

<sup>13</sup> Wittberg, *Pathways*, pp. 80-85.

<sup>14</sup> The above-mentioned St. Joseph of Arimithea Society seems to operate through “franchises”—the Cleveland and Louisville chapters appear to be separate from each other. Many other groups enlisting high school or college students operate similarly.

### A Sampler of Potential (and Actual) Religious SMOs

1. “Franchised” Youth Groups (local school chapters, perhaps with a national headquarters supplying materials or training)
  - a. Volunteers supporting a local soup kitchen
  - b. A high school or college centering-prayer group
  - c. Group spiritual direction, big brother/sister spiritual mentoring
  - d. Adoration societies, sodalities
2. Ministry Groups (non-age-specific, perhaps linked nationally in a network or association)
  - a. Supporting crisis pregnancies
  - b. Companioning the dying
  - c. Running a women’s shelter
  - d. Strengthening marriages
3. Spirituality Groups (may have a centralized headquarters and/or a youth branch – see #1, above)
  - a. Devotion to a particular saint
  - b. Performance of a particular spiritual practice (Eucharistic adoration, centering prayer, pilgrimages)
  - c. Spiritual mentoring, group spiritual direction
4. Lifestyle Groups
  - a. Simple living
  - b. Intentional communities
  - c. Peace and reconciliation

## Revisiting Religious Identity

**I**n the years following the Second Vatican Council, much attention was focused on changes in religious life. Much writing and much effort have been directed toward rethinking or reimagining religious life. In light of all that, one might be tempted to say “Enough already!” An old saying has it that familiarity breeds contempt. Familiarity can also breed complacency and neglect. It might be good, then, to look once again at what it means to be a religious, to reflect on our religious identity.

Besides the decree on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae caritatis*, Vatican Council II also spoke of the role of religious in *Lumen gentium*, the dogmatic constitution on the church. In chapter 6, §44, we read that the religious state “manifests in a special way that the kingdom of God and its high requirements transcend all earthly considerations, bringing home to all people

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the immeasurable greatness of the power of Christ in his sovereignty and the infinite might of the Holy Spirit marvelously working in the church.”<sup>1</sup> The council is simply saying religious life gives special witness that, above and beyond earthly values, there is something we call the kingdom of God.

While religious life’s characteristic witness is special, it is not exclusive. It is the duty of all Christians to give witness to the kingdom of God. All Christians, be they lay or religious, are committed to living out their baptismal consecration. Emphasis on the common vocation of all Christians highlights what is of fundamental importance, the fullness of Christian life informed by charity. That emphasis also counteracts any tendency to draw unfavorable comparisons between the lay and religious states, as though laypersons are somehow second-class citizens or “children of a lesser God.”

That broad emphasis on all Christian life is rooted in the most ancient tradition of monasticism. In his masterful study *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, Louis Bouyer finds certain constants in the literature of monasticism. He affirms them because they were somewhat obscured by later developments. One such insight is that the primitive monk did not appear special. Whether by himself or others, his vocation was not considered particular or exceptional. The monk was simply a Christian, a devout layperson who took the most radical means to live the Christian life to the fullest. The monk proposed no other end than to be saved. All his life, the monk asked for no other teaching from his elders than the means of attaining that goal. His fundamental and persistent question was: “Tell me. How can I be saved?”

Two points need emphasis. First, holiness, the fullness of Christian life, is not something reserved

to religious, while laypersons are called to something less. Second, religious are to focus on the essential, on the search for union with God, and not see holiness as something incidental or distinctive which sets them apart from “ordinary” Christians. Fundamental to religious identity is one’s identity as a Christian. It is the fullness of the Christian experience that constitutes Christian identity.

There are three major elements in the Christian experience. The first is not distinctively Christian. It is the human preamble. It consists in discovering that human happiness and fulfillment are not brought about by taking. We all start out that way, looking for that certain something or combination of things which, if we could only latch on to it and make it our own, would provide fulfillment. The Christian experience becomes possible once we realize that what we really seek is something or someone to give ourselves to, something or someone greater and nobler than ourself. It is a search for something or someone that will endow our life with meaning and purpose. Finding that something or someone is the beginning of faith as a lived reality. It becomes the basis of all commitment worthy of the name.

The second element makes the experience specifically Christian. It consists in finding that greater-than-self reality in the person of Jesus Christ. It is finding in his words meaning for our life. It is finding in his life the pattern and model for our own.

The third element is the desire to share what we have found. We want others to find the meaning and purpose that have become our own. We want to live out this meaning and purpose in love for one another. The full Christian experience, then, is apostolic and missionary.



If this Christian experience is not real in our lives, no amount of theorizing about what it is or should be will ever make it so. Furthermore, theorizing will not help much in our lives as religious. If the Christian experience is real, it can be progressively liberating, freeing from all those attitudes of mind and spirit that limit us to operating within the narrow confines of self-ish interests.

Like all Christians, religious are to give witness by their lives to the possibilities open to everyone for liberation from enslaving attitudes like inordinate ambition, defensiveness, possessiveness, self-pity, and cynicism. The life of religious should also be an active witness to joy, to hope, and to love.

The call to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity seems so daunting that people often try to evade its challenge. In doing so, laypersons sometimes say that holiness is something for religious and priests, not for “ordinary” persons like themselves. Likewise, religious sometimes find a type of escape through dependence on the system. Religious life involves a kind of system that includes public vows, constitutions and rules, and a goodly number of practices found in the traditions of various religious institutes. We might think just plugging into the system will make us as holy as we need to be. It is easy to just coast along. All too easily we can come to rate as virtue whatever is conformable to our religious surroundings. Custom and routine can so enslave us as to dispense us from personal decision.

Of course, custom and routine, as well as the regular practices and exercises of religious life, are also great helps—if we understand and use them rightly. They do not, however, carry us all the way. They reflect the fact

that in choosing to be religious we have set the direction of our lives. But they do not guarantee we never lose that direction. The need for ongoing renewal is simply the need to reaffirm, to reset our direction. The human condition is such that nothing can be taken for granted except the constancy of God’s grace, of his invitation.

Another point on which the council spoke explicitly is religious consecration. Everyone of the faithful is consecrated to the divine service by baptism. Clearly, in various contexts the word “consecration” has various meanings, causing difficulties to be raised about how this idea applies to religious. In addressing those difficulties, the council begins by relating religious consecration to baptism. Religious consecration adds nothing to the baptism’s sacramental character. It is, however, in the line of baptismal grace. That grace can be lived in varying degrees of intimacy. The council speaks of religious as being “more intimately consecrated to the divine service.” That phrase is significant. It does not say “more strictly” or anything that might seem to emphasize some form of legal obligation. What the council points out by those words is that baptismal consecration can be interiorized to a greater or lesser extent by grace and by love.

Ultimately, the truth of every Christian life consists in one’s baptismal consecration. But God calls people to live out that consecration in different ways. For religious

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the call to God's service is more explicitly determined. It takes on a particular form or style. To put that a bit differently, for religious the vital response called for by God's loving initiative is made concrete in a specific and distinctive way.

By making a certain explicit profession of the evangelical counsels, persons technically become religious. The purpose of such profession is to commit ourselves more explicitly and more profoundly to living our baptismal consecration. At one time religious profession was commonly called "a new baptism" in homilies at profession ceremonies. In those days it was not always adequately explained. The council statements revitalized and clarified that idea.

In reflecting on religious consecration, it is important to realize that such consecration is the work of God. Virtually every page of Scripture speaks of God's initiative in regard to creatures. Jesus told his disciples: "You have not chosen me. I have chosen you." Passages like that have a particular resonance for religious. It is God who calls religious and consecrates them through the church's ministry. Because it is God's work, religious consecration is permanent. God's choice and God's fidelity are unchanging. God is constant in the grace he offers, in his call. Our challenge is to keep trying to respond generously to that call.

Religious consecration represents a special instance of the mysterious interaction between grace and human freedom. Obviously it is essential that those consecrating themselves to God's service be free. At the same time we must recognize that the consecration is ultimately God's work.

Religious profession has never been considered a sacrament by the church. In recent years many things have been referred to as "sacraments," in a broad sense

of the word. In the strict sense, religious profession is not a sacrament. That does not mean, however, that religious profession has no reality beyond the disposition and conduct of the subject.

Religious consecration is something accorded to free persons precisely as free. To be received, the consecration requires a personal response to God's call. That response includes certain characteristics. It must be sufficiently enlightened, conscious, and free. A person's intention and the vows which formulate that intention are eminently free acts.

Conversely, when the church dispenses from vows, she judges that in reality there was some impediment to freedom in the original profession, something lacking in what was offered for divine consecration. The fact that religious consecration is not a sacrament does not mean nothing more is involved than the liberty of the one making vows. On God's part the engagement is indefectible.

A vocation consists in a person's being called to a certain manner of life. Each vocation has its own structure and laws. Those laws are not to be understood as something imposed from the outside. They derive from the very nature of the life in question. To ignore structure and laws proper to religious life would be to think of religious life as funny putty which can take on any shape one gives it. History shows significant variations in the forms of religious life. But, in the last analysis, that life must always be directly related to what is most fundamental in Christianity, the search for God and growth in charity.

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In the Christian understanding of life, the goal is progress in charity. Jesus made it clear that love of God and love of neighbor sum up the whole law. Love gives ultimate value to what we do. That is why religious consecration is wholly directed towards love of God and neighbor. It is precisely that love which gives the value of consecration to the activity of the religious. The idea that one's activities must continuously be animated by charity is certainly not new. We have heard it countless times in one form or another. Nor is it distinctive. It is true for everyone. By religious profession we are committed to that goal more explicitly, more officially, as it were.

On the part of religious, the consecration of one's life consists in using distinctive means for achieving the common Christian goal of progress in charity. My circumstances, my state of life, determine the means that are most appropriate for me.

Jacques Maritain offered an excellent definition of means. He said means are the end in the process of coming to be. Thus, at each moment of our journey toward the perfection of love, we make that end real by employing the appropriate means. Perhaps we should emphasize the word "journey." While we hope we are on the right road and we try to keep moving in the right direction, we never reach the end, the perfection of love, in this life. Another way to put that is to say that holiness is not so much a place we arrive as it is the way we travel.

Consciousness of our shortcomings and failures makes us reluctant to think of ourselves as holy. A number of years ago Archbishop John Roach of St. Paul, in a pastoral letter on spirituality titled *A Friendship Unlimited*, offered a valuable insight in this regard. He wrote: "It's a funny thing, but for years I couldn't imag-

ine thinking of myself as holy. I was equating holiness with perfection, and I knew I simply didn't have that. It is clear to me now that holiness is the desire to be a friend of Jesus Christ and to surrender my will to God. I may stumble along with that. I have so far—but, so long as I continue a sincere effort toward that goal, I am holy."

It might help also to remind ourselves of one characteristic of holiness that is often overlooked. It is compatible with human frailty. Many stories and most statues of saints give a wrong impression, an impression of otherworldliness that obscures the fact that those saints were real human beings with human faults and weaknesses. Examples are plentiful. St. Augustine was given to rages. St. Thérèse of Lisieux had bouts of depression. St. Vincent de Paul, the great saint of charity, was said to be bilious and subject to fits of anger. St. Jerome was aggressive and insulting to persons who disagreed with him. In fact, one of his contemporaries said of Jerome that his malice was such that no saint could live within miles of him. The secret of all of those people is that they never gave up struggling and working to overcome their human weaknesses. They knew what counts is not the triumphant victory of total perfection, but persevering effort. Teresa of Avila said we should strive and strive and strive, for we were made for nothing else. She was right, of course, but the way she said it makes it sound hard. And it is a constant challenge. We cannot gloss over that. But I like the way T.S. Eliot put it when he said: "We are only undefeated because we keep on trying."

In question 186 of the *Secunda Secundae* of his *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas treats of things that pertain to the religious state. He speaks at length of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and argues their



necessity for religious perfection. He points out that “a person cannot offer his whole life to God directly because that life is not lived all at once, but only successively. Hence, a person can only offer his whole life to God through the obligation imposed by vows” (my translation). Thus, our real challenge is not the performance of heroic acts, however beautiful, however noble, for every human act is by nature transitory. Our real challenge is the heroism of a whole life, offered to God without measure, without reservation, without regret. This is done through religious consecration, through the vows. And in this the entire person, mind and heart, must be involved and permanently involved.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> The Vatican translation and the revised Flannery translation, melded. See *Lumen gentium*, chapter 6, §44: “Regni Dei denique super omnia terrestria elevationem eiusque summas necessitudines peculiari modo patefacit [status religiosus]; supereminentem quoque magnitudinem virtutis Christi regnantis atque infinitam Spiritus Sancti potentiam in Ecclesia mirabiliter operantem, cunctis hominibus demonstrat.” Ed.



#### Questions for Personal and Group Reflection

1. If religious sisters and brothers are identified with the laity, how do you claim their special religious identity?
2. Has Clark been helpful in underlining aspects of religious identity that distinguish religious life for priests, sisters, and brothers? Would you want to add or subtract anything?

## Encounters Early and Late: John Bosco and Paul

Saul was present at the stoning of the lovable Stephen, and perhaps this increased the Pharisee’s desire for Christian blood. Fernand Prat says, “Not content with being present at the torture of the victims, he entered into houses and dragged out the inmates, both men and women, to hale them to the dungeons.”<sup>1</sup> Saul set out on the trail of Christians not to evangelize them but in pursuit of them to bring them to what he thought was justice. He had asked the priests to give him the official mission to seek out Jesus’ disciples in the synagogue of Damascus and drag them before the Sanhedrin. In the Acts of the Apostles we have three accounts of the vision on the way to Damascus (9:1-19; 22:3-21; 26:12-20). It is Luke who makes the first announcement of

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