by side the colonizer, today's missionaries from Asia, Africa and Latin America come alongside the migrant worker. Like the colonizer, Western missionaries in the past came to give. Today, like the migrant worker, third world missionaries are sometimes looked upon as coming to take. In the past, Western missionaries came with shipping containers full of things to give. Today, third world missionaries come with empty hands with nothing to offer in the material sense. Thus, from mission out of one's abundance (if not one's own, at least of one's country) to mission out of one's poverty (certainly one's own, as well as of one's country).
22. Cf. Robert Schreiter, "Ministry for a Multicultural Church", (<http://www.sedos.org>, Articles in English).
23. Cf. John Allen, *The Future Church*, pp. 178-216.
24. It is estimated that the total "workforce for the Church's apostolate" increased from 1.6 million in 1978, at the beginning of John Paul II's pontificate, to 4.3. million in 2005, at the end of that pontificate, and that 90 percent of these were lay people. Catechists alone accounted for two thirds of the total. In the United States, while the number of priests dropped from 49,054 to 43,304 between 1990-2005, the number of lay ministers increased from 22,000 to 31,000 in the same period of time. It is said that about 500 to 600 parishes in the United States are without a resident priest and are administered by a lay "parish life coordinator". Cf. John Allen, *The Future Church*, pp. 195, 192-193.
25. It is said that to date the Vatican has granted canonical status to about 120 of the "new lay movements". Most of these movements (such as the *L'Arche*, *Comunione e Liberazione*, *Focolare*, *Sant'Egidio* Community) were founded over the last hundred years. Many of these movements undertake a variety of projects, missions and institutions, and see themselves as missionaries in their own walks of life, sanctifying or transforming the secular world. Cf. John Allen, *The Future Church*, pp. 187-191. As mentioned above, some in the Church look at these movements as replacing the religious congregations in being "special forces" of the Church today.

MAKE THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE POSSIBLE

Br. André-Pierre Gauthier, FSC

Born in Paris in 1956, Pierre Gauthier is, by training, a professor of Classical Literature. He entered the Congregation of the Christian Brothers in 1984. He studied Theology and was pastoral animator and teacher for over twenty years in high school, college levels and vocational high school. He gives great importance to the accompaniment of the alumni. The Congregation has entrusted to him the responsibility of missionary service and assistant provincial.

Original in French

In France apostolic religious life is disappearing from our habitual panorama. This observation, which we can apply to all of Europe in general, makes us really question ourselves. Until about 1950, our context fostered the budding of numerous religious vocations, thanks to the demographic resources of the rural world. But the upheavals following the world war made everything inevitably fragile. Here and there community styles were too rigid and an outmoded anthropology of the vows and theology of religious life multiplied the problems linked especially to the secularization of professions traditionally exercised by these men and women, those of health care and education. The drop in the number of members of the congregations was especially serious among the brothers and sisters who were teachers.

As a Christian Brother, I am reflecting from within an educational mission in the school where children, youth and adults are encountered and where you live and observe, for those who want to see, the enormous changes in the way of living and thinking of the new generations. These profound changes give us the first challenge of being aware of them and accepting them, not to deplore them or for a kind of withdrawal into “school fortress”, but to feel actively a part of the generation of a new world by the unprecedented contours of which the youth and young adults are both witnesses and actors, often enthusiastic, but also often perplexed when facing the choices and difficulties that they have to make on their own. More than a crisis of trust, we find ourselves facing a crisis of presence because it is difficult for us to

reach them where they live. Of course, we rejoice to find them in large ecclesial assemblies, and often also coming on time. But it would reduce the thrust and the ideal of evangelization to be content to distinguish the majority of those who do not have ecclesial spaces anymore in the time of their “profane” lives, and the minority we are near when they cross the threshold of the “sacred” during the important liturgical Seasons and to receive the sacraments. Religious must feel it a duty to live this necessarily freely given presence that requires a constant “going out toward the other.” It is exactly here that poverty, obedience and chastity are lived when the invitation to prayer and announcing of Jesus have lost the character of evidence and, at times, for a long period of time. The scholastic environment is characteristic of this situation, but I think that by giving time for time, either in the short term or the long term, this presence of a brother or sisters cannot remain infertile. Today’s youth will give thanks tomorrow for the respect for their growth and the accompaniment given to their questions and searching. Then God’s freedom will be able to meet their liberty as persons.

I am certainly aware that some of the behaviors and values that the youth hold, but also some of their reasoned and conscious rejections of the transcendent, carry within themselves serious risks of dehumanization. Some, but not all. We need to make a serious discernment, without which, as has already happened in other epochs, the Church risks remaining along the sideline watching the train rush by at the speed of the new world. In addition, the reality of the post-modern has been well analyzed. I will highlight several sensitive aspects in the field of education for us in France. “Inherited” religion is over for us. The vocabulary of Christian faith is becoming foreign to the overwhelming majority of young people, even if they belong to sociologically Christian families. Like the adults they do not wait for nor accept that the Church can enter into their affective and sexual choices, as if they carried within them the memory of an especially burdensome control in this area. The sometimes malicious spreading of some trends or radically held positions of the clergy or religious by the media have destroyed their credibility. New technological means make the youth independent in their behaviors and ways of thinking at an earlier age and with greater force

And from this comes a second challenge we must accept. Religious life is often a matter of men and women who, in a crisis context, respond to a call, provided however, that the term “crisis” is understood as a time of profound change that only the reasoned and bold decision of a small number can take on and redirect. This type of situation demands accepting the pluralism of apostolic responses within the Church. That is, both must accept that the Gospel, in an uncertain situation, highlights the different characteristics of the single face of Christ. Thus it happens for the scholastic mission of the Catholic

Church, especially within Catholic teaching. In France, its richness comes from the diversity of educational traditions that produced it. Ignatian, Ursuline, Salesian or Christian Brother, to name only a few. These traditions are searching, with reason, for an expression of their melody in the symphony of Catholic schools. On our part, attention to education and to the pastoral dimension, wanting to associate our lay partners not only in the animation of our network of institutes, but also in their administration, and the desire to have them share in the charism of the founder, take us to very specific choices. We want to enter into the Gospel through teaching and make it an educational action that respects the person of the student which is the first ministerial action. Thus the explicit announcing of Jesus Christ moves into second place without in any way being secondary.

This attitude involves accepting a third challenge. Our bewilderment because of the decline in our forces is increased by a surprise: contrary to what happened several decades ago, the School has found its reason for being again, it is ever more appreciated by various persons in the society, the families and the civic powers. But it must be added that the mission of the Catholic school is also more recognized by the Episcopal powers. This brings us to confirm with renewed conviction that “the harvest is great”. On the part of the youth and the adults, we are coming out of a time of hostility and mutual mistrust. In this context, what is expected from apostolic religious life and from the religious involved in the field of education touches upon broader expectations. Therefore, there are another three challenges.

That of communal living, the challenge of intelligence and heart, and that of attention to the young adults. I am putting them together because, in some ways they are connected. The students at the center of our attention, not above all and not first of all in a vocational perspective. But in order to allow them to discover what we ourselves have discovered, at times after long years of searching: a life under the sign of the Beatitudes. This perspective is a priority in France. Religious life has the ability and the grave responsibility of being present here and there. Here, with the individuals in their daily work, sharing their concerns, their life choices, their commitments.... and there, the ability to invite them within a religious community to advance in humanity and along this path to know how to propose Jesus Christ to their companions. This challenge is always demanding of acceptance.

The challenge of intelligence and heart. This daily closeness with youth, men and women who are more or less distant from the Christian faith invite us to freedom and boldness. The necessary prudence will not be able to prohibit taking the risks necessary to maintain a vital contact between the Church and society. That supposes living in the places and participating in the

debates where our contemporaries lay out their way of thinking and acting. Accepting the grace to stay near young people, that of patiently becoming companions and having the right words for the situations, we can peacefully witness to the presence of the Spirit in all our life, the joy of the sacraments and happiness in belonging to the Church, on the condition, however, of keeping the encounter a gift freely given.

The challenge of communal life. The challenges mentioned demand a stimulating and meaningful communal life where discernment, acceptance and shared prayer are experienced. Prayer as a fundamental free gift, poverty of those who abandon themselves to the One who alone can fulfill every desire of the human person, acceptance assured by open and chaste hearts that are respectful of the questions and the expectation of those that come to them. Community discernment as an expression of serene obedience to the Spirit.

In France we apostolic religious are trying to understand our involvement not as something counter cultural but as the experience and witness of a fruitful difference within this culture. I have indicated some challenges. Yes, the current situation is complex and worrisome. Nevertheless, we have been trying to give meaning again to our community life and our prayer life for several decades already. We are opening our communities and diversifying our involvement with the poor, sharing our spirituality with the laity who ask ... I have not yet used the word “fraternity” because it is demanding and should not be emptied of meaning. But I want to give witness to it, the apostolic communities in France are committed to living it and witnessing to it.

Their testimony is decisive because the fraternity we want to build needs to continuously educate its own humanity. Religious life is a possible response to the killing of Abel. Because someone exists as brother, it is necessary that I make room for him. Educating youth is allowing them to take their place, to become a person, allowing others to have their place as well. To be a religious man or woman involved in the field of education is to personally and communally live this program of fraternity. But only those who are committed to build up relationships of true fraternity can educate. It is not only the legacy of religious, but it is their responsibility in the following of Christ. On this condition our community will make renewal of religious life possible. None of us is called to foresee this future, but only to make it possible by a life completely entrusted to Christ.

I thank you.

*SOME THEMES AND CHALLENGES FOR
APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THE
THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN THE
REGIONAL CONTEXTS OF AMERICA*

Sr. Maricarmen Bracamontes, OSB

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Original in Spanish

For more than a decade now CLAR (Confederation of Latin-American and Caribbean Religious Men and Women) has been focusing its attention, reflection and collective discernment on the call launched toward Religious Life in Latin America and the Caribbean by the awareness of living in a period of change.

In 2007 within the frame work of the Aparecida Conference in Brazil¹, CELAM also officially recognized that it was within this historic dynamic. The organisms, which group together the bishops and the religious men and women of Latin America and the Caribbean, recognized some themes and challenges that the current epoch has launched out to them.

In the United States and Canada, the northern part of the American Continent, religious life defines itself in facing this social and cultural transition from its own reality. At this time religious women in the United States are experiencing an apostolic visitation. They are women who developed their intellectual formation in various sectors, through being involved in the field of reflection and teaching. They actively participate in the civic sectors of defending the dignity and respecting the rights of every person. Their influence in these various sectors raised suspicions in ecclesiastical circles regarding

their religious identity.

The religious men and some Bishops in the follow up to the scandal of pedophilia and to the apostolic visitation to their seminaries and houses of formation in 2005-2006 felt the urgent need to transform the clerical culture they are immersed in. Some aspects that offer the greatest challenges are²:

- * Clericalism, as a hierarchy of power more than as service, becomes inevitable when formation to the priesthood and its understandings are not based on a profound faith life and on the life of discipleship.
- * Side effects which come from that are relationships of dominion or submission which generate control, fear and self-censure.
- * In the seminaries, formation in the field of human maturity was generally neglected because of the fact that it is in the hands of the clergy, and has resulted therefore, in an institutionalized immaturity.
- * There is a certain triumphalism of the Catholic Church, a kind of institutional pride that on certain occasions has contributed to protecting the self image at any cost. It is certain that in the tradition of the Catholic Church there are many things that merit our admiration, but the culture of discretion becomes pernicious when, in order to protect the good name of the Church and the priesthood, it gets to the point of covering up crimes.
- * A culture that confuses sin with crime and that considers the pardon from guilt in the secret of the confessional a substitute for the need to report the crime, have it judged and mete out punishment for it.
- * The need for a profound revision of the teaching of the Church on sexuality and for communicating this teaching with deep respect for the body and the sexuality of men and women.

Having said this, I go back to Religious Life in Latin America and the Caribbean following the experience of CLAR. We said we found ourselves in an epochal change and the first challenge that is presented is that of knowing that we are part of this cultural transformation. The General of the Jesuits characterized this time in the following way³:

“I believe we must accept and formulate it as such, that we find ourselves in an epochal change. I believe that change happening in the world is extraordinarily big and not just in terms of globalization, which is a special phenomenon penetrating into the context of our work, but in terms of an epoch. We truly find ourselves in a change in terms of values, in terms of relationships and in terms of institutions and systems. This change is radical and puts into question the methods we use for confronting the problems and seeing new possibilities in Latin America.”

These transformations generate crises and the crises produce insecurity. It is an epoch when the lack of trust in institutions that have contributed to the development of the current civilization is becoming deeper. In facing this transition these institutions are perceived as restraining and being an obstacle.

Nonetheless the crises are awakening a new awareness, and from this new awareness come expectations in each of the people who have experienced a lack of equality, oppression and exclusion in the existing institutions and that are trying to overcome these situations with a participative "inclusion."

The institutions are challenged to the degree they are perceived as a threat to the promotion and respect of the values of freedom, truly participative democracy, scientific, technological and economic progress, active promotion and practical exercise of the respect of the rights of men and women, stability and security in every country, education for everyone, a sense of justice, equity and peace among peoples and nations, recognition and respect for indigenous populations and awareness of the urgent need of going forward toward post-colonial practices.

These expectations repeatedly come up more meaningfully and promote a progressive growth in the number of people who are no longer content with dogmas, prohibitions and obligations. These people and groups demand openness, respect for pluralism, diversity in the freedom to manifest their opposition or their disagreement with the doctrines and official practices.

Today we need a clear awareness of what urges us on, starting from the richness of our charism to identify the alternatives and to participate in the search for creative responses to the current challenges. I will point out some of the challenges I wish to reflect upon. It seems to me that it is necessary to:

1. *Imagine and implement new relationships in a creative beginning with a conscious work of deconstruction of the internalized models of submission.. It is urgent to go beyond discriminatory and exclusive practices that are at the basis of distinctions between clergy/laity, men/women, people/nature, that which is western with indigenous/African/rural/migrant, all the questions that have something to do with ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. There is a call here to reconcile faith and justice, ecology, gender to go beyond any form of impoverishment and exclusion. Something like what Henri Nouwen⁴ dreamed about: to move from isolation to solitude, from hostility to hospitality, from illusion to prayer by balancing the **individual and communal, spirituality and ecclesiology; being mature and committed persons, spiritual and ecclesial.***
2. *Consider, with creative imagination, the work of **construction** of human equality in the diversity that makes us who we are.*

3. *Clearly express our own **Spirituality** ... since “the third millennium will be mystical or will not be.” (R. Panikkar) In our daily practice to maintain the right to interiority, to prayer, to depth and serenity, an effective antidote against the growing fear and insecurity that have paralyzed our hearts and the depths of who we are. This intimate relationship with the source of the Life of our faith is expressed in each charism as an alternative to the compassionate life ..., by giving up the main role, ambition and pathological activism ..., transcending resentment, trying to simply be effective signs of salvation, reconciliation and peace in the heart of a wounded, divided and polarized community.*
4. *Promote and accompany the processes of **transformation of traditional roles** attributed to men and women. To creatively promote a healthy sexuality that transcends the violence of frigidity and irresponsibility toward a chaste and passionate sexuality.*
5. *The urgent need to go beyond the **images of God** built from exclusively masculine anthropomorphic parameters, a “God” who in the very representation is exclusive, often with authoritarian, domineering characteristics, or in the best of cases, with serious ambiguity, like that of the tender father who loves unconditionally, but who, in fact, punishes and can do so for eternity.*

The God of the Bible is not the projection of a patriarchal mentality⁵... God transcends the human distinction of sex. God is neither man nor woman, God is God. God also transcends human paternity and maternity ... (CIC n 239).

It is necessary to note that a task was left undone in Latin America because in the Concluding Document of *Aparecida* a certain resistance to reflect on this topic is felt. The text speaks of the Church as Mother, of Mary as Mother, of the earth as mother, of religious life as the maternal face of the Church, but there are no feminine symbols to make reference to God. It is urgent to express in our theological and catechetical reflection, in liturgical symbols and in our preaching that the Divinity is the fullness of the masculine and feminine, that God is what is also the latent life principle in all that exists.

God’s image is determining for inventively giving dynamic movement to alternative forms of relationships between persons and peoples where the richness and complexity of the diversity is mixed so that an end is put to the building up barriers to keep us apart. Opening our eyes and ears to what is new is a necessary condition to perceive the gentle murmuring of the silence where the Divine is revealed to us.

6. *All this invites us to imagine new forms of life together which permit*

respectful dialogue in the recognition of the richness of the diversity in which humanity was created and of the house where humanity dwells.

7. *Encountering and accompanying each other in these processes of constructing citizenship and an adult, responsible and participative ecclesiality. (DA n. 215), to situate ourselves in new settings and recognize the emerging themes in this time of epochal change.*

And finally, let me mention among the challenges that which comes from the fact that religious life is mainly feminine:

8. *Deepen the theological-practical reflection on the theme of discipleship/mission of women which has been part of Christianity since its very beginning.*

I believe we cannot continue to be observers that judge or ignore history. It is vital for us to accompany, to be a mature and active part of these processes of cultural transformation, by offering the alternative that our charisms can offer. A mature participation that gives light to other forms capable of humanizing persons and peoples, who care for and respect our common home.

¹ CELAM, *Documento conclusivo della V Conferenza Generale dell'Episcopato Latinoamericano e dei Caraibi*, realizzata ad Aparecida, Brasile nel maggio 2007. Da ora in poi, DA.

² Cf. Roberts, Tom, "Some bishops questioning clerical culture" *National Catholic Reporter*, Kansas City, Mo. EEUU, Aug. 13, 2010

³ ITESO, Guadalajara. México, Mayo 2010.

⁴ Nouwen, Henri J.M., *Tres Etapas De La Vida Espiritual*, Ed. PPC, Colección Sauce, Madrid, 1997.

⁵ Pontificia Comisión Bíblica, *La Interpretación de la Biblia en la Iglesia*, Librería Parroquial de clavería, México, 1993, p. 62.