

## Chapter Thirteen

# Toward a New Synthesis

Religious of the nineteenth century developed a new way to live the vows. They translated the idealism, self-sacrifice, and devotion to Christ of religious life into a framework for their times. Religious life was both a "way" of personal transformation and a way to bring change in the world. They renounced the world as religious before them. Their renunciation, however, was not an abandonment of the world, but of an absolutizing relationship to it.

Religious of the 1800s embraced the values of their age. Yet, they witnessed that the goals and ideals of their times were not absolute.<sup>1</sup> Positive aspects of nineteenth-century culture can be found in their lives and ministry. At the same time, they stood against what was false in their culture. They reached out to those abandoned by the self interests of their age.

They translated religious life into a new form by integrating a "way" of personal transformation and service to the world. Four core patterns are evident in the complex strands of this history.<sup>2</sup> Their lives involved a "way of transformation"; they formed a new community of baptism; they engaged in the defeat of death according to their times; and they generated and were sustained by ecclesial energy.

1. See Merkle, *Committed by Choice*, 96.

2. For insight into the nineteenth century in relationship to a broader view of the history of religious life, see JoAnn Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1996) 565-630.

## A way of transformation

Religious communities of the nineteenth century were a "way" of transformation. They believed in the transcendent data of the gospel and followed a way which gave access to that data. Each "way" had positive and negative characteristics. They promoted "freedom from" habits and mentalities and a "freedom to" live the values of the gospel. Each "way" suggested leaving things which society claimed were not distractions. Each way promoted behavior which the age claimed unprofitable. By creation of their "way," religious engaged in ideological critique. They made clear that their way was not "business as usual" in their culture.

Thought in the nineteenth century held that the human person was perfectible. For religious, the transformed self was not an absolute goal. Religious did strive for perfection. Perfection often was interperated through lingering scholastic frameworks. These encouraged the pursuit of "perfect" actions, such as perfect charity and perfect acts of contrition.

However, nineteenth-century spirituality went beyond scholastic frameworks. The "leaving behind" of religious life was to create a new "will" or a desire for God's will which was dynamically transforming the world.<sup>3</sup> God in the 1800s, among other things, was a God creating a kingdom. Nineteenth-century religious developed their spirituality in a mix of old and new practices. All was not clear nor was practice clearly that of one century.

Religious sought salvation in a century when people believed they could save themselves. Religious went against the mentality of their age. They renounced material things and redirected sexual and relational energy to seek and do God's will. Their choices gave new expression to the meaning of the gospel in a very secular age.

Their way of transformation was not isolated from mission.<sup>4</sup> Amid lingering monastic frameworks, union with God's will

3. Gerald A. McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977) 190-200.

4. Here we will address apostolic orders because there were so many new ones, especially of women, that developed at this time. We do this, however, valuing the "mission" of prayer of contemplative religious.

drew them to union with a loving presence and action in the world.

Monastic spirituality gradually was transformed into one suited to the apostolate. Monastic discipline became apostolic mobility, acceptance of the hardships of community and ministry, learning new cultures, and the discipline of work.

Religious life mirrored a broader struggle in the Church to reconcile the natural and supernatural orders. Enclosed religious were still seen as "true" religious. Yet, congregations struggled to balance monastic practices and apostolic work. Religious blended the apostolic practice of social service and the renouncement of the world of monastic practice.

Love of God, delight in virtue, and service to others were the goals of the vowed life. Their ministry was a witness, not just a social service. They linked mission and their "way" of living. Religious of the 1800s not only did good work, they depended on God. They combined two inseparable marks of Christian holiness: reliance on God which gives rise to true courage and independence, and love of neighbor in the face of the rationalism and skepticism of their age.<sup>5</sup>

There was no recipe for this innovative approach to religious life. It involved a search not unlike our own today.

#### *Facing the ideal and the real*

The ideals of religious life had to be refound in the new situation of nineteenth century culture. In cultural transition, there is a tension between the ideal and the real. Those things once thought ideal no longer have the same meaning in the times. Some values are discarded, some continue, and others are re-expressed in new cultural forms.

Religious life, as enclosed life, did not conform to demands of the times. For our purposes, "ideal" will mean the image used as a model of religious life. The term "real" will mean what religious actually did and/or were called to do by the Church and society.

Religious, for the most part, were not asked to stay in monasteries. They were needed to start schools. They were on battle-

5. Kathleen Fischer and Thomas Hart, *Christian Foundations*, 146. See also McCool, *Catholic Theology in the 19th Century*, chapter 1.

fields nursing the wounded, in the streets collecting orphans. They ran parishes. They created hospitals. These helped industrial workers with subsistent wages recover their health and get back to work to support their families. Nineteenth-century religious were affected by a rapidly changing culture. Not everything was clear. Yet, they did respond.

Facing a tension between the ideal and the real could have resulted in hesitant, immobile, and fearful behavior.<sup>6</sup> Yet, religious faced the challenge. They closed the gap between the ideal and real in their times by incarnating their faith in a way of life that produced what was socially needed. Their life was a "way." It was organized to take the transcendent data of their lives and translate it into practices. These practices affirmed their values and made acquisition of them key to their way of living.

#### *Practices*

Practices are actions which are both a means to a good life and a socially situated good life itself. Practices differ from good experiences in that they re-occur. We may go to a conference or a retreat and find it lifted our spirits. A practice, on the other hand, is ongoing. Attending a yearly retreat is a practice. Making a retreat once is a good experience with no commitment to the future.

Practices engage us. As repeated actions, they help us acquire values. Practices are ritual actions which embody what is right in a context.<sup>7</sup> A practice of nineteenth-century religious life was the readiness to be sent to any mission. This readiness expressed the "faith" of religious life in those times. Religious were missioned consistently throughout their lives in this way.

Practices not only embody transcendent data but are means to acquire it. The way of life of a community is constituted by its practices. Practices form character both of the group and its members. They are meaningful because they are understood as means to acquire community values and to express community values. Sharing in common practices fashions character and gives

6. Donald Capps, *The Depleted Self* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 87.

7. Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments*, 154.

distinguishable shape to a way of life. A common practice among religious today is the sharing of income.

Practices are similar to actions which comprise a sport. One day I observed a young boy sliding into a pillow thrown onto the ground. He would run, fall to the ground, and slide into the pillow. He would repeat this action over and over again. Taken alone, this behavior is not easily understood. Unless one knew he was preparing to play baseball, this behavior was silly. However, knowing the game, the behavior made sense. Today the practice of sharing income is meaningless outside the expression of a total way of life.

Practices form a matrix of behavior which is meaningful as a whole, as a way. In isolation, their meaning is not understood. Monastic practices stayed in religious life long after monasticism was its main framework. These practices were gradually dropped as they no longer effectively formed character in an apostolic life. The vows shape practices of religious life. Nineteenth-century religious adapted them for apostolic life.

Practices, as praxis, also shape thought. What we do affects how we think.<sup>8</sup> Practices are at the heart of moral communities. In order to hold certain moral values, one must experience them. The group has to live their stated values in order to be a moral community.<sup>9</sup> Practices are essential for this task.

Practices are subject to moral judgment. People assess which practices are helpful for their lives and which are not. They may ask what practices communicate about their way of life or what kind of community their practices form. They may inquire about the type of power relationship practices embody. They might ask if their practices are in sync with the culture. Practices answer the question, what is the best way of life for us to lead? They make vision, obligations, values, and hopes concrete.

8. See Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 9. The relationship of praxis and insight is a popular theme of Latin American theologians. See Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (New York: Orbis, 1978).

9. See Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of practices in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

Practices cannot be coerced, but they can be reinforced by social sanctions. Membership involves fidelity to practices. They are the connective tissue that shapes participants. Practices often denote whether one is really playing the game, improving one's skill, or just sitting on the sidelines. Superficial or arbitrary understanding of practices creates a judgmental climate. New forms of "fidelity" are then difficult to recognize. Practices need to be grounded in healthy communal spirituality.

Religious life today is also a way of transformation. To follow this coordinate of direction, we need to link our "way" to practices. Effective practices today will connect a "way" of transformation and mission, as did religious of the nineteenth century.

Yet, modern society is based on a different conception of community from that of the nineteenth century. New practices must be based on a contemporary understanding of community. A false assumption today is that practices belong to the past. On the contrary, every community form needs them. The whole way of life educates and forms; it is not just episodic observances. Religious are challenged today to re-express their framework of life in a new cultural situation.

#### *The new community of baptism*

A second coordinate of direction provided by nineteenth-century religious is community. Religious of the 1800s lived the community of the gospels, as did many religious before them. They formed new ways of coming together and gave witness to the "new community" formed by baptism.

In the 1800s, religious created communities of caring, hospitality, and mission. They founded new institutions as images of God's intended community. They dedicated themselves to the practices which constitute community. They broke barriers of community and engaged in hospitality. They sought to welcome the world. They embraced a spiritual elitism that did not divide the world and the Church. It actually helped to unite them. Their spirituality was not divisive insofar as it was rooted in community.<sup>10</sup>

10. We note hospitality, acknowledging that enclosure often blocked efforts in this regard.

Baptism is a call to community. The communal mission of nineteenth-century religious gave new expression to the community of the Christian life. Today religious are challenged also to form community, but on new grounds.

Community of the nineteenth century was modern compared to monastic communities. Yet it was still a traditional community. Community solidarity in the 1800s was based on shared ethnicity, territorial identity, and common social class.<sup>11</sup>

Religious communities drew upon these traditional boundaries and went beyond them. Choir and lay sisters were joined. Brothers from different nationalities were merged. Religious had an international mission and a solidarity which transcended national lines. On the other hand, many nineteenth-century communities did have a common language, ethnic customs, and other markers of cultural identity as building blocks for community. It seems fair to say that nineteenth-century religious communities were transitional in that they had both traditional and modern elements.

Sociologists claim modern life waged war on traditional community. Modern times welcomed the freedom of an anonymous society. Oppressed by the small-mindedness and pettiness of small village life, people found new opportunities in the wider boundaries of modern living. Religious, too, experience these shifts in their experience of community.

Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Freud claim modern "beliefs" gave cultural and moral coherence to people's lives in the face of the unraveling of traditional community. Religious also seek shared beliefs to knit together a community not bound by the daily ties of living.

Changes in community also impacted identity. Traditionally, intact, long-haul communities create identity. However, modern society is built on a mobility of labor and capital, creating opportunities for exposure to wider worlds. This destroys the communal mechanisms and sanctions which cement communities into centers of identity and shared vision.

11. Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments*, 36. I will draw on Rasmussen's analysis in the following pages, adapting it to religious life.

Until Vatican II religious life remained relatively immune from broader cultural changes in community. Religious community was sufficiently withdrawn from the culture that its monastic style gave it the flavor of a traditional community, even though adapted to ministry.

However, after Vatican II this changed. Shared housing, living in the same locality as one's group, working in community institutions, engaging in similar educational opportunities and mission experience ended for many religious. Diverse experiences made the ideal of a shared community vision difficult. Its base in common experience was eroded. Pre-Vatican II religious life was in many ways a pre-capitalist life. Modern society dismantled that life, and with it, not community, but a model of community existence.

The modern model of community is based on a different ideal. The modern era produced a vision of a Great Society in which individuals fashioned their own lives, based on their preferences. Individuals name the relationships to which they hold themselves. Intact communities are not part of this vision, nor is public life and the common good.<sup>12</sup> Religious life, as it adapted itself to modern life, was affected by this change in mentality of the broader society.

In society, community was transformed from a place to an experience. Modern society defines itself around the economic world. Yet, it assumes that morals centered in a noneconomic life will humanize it. Moderns want to make money, but they assume people can be trusted, will be fair, and can tell the truth.

What modern society did not calculate is that intact communities provide the values, training, and skills to have a public life together. The modern paradox of community is that community is to provide the values for modern life; however, modern society does little to provide for the stability of these centers of human life. Historians claim that modern life lives off the moral capital of a more traditional society which preceded it.<sup>13</sup> The crisis in community is, what happens when this stable generation dies?

12. *Ibid.*, 37.

13. *Ibid.*, 45.

In religious life there is a parallel situation. Community life today assumes members already know how to live in community.<sup>14</sup> However, religious face a unique crisis. Some experienced members do not want to live in community, while younger members ask for community. The community variations, which many religious live today, work because they live off the "moral capital" of a more traditional way of life. How do we provide for formation of community in the new situation of today?

#### *Life-style enclaves*

People still need intimacy, identity, and support. Modern society meets these needs, not through community, but through life-style enclaves.<sup>15</sup> Life-style enclaves are not communities. They are groups of people who share similar patterns of consumption, leisure, and interests. A life-style enclave is a private community with its own goods and services, from a security system to shield it from others, to schools, pools, clubs, parks.

In enclaves, people have no common history, memory, or story. Enclaves do not call a group beyond itself. People simply gather around shared preferences, usually leisure and consumption. In enclaves there are group boundaries. People can keep others, who are not like them, away.

Community, on the other hand, is a place of manifold engagement.<sup>16</sup> Community is an inclusive whole where people live interdependently with one another, sharing both a private and a public life. In community, one generation initiates the next into a way of life. As center of manifold engagement, community gives each member a significant place in day-by-day participation. Manifold engagement creates important bonds which tie the members together.

14. This is often due to the "gap" between ministry expectations and the patterns in local living situations. Here we are using community to mean a shared living arrangement.

15. Merkle, *Committed by Choice*, 21. Here I draw on Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*.

16. Rasmussen, *Moral Fragments*, 139.

Manifold engagement can be contrasted to a life-style enclave.<sup>17</sup> Members of a life-style enclave are not interdependent nor do they act together except to insure the future of their life-style together. Their lives are essentially private. They gather principally around leisure and consumption.

Life-style enclaves assume a formed morality. They draw on whatever moral insights people bring with them to a loosely formed group. The enclave does not have shared practices beyond the structures of families or schools within it. It leaves all other decisions to the current mentalities common to a culture. It has no vision of life beyond that of the will of the members to keep choosing to live together. It provides no source for solidarity. Life-style enclaves are not centers of freedom; rather, they are groups of conformity who bind together, often to keep others out.

Community is a center of moral formation. Through intact small communities, people learn the staying power and trust to temper themselves, to serve, to sacrifice, to lead, to observe meaning-giving traditions, to develop character, to practice decision-making, to recover from mistakes, and to forgive. In small communities people learn how the world works.

Patterns of practice in community living today cannot be those of the nineteenth century. Yet, community is more than a discipline of religious life. Devising a modern image of community in religious life is key to its future. Community is central to religious life as a "way" of personal transformation and a way to bring change in the world. Yet, both must be translated for the culture of today. Religious are called not only to discern shared values but to name the conditions which develop those values and enable them in the next generation. As we receive this coordinate of direction from the nineteenth century, we ponder the next step.

17. *Ibid.*, 53. Again I will draw on Rasmussen's analysis and adapt it to the needs of religious community.