

This is a review of Sandra Schneiders' book which appeared in the *National Catholic Reporter* in their February 22, 2002 issue. The entire book deals with celibacy and relationships (community), and even though it is 11 years old, Sandra was/is always several years ahead of most of us so it's pretty "current"!

SELLING ALL: COMMITMENT, CONSECRATED CELIBACY, AND COMMUNITY IN CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS LIFE By Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM Paulist, 471 pages, \$24.95

In this second volume of her projected three-volume study of Catholic religious life in a postmodern world, Sr. Sandra Schneiders offers a wide-ranging exploration of the subjects of commitment, consecrated celibacy and community. These are, for her, three critical areas for the internal identity of both the individual religious and the corporate body, however defined, to which she/he belongs. It is an amazing book.

Schneiders, of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters, has the biblical, theological and historical competence, as well as the psychological, anthropological and experiential insight, to bring an extraordinary vision to bear on contemporary religious life. Without a doubt her work is the quintessential effort in this area.

The central premise around which the entire book revolves is Schneiders' conviction that consecrated celibacy is the constitutive vow of religious life. The call to consecrated celibacy for those considering religious life is one of "giving themselves to Jesus in an exclusive and permanent union that expresses itself in non-marriage to anyone else." Such a call, she feels, is at the heart of religious life. "It is not a choice of an organization, community, or ministry ... but of a Person, of Jesus Christ as the locus of union with God."

'To love unto the end'

While post-Vatican Council II renewal of religious life has almost universally concentrated on mission and ministry, she unequivocally affirms that only an intense desire for the "unitive/mystical God quest" is sufficient motive for entrance into religious life and for embracing consecrated celibacy as a life commitment that admits of no reservation and therefore 'of no temporary profession.

Accordingly, uttering the formula for profession "unto death," or "for the rest of my life," is a moment of total self-possession and self-gift, and not something for the immature or hesitant. "The commitment to love unto the end is the ultimate act of freedom and self-determination." She finds the ancient nuptial imagery appropriate for the relationship and employs analogs to marriage, in a number of contexts. Some will take pause at this idea but the foundation she establishes is worthy of reflection.

Schneiders addresses all the considerations that must go into a candidate's process of discernment in considering religious life as a permanent life form. Desire for community or for mission, she says, does not suffice, since these are not unique to religious life. In that sense consecrated celibacy is not subsumed by either of the other two vows (these to be

developed in the third volume) nor is it incidental to the ministerial character of what she calls "mobile religious life."

I found her exposition of friendship on the basis of biblical texts particularly compelling. There are, perhaps surprisingly, many biblical texts on friendship that Schneiders draws together into a cohesive theme. The saying of Jesus to his followers, "I no longer call you servants but friends," is an obvious one. Such sayings are remarkably equalizing, contrary to any claim to dominance in religious life that prevailed in the past and perhaps continues in some form in the present. She holds that the religious community is essentially a community of friends. For those old enough-in religious life to recall the prohibition against "particular friends" of earlier times, the biblical foundation she establishes is refreshing and encouraging.

In the central section of the book Schneiders pursues multiple issues around the idea of consecrated celibacy preference for "celibacy" over "chastity"; its "nonnatural" rather than "unnatural" character; valid and invalid motivations for choosing religious life.

Critical for many readers will be her approach to the unitive, communitarian and ministerial dimensions of the vow of consecrated celibacy.

Here she provides an overview of the development of ministerial religious life from its beginnings until the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) with the attendant emphasis on ministry that in effect was an understandable result of the movement from enclosed religious life to active life in mission. As a result, consecrated celibacy receded as a focus of religious spirituality. While she holds that celibacy is not necessary for either ministry or community, Schneiders recognizes that shared celibacy among the members of a community creates a particular kind of community and can also be a fostering condition of ministry.

Total self gift to Christ

The chapter on celibacy as women's reality" is comprehensive in reviewing the teaching of the official church on women and contrary views that arise from women's experience. Schneiders traces celibacy back to its Christian beginnings among male ascetics and consecrated virgins. She suggests that, as different from men for whom celibacy was essentially ascetical practice and functionally instrumental, for women consecrated virginity was unitive and integral to the end itself, that is, total self gift to Christ.

What follows is an insightful analysis of how patriarchal dominance is rooted in the physical, psychological and social differences among women and men. She makes the case for the "protofeminist character of virginity within religious life and the role of the marital metaphor in legitimating and expressing this character."

In other contexts she notes the difference between virginity and celibacy. Invoking the lives, experiences and writings of the mystics, she pursues her view of the relevance of the spousal metaphor for women's commitment to Christ in religious life.

The treatment on community is especially thoughtful and thought-provoking. Sociologists such as Patricia Wittberg, upon whom Schneiders relies to some extent, has identified forms of organization in contemporary religious communities as intentional, bureaucratic and associational. Apart from the intentional form, defined as the pre-Vatican hierarchical form prevailing at the time, Schneiders is able to find positive values in the other forms, not, however, without cautionary considerations.

In concluding this book, Schneiders invites conversation and discussion around the ideas that she has proposed, acknowledging that they are not definitive. Surely, that invitation will be accepted.

Some will question the very use of the term "consecrated," in light of the Vatican's penchant for dividing religious between those who choose consecration and those who choose mission as their identifying characteristic. The marital metaphor for women's religious life will be a stumbling block for some as well, particularly for those who look for feminine images of God within the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

The restricted identity of "intentional community" may be questioned, since it has taken on meanings today other than that proposed by Wittberg. The issues around the vows, community and mission are ongoing and conflictive for many. Schneiders addresses all of these issues and brings new and well-founded insights into all of the problems.

Throughout, the reader is caught up in the stream of ideas that flow from the creative mind of this author. They move the reader along in the apparent passion that Schneiders has for her material. She has thought long and hard and produced a volume that seems hard pressed to hold its contents. There is scarcely a page that does not invite a pause for reflection.

We can all be grateful for the compendious work Schneiders is doing in the spirit of the poet who wrote, "I think back gladly on the future."

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