

Center for the Study of Religious Life Scholars Roundtable – May 2009

The Scholars Roundtable is one means the Center for the Study of Religious Life has for doing interdisciplinary reflection. The Scholars meet twice during the year to discuss current studies, articles, or presentations on religious life and to share their own observations and insights. The current Scholars are: Kathleen Cummings, Paul Philibert, OP, Gary Riebe-Estrella, SVD, Robin Ryan, CP, Katarina Schuth, OSF, and Patricia Wittberg, SC. This is a summary of their May, 2009 reflections.

Some of the most dramatic pages in the Bible describe the calling of figures who will be instruments of God's initiatives in salvation history. Think of Moses at the Burning Bush (Ex 3), Isaiah's vision in the Temple (Is 6), Mary's encounter with the Archangel Gabriel (Lk 1), and Jesus' appeal to his first disciples, "Come, follow me" (Mt 4:19). Pope John Paul II loved to refer to the touching encounter of Jesus with the rich young man, where "he looked at him and loved him" (Mk 10:21). Paul adds another voice to describe vocation in his opening to the Letter to the Romans: "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle..." (1:1) and "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints..." (1:7). In all these cases, the calling is a prophetic one (to listen to and understand God) and a pastoral one (to give one's life in service to God's people). Every vocation to follow Christ is a gift of the Holy Spirit: "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord" (1Cor 12:4-5).

While every Christian has the vocation to believe in Christ and follow him, guided by the Holy Spirit, there are some who are called to:

bind themselves to the Lord in a special way. They follow Christ, virginal and poor who, by obedience unto death on the cross, redeemed humanity and made it holy. Under the impulse of love, which the Holy Spirit pours into their hearts, they live more and more for Christ and for his body, the Church. The more fervently, therefore, they join themselves to Christ by this gift of their entire life, the fuller does the Church's life become.... (Perfectae Caritatis 1).

Two themes in this passage describe the fundamental sense of religious life. First, there is a close, personal following of Christ involving the gift of one's entire life. From the earliest times, there have always been some among the faithful who undertook to follow Christ more freely and to imitate him more closely out of love, but also out of a desire to allow the mystery of Christ's incarnation to radiate through them.

Second, the stress in Paul's letters upon a great variety of gifts given by the Holy Spirit allows us to recognize another fundamental meaning of religious life. Religious life expresses with particular clarity and intensity certain gifts that arose in the Church to

address the “signs of the times” and to embody the charisms and spirit of religious founders and their original group. For example, the Benedictine charism of hospitality, the Franciscan charism of poverty, the Vincentian charism of compassion (as only three examples among many others) manifest the quasi-institutionalization of spiritual gifts in the social life of the Church. The religious of these institutes personify these charisms.

However, following Vatican II, we saw a steep decline in vocations to religious life in the U.S. and in other western countries. So much so, that the very *raison d’être* for religious life has been and is being posed in new ways. Given the Council’s mandate for apostolic radiance for all the baptized (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 2) and its affirmation of the call to holiness “to each and every one of [Christ's] disciples, no matter what their condition of life” (*Lumen Gentium* 40), the dominant rationale for religious vocations in past centuries seems to be called into question. Pragmatically and in the context of our current social situation in the West, how do the faithful actually experience the value of religious life?

How Does Religious Life Animate the Church?

As a social phenomenon, the Church is constituted by the people who belong to it. If all priests and religious were to vanish tomorrow, the Church would still go on. There are documented instances where this has happened—Japan in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, the underground churches in China and Eastern Europe in the twentieth. On the other hand, if all lay Christians were to vanish, the priesthood and religious life would vanish, too.

This does not mean, however, that the priesthood and religious life are not necessary. Look at those Protestant denominations that have attempted to do without one or the other. Congregational-polity denominations such as the Baptists officially teach that there should be no priestly intermediary between the individual and God. (It is no accident that their clergy are called “ministers”—they are supposed to be the servants, not the priests, of the congregation that hires them.) But sociological observations of such denominations show that their ministers are usually given an implicit priestly status by their flocks. In a similar way, every Protestant denomination since Luther has questioned the legitimacy of religious orders. As a result, members who want to do more for Christ tend to leave the denomination and join a stricter one. Without religious orders, Protestant denominations tend to lose many of their most committed adherents to sectarian alternatives.

So, while the People of God *constitute* the Church, priests and religious perform two essential *service functions* for the Church. Even if a denomination denies the legitimacy of these functions, or if persecution eliminates priests and religious, the People of God will somehow recreate them. What are these two service functions? We believe that priests (and bishops, chancery officials, pastoral associates, catechists, etc.) are responsible for *institutional maintenance* and—in Catholicism—for the administration of the sacraments. This role is absolutely essential. Someone has to offer catechesis, to call

the assembly together for worship, to certify orthodoxy, to minister to the flock in times of life transitions (birth, passage from childhood, marriage, illness, death), and even, prosaically, to see that the bills are paid. The People of God could not long survive as Church if someone does not perform these functions, so God calls some persons to devote their lives, in whole or in part, to them.

Religious life, on the other hand, has a different role: that of *institutional change*. Over the centuries, societies, cultures, and economies have changed, and the Church has had to find ways to address these changes. The waves of religious foundations across history can be read as efforts to move the Church (sometimes kicking and screaming—as many of our founders can attest!) to make necessary changes in its theology or functioning. For example, the rise of the early hermits can be considered as a compensation for the absence of martyrdom as a road to sanctity; early monasticism can be seen as a way of creating “the city of God” during the upheaval of the barbarian invasions; the mendicants addressed the needs of a newly urbanized and commercialized High Middle Ages; the apostolic orders responded to the challenges of the Protestant Reformation. Ideally, religious life in each era is a gift and a challenge for the Church, a force for its adaptation to new societal conditions. As with those called to the maintenance role in the Church, God also calls some persons to devote their lives to helping the Church change and reinvent itself.

In real life, of course, things are not always so clear-cut. Sometimes clergy and bishops bring about institutional changes. (Think of John XXIII, for example.) Further, especially in nineteenth century Europe and North America, religious congregations often concentrated more on institutional *maintenance* (catechesis, running the Church’s institutions, and—for clerical orders—administering parishes) than on *prophetic pushing* of the pastoral frontiers. In addition, the original charisms of many orders became merged over the centuries, and their distinctiveness became blurred. Some apostolic groups became monasticized, while some monastic sisters were forced to give up the Divine Office in order to teach or nurse. The 1917 Code of Canon Law so standardized women’s religious life that the Rules of many congregations followed an identical template.

After Vatican II, the corporate witness of religious congregations became further diminished, as many male and female religious increasingly worked outside of their congregations’ institutions, doffed a uniform habit, and lived alone. What do these changes mean for religious life—and priesthood—in the Catholic Church of twenty-first century Europe and North America?

Regarding institutional maintenance, the decline in the number of ordained priests seems to confront the Church with two choices: to open more roles to the non-ordained, or to further clericalize its ministerial priesthood and serve a smaller population. The former choice is what has been happening since Vatican II: a host of lay pastoral associates, catechists, youth ministers, liturgists, lay chancery staff, etc., now run many aspects of the Church on both the parish and diocesan level. More recently, however, the choice of re-clericalizing the clergy has been advocated by more traditionalist

seminarians, clergy, and bishops. It does not seem to bother them that this may antagonize many Catholics or even drive them away from the Church.

Regarding religious life, it seems clear that many new challenges in our day call out for the charismatic and pastoral response characteristic of the role of religious life. Chief among these, in Western societies, is a desire for spiritual depth and meaning beyond the superficialities of our commercialized culture. Without either denying or diminishing the biblical or classical theology of religious life, we can see that, practically speaking, today's religious serve the faithful and touch their hearts most especially through their example and their mentoring. Surely these are not the only ways in which religious life is generative today. But we want to explore these two ways in particular here.

As to *example*, in a society that has become increasingly and even aggressively secular, the faithful who have received the grace to believe and to live discipleship to Jesus Christ have need of (and welcome) the iconic witness of sisters and brothers who have made following Christ the fundamental reality of their lives. Without particularly choosing to do so, some individual religious have come to represent the embodiment of charismatic Christian values in the face of a cynical or doubting world: Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, in her prophetic advocacy for the imprisoned; Father Timothy Radcliffe, OP, in the freedom of spirit of his writings; Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, in her marvelous insight about grace in the ordinary and Father Richard Rohr, OFM, in articulating Christian spirituality as a way to survive in the consumerist culture. (It would be an interesting exercise for any community to propose alternative and additional examples of this kind of charismatic exemplarity.)

However, it is its *corporate witness* to the power of the Christian life above all that is most characteristic of religious life. The magnetic appeal of monasteries and the attractive force of the dynamic liturgies of religious communities is one vivid example. The ability of some communities to inspire apostolic investment by the laity as oblates, associates, or participating members of the institute's spiritual family is another example. Some institutes' witness to justice and to peace in a violent and greedy world in a countercultural way is yet another. But as Joan Chittister and others have pointed out, such witness is more likely to come from individual religious in their separate ministries than from an order or a congregation as a whole. Outside observers rightly ask why it is necessary to join a religious community in order to give individual witness. Religious are likely to respond that the prayer and encouragement, as well as financial support from the community, make such witness possible for them.

The second dynamic mentioned here is *mentoring*. In social psychology, a mentor is described as someone sufficiently experienced to be able to help the less experienced, on the one hand, and sufficiently similar (in age or state of life) to be trusted and believable, on the other. A mentor is a "go-between" person, someone who can help novices to feel at home in a new system, someone who can "read the hearts" of those having difficulty adapting to structures. Religious do this in many ways. Some are

mentoring lay ecclesial ministers as they make their entry into service of the Church. Others are mentoring (whether individually or in groups) through pastoral care in spiritual guidance and spiritual direction, whether in retreat centers, in parishes or in the communities of their own institutes.

There is a tremendous need for this kind of spiritual guidance. All serious Christians need someone who can be trusted to share the mystery of what God is doing in their lives—especially if they are risking themselves by daring to respond to an apostolic call for the sake of the Gospel. Here again, however, a corporate expression of this charism of mentoring would be even stronger than an individual one. Communities that take on sponsorship for the spiritual mentoring of lay ecclesial ministers, associates or seekers, or—especially—through meaningful and culturally sensitive catechesis for the laity, make a great contribution to the local Church and also give privileged visibility to their own institute and its charism.

The ministry of a religious congregation is the expression of its following Christ and of its commitment to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. Prophetic eyes see the connection between these perennial religious values and the actual needs and circumstances of our day. Some of these needs will stimulate a response of solidarity and compassion from religious according to the pattern of new religious ministries undertaken through the centuries. One of these needs might be a stronger corporate stance with and for the poor. If the current recession deepens and populist anger at the increasing gap between the rich and the rest of society continues, a religious congregation that visibly lives with and ministers to the poorest of the poor would be very attractive. Another contemporary need centers around the environment. To date, however, while several established congregations have ecological centers on their grounds or feature retreats on creation spirituality, there is no congregation that is specifically focused on this need. Yet this concern is profoundly linked to the respect for creation and for beauty that is integral to the spirituality of a variety of religious institutes.

From a sociological perspective, religious life in its ideal form is, and has always been, as essential to the Church as the ordained priesthood. It is what keeps the Church current with the spiritual needs of people in a changing society. There is a dynamic tension between religious life and the clergy/hierarchy—as there should be, given their different roles in the Church. Each is necessary to the other, and to the People of God.

Why So Few Vocations?

Why then are vocations so few in these times when social and ecclesial challenges abound? Partly this is because other options now exist for young men and women in the larger society. But we would argue that religious and priestly vocations also flourished when ecclesial actors—priests and bishops as well as vowed religious—actively encouraged them. An example from the last century helps to explain this. Kathleen Sprows Cummings' book, *New Women of the Old Faith*, tells a dramatic story of the role

of apostolic women religious from the earliest days of their presence in the United States. In Chapter Three, “The Wageless Work of Paradise: Catholic Sisters, Professionalization, and the School Question” (101-155), there is a vivid depiction of the complex relationship between the sisters and the hierarchy. This relationship was defined by the ecclesial circumstances, but also by the cultural and social situations of that period (mid-19th to early 20th centuries). Both help explain why religious vocations were once plentiful and are now scarce.

Women had few rights until well into the 20th century, men made most of the decisions, and, except for women religious, a woman’s place was in the home. Thus, the clerical condescension toward sisters by bishops and priests was not surprising for that time. The priest-superintendent of schools in Philadelphia at the turn of the century was “consolidating diocesan authority in his office,” shaping it “by the search for efficiency, uniformity, and centralization” (113).

How did “vocations” fit into the thinking of the time? Religious were valued, we would argue, primarily for institutional maintenance rather than institutional change. The hierarchy “had no qualms about expressing their preference for male vocations over female ones” (121), but “as Church leaders recognized that women religious provided the only viable source of labor, they not only assigned nuns to the task [of teaching religion], but also beseeched them to ensure the permanency of the system by convincing more of their students to follow in their footsteps” (116). If there were not enough vocations, sisters were chided for being too worldly (124). Cummings writes, “By 1920, calls for vocations assumed almost fevered pitch” (129). The message seems to be that sisters’ vocations were for the purpose of supplying teachers to the ever-growing Catholic school system. To ensure the steady supply, sisters not only had to be educated—at the expense of the congregations—but they also had to be very pious to give proper example to young girls who might follow in their footsteps.

Little of this emphasis seemed to relate to the individual call of the young woman, let alone to empowering her or her congregation to become change agents in the Church. Vocations were for the purpose of providing service to the Church at minimal cost. Under these conditions, bishops and priests went out of their way to encourage young women to join religious congregations, but they did little or nothing to support the congregations in forming them for religious life and educating them for a career in teaching. This religious-institutional apparatus did not survive the last decades of the 20th century.

What changed, when and why?

Much of the first half of the 20th century saw the world engulfed in wars, influenza pandemic, and depression. Women’s roles began to change ever-so-gradually, but also importantly with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Sisters’ congregations suffered with the rest of the world, and their numbers did not increase significantly until after World War II. After the war, vocations exploded and convents everywhere were filled with new members. Entering classes of forty, fifty and more were

common for even moderate-sized congregations. More and more Catholic schools were opened to accommodate the post-war baby-boom. And sisters staffed them—still poorly paid, still without assistance from the Church in providing formation and education to new members. Yet bishops were delighted by the numbers and priests joined in encouraging young women to enter convents.

Then the world changed, and the church needed to address these changes. The Second Vatican Council mandated that the Church—and religious congregations—re-envision their calling in light of the signs of the times. In doing so, many congregations began to question whether teaching in suburban schools or nursing in large, bureaucratized hospitals was really congruent with their founder's original vision. Other, more prophetic, ministries appealed to the “new sisters;” they moved into mission work abroad (at the urging of the Vatican) and extensive engagement with the poor in the slums and rural poverty areas of the U.S. But after a few decades of decline in the number of sisters serving in Catholic schools and with the need for higher salaries to support the growing number of retired sisters, the encouragement of vocations from the ecclesial hierarchy gradually eroded. By the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, this lack of support often coalesced into active opposition, especially on the part of young priests and diocesan vocation offices. If the sisters no longer staff the parish schools, why is there need for more of them? A small number of “new communities” have arisen, whose members seem willing to take the place of the sisters of the 1950s. Official episcopal encouragement goes to the congregations who wear habits, staff schools, ask little in terms of money or autonomy.

Certainly the members of established congregations know the complaints against them—they appear too worldly, not interested enough in parochial education, wear no habits, ask too much for salaries. For better or worse, they are not like the sisters in Philadelphia in 1880. No longer involved, for the most part, in ecclesial maintenance, they have yet to articulate a compelling model of ecclesial change that would appeal either to ecclesial officials or to potential entrants among the people of God. Can they change anything to embrace such a model, or will they quietly pass away?

Perhaps the impending Apostolic Visitation will give sisters an opportunity to convey the story of their current ministries and the good that continues to flow from their lives. If their lives and ministry were recognized and valued by the People of God, might the bishops and priests respect religious life in its evolving form, rather than bestowing all their adulation upon the “new communities” that in fact replicate pre-Vatican II patterns of religious life and ministry?

Responding Courageously to the “Signs of the Times”

Post-Vatican II religious have trained themselves to be attentive to the “signs of the times,” those social and cultural indicators that presage opportunities for evangelization and renewal of ecclesial life. In this way they have become generative not only within their own institutes, but in the wider society. The psychologist Erik Erikson spoke

of generativity as a virtue characteristic of religious personalities who turn their attention not to their own families, but to the families of other people for the good of the community. We have talked for so long and so often about individual, personal identity (which is the virtue that Erikson assigns to the adolescent phase of life), that we have failed to really explore the more appropriate developmental virtue of generativity, a virtue that our society so badly needs. For aging communities, attending to the future needs of the local Church is a generous and courageous expression of such generativity. Many communities have done this in various ways, among others, by preparing institutionally for the day when their nursing homes can be at the service of the larger society, and by financially supporting emerging apostolates that are linked to the needs of a changing Church.

One of the fundamental contributions of religious life to the contemporary Church is its ability to pay careful attention and to respond to the “signs of the times”—to read the possibilities of our collective future. This theological category, canonized by Vatican II, is today even more a reality and a challenge for the Church than it was forty years ago. *Gaudium et Spes* 4 says that,

In every age, the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, it should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come... We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live.

It is religious, especially, who are called to be in the vanguard of this effort.

Different local Churches, different religious charisms, and different apostolic insertions will affect the way in which individuals or communities read the signs of the times. But this biblical and prophetic challenge is a particular responsibility for our moment of Church. Here, for example, are several dramatic features of our world and Church that will shape our future:

We live in a Church (in the U.S.) in which there are now more pastorally trained and apostolically active lay ecclesial ministers than there are parish priests. Who is committed to assisting their ongoing theological formation and their personal spiritual development? We live in a Church in which the fastest-growing sector of the population is the Latino/a community. Who is able to offer the many kinds of pastoral ministry they need and to mentor their creative insertion into the wider Church? We live in a country where the divide between the very rich and the poor is growing larger than ever, creating huge pools of unemployed and shocking numbers of children in poverty. Who will advocate for them? Who will accompany them?

Other signs of the times touch on the areas of spirituality, science and theology, ecology, religion and the arts, the good use of time for an aging and retired population

...and many others. Even the ability to articulate the issues at hand is a prophetic contribution to the life of the Church. As the Gospels show, Jesus' disciples were not called to follow him in order to set up a self-preoccupied ecclesiastical establishment, but rather to proclaim the Kingdom of God in every culture and age. If religious have a greater freedom than others in the Body of Christ, it is above all a freedom to read the signs of the times and to give themselves radically in witness to the kingdom itself.

If, due to declining numbers, to changing views of women, and to women's own recognition of their historic subordination within the Church, Catholics sisters are no longer viewed as "workhorses," what purpose do they—and men religious—serve in the Church? This question seems essential if religious communities are to invite others to join them. Where do the tensions between "Martha" and "Mary," felt so acutely by Catholic sisters in the early twentieth century, manifest themselves today? How do men and women religious balance personal and professional identities? Are there any parallels between the ways in which lay ecclesial ministers are undervalued today and the way women religious were undervalued a century ago? Indeed, what does "value" mean in terms of work for the Church?

Concluding Thoughts

This present brief articulation of religious vocation and religious identity is in fundamental continuity with the age-old Catholic tradition. However, it is to some degree different from the early years of the twentieth century, when religious recruitment was often aggressive in order to insure the maintenance of Catholic institutions, especially in education or the care of the sick, the poor and orphans. Since that time, the articulation in *Perfectae Caritatis* of principles for the adaptation of religious life, experimentation and consolidation of new apostolic insertions of religious following the Council, and the changing signs of the times of these early years of the twenty-first century have taught us a lot. We are more vividly aware of the contemplative nature of every religious vocation. We are more conscious that we have in common with all the faithful a call to follow Christ, but that our call is more radical — more totalizing than theirs. Finally, we are more conscious of the relational nature of our call and our mission: what we do is for the sake of the whole Body of Christ and, to the degree possible, in collaboration and in solidarity with the whole body.

To deepen our understanding of this new predicament and to invite others to share our evangelical life, it seems clear that we need to reappropriate these foundations. We can do this through catechesis within our own institutes. We need to do it, as well, in a broader Church-wide catechesis to bring about a better understanding among the faithful of the meaning of the Church as a witness to the Kingdom of God and to foster an understanding of the gracious and fulfilling life of those called to follow Christ in religious community. *Perfectae Caritatis* 24 advises us: "Religious should remember that the example of their own lives is the best commendation of their institutes and is an invitation to others to take on the religious life."

Reflection Questions

- The following of Christ in vowed community life has known historical and theological tensions through the centuries: between solidarity with the faithful and separation, between action and contemplation, between secular insertion and sacral consecration. How does your institute address and resolve these tensions today?
- Has your institute recently raised and discussed the question of why new members ought to be incorporated among you, and how to articulate your vision of their role for the wellbeing of the institute and of the Church?
- How would you describe to your bishop (or to the Holy See) the positive developments in religious life and in your institute's apostolic life over the last 40 years? How might you go about sharing these same insights with the faithful?
- As a Christian disciple of Jesus and a religious, what are your personal feelings or understandings of the nature of your vocation? What precisely has God called you to be and to do?