

Apostolic Religious Life: A Public, Ecclesial Vocation

Religious life belongs unquestionably to the life and holiness of the Church, although it is a “charismatic” rather than a “structural” element; one could even say it is an essential expression of that holiness.¹ It is a gift by which God the Father through the Holy Spirit animates and refreshes the Church with an outpouring of grace that calls forth communities distinguished by their courageous faith, steadfast hope, and passionate love for Jesus Christ and the world he came to save. Consecrated religious have a place in the heart of the Church because, by leaving all to follow Christ, they announce with their whole lives that God has made us for himself and our hearts are restless until they rest in him.²

We who accept the vocation to religious life make profession of the poverty, chastity, and obedience of Jesus Christ “freely, willingly, and purely for the love of God.”³ In fact, our freedom must be assured; our vows are invalid if we have been subject to any alien pressure. We ask to be admitted to public vows in response to a deep personal experience of being loved and chosen, and in the light of a strong attraction to the charism of a particular institute. This impulse to “sell everything” to buy the field in which we have found the “treasure” (Matthew 13:44) is from the Holy Spirit. If our request is accepted, we commit ourselves to observe the evangelical counsels, to live in community, and to carry out a particular mission in the name of the Church—according to the charism and constitution of our institute. Because our witness arises from a free personal gift of self, lived according to a way of holiness approved by the Church, it

¹ *Lumen gentium*, 44.

² St. Augustine, *Confessions* 1,1,1.

³ This was formulated as a question in the final vow ceremony of my congregation, the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity.

possesses moral authority—the kind of authority, in fact, that is indispensable for transmitting the faith and accomplishing the Church’s mission.⁴

We are here to reflect on our vocation. Most of us are aware that all is not well, that something has been lost and must be reclaimed. What is this “treasure” that needs to be reclaimed? The problem is not only that so few are joining our ranks.⁵ It is that the current polarization and division in the Church at large is found among us as well. It exists in the uneasy and even fractured relationships among our apostolic institutes, within many of our institutes, and—for many—in the relationships of religious with the diocesan clergy, the bishops, and the Holy See.⁶ The reality of this polarization is more than regrettable; it is a cause of scandal, a counter-sign. Our way of life was born from the ardent desire to reproduce the apostolic ideal in which “the company of those who believed was of one heart and one soul, . . . had everything in common, [and] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers” (Acts 4:35; 2:42).

New communities of apostolic men and women religious seem able to offer this witness. They are attracting vocations, and for this we can all rejoice. Some traditional institutes that made few changes or made them very gradually, and some of the younger institutes that had fewer changes to make, are likewise still welcoming new members. But many communities that were flourishing before the Council are now floundering and

⁴ In the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (*Origins* 25 [April 4, 1996], 34), Pope John Paul II teaches that consecrated religious are to supply the rest of the baptized with “the incentive to make a full and loving response” to God’s Word through Christian service.

⁵ In 1993 the Nygren-Ukeritis study (*The Future of Religious Orders in the United States: Transformation and Commitment*, by David J. Nygren, C.M. and Miriam D. Ukeritis, C.S.J. [Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993]) predicted that the “window of opportunity” for reversing our rapid decline would remain open for only ten more years.

⁶ The Congregation that oversees religious life has had several changes of title. Today, it is called the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL).

dying, despite the evident good will and generosity of most individual religious. We experience a decline in numbers and a rise in median age but also a malaise, an uncertainty about the future. Many are stymied by indecision.⁷ They may soldier on, hoping and praying for new members, but they are unable, or perhaps simply afraid to evaluate how their own choices and attitudes affect their situation. Some long to “reclaim the treasure,” but meet with inertia or resistance from other members of their institutes and cannot get enough traction to initiate a change of direction. Others are convinced that apostolic religious life as we have known it not only will die, but that it deserves to die. They anticipate a future on the margins of the “institutional Church.” Some are “sojourners,” already so far out on the “margins” that they expect to leave Jesus Christ and his Church behind for the sake of a new, universal spirituality.⁸

Are apostolic women and men religious doomed to remain divided into factions—liberals and conservatives, women and men, ordained and non-ordained, Leadership Conference of Women Religious and Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious?⁹ Is this the best we can do? Is this pleasing to God?

I will focus on the theological dimensions of the present dilemma. First I will review three challenges all congregations of apostolic religious had to meet in view of the

⁷ At the 2007 Assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), Sister Laurie Brink, OP outlined four scenarios in “A Marginal Life: Pursuing Holiness in the 21st Century.” This paper is available on-line at www.lcwr.org, under Assemblies. An abridged version of the paper, with three responses, appeared in *Horizons* 33:3 (Spring 2008): 4-9. *Horizons* invited a comparable analysis of issues in apostolic institutes of men, with two responses, making this issue a useful tool for discussion.

⁸ See the document from the Pontifical Councils for Culture and for Interreligious Dialogue, *Jesus Christ: the Bearer of the Water of Life* (2003) for a Catholic critique of some Gnostic and “New Age” currents of thought that have found their way into literature promoting a “new paradigm” for religious life.

⁹ The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (founded in 1956 as the Council of Major Superiors of Women) and the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (founded in 1992 and approved by the Holy See in 1995) are the two U.S. associations authorized to represent institutes of apostolic women religious to the Holy See.

Council’s call for “appropriate renewal.”¹⁰ Next I will consider a fourth, unexpected challenge that emerged after the Council, namely, a crisis of faith with respect to the origin, structure, and authority of the Church that has affected the relations between apostolic religious and the hierarchy—the “institutional Church.” I will suggest that our “different ecclesiologies” are a major source of our malaise. Finally, I will venture some thoughts as to the nature of the “treasure” we have lost and identify a fifth challenge that remains to be fully met and that offers us the prospect of reclaiming that “treasure.”

Three Challenges Presented by the Council

The Second Vatican Council challenged us to clarify the nature of our vocation as religious in light of the “universal call to holiness” addressed to all the baptized¹¹; to adapt our manner of living, praying, working and governing ourselves to meet the apostolic needs of our day¹²; and to expand our apostolic concerns in view of the Church’s teaching on social justice.¹³ How have these three challenges affected our self-understanding as apostolic religious, our community life, and our ability to bear corporate witness?

1. The Universal Call to Holiness and the Special Vocation of Apostolic Religious

The Council’s teaching on the universal call to holiness held an indirect challenge for apostolic religious. If all fully initiated Christians are called, by reason of their Baptism, to imitate Jesus, poor, chaste, and obedient, and to strive for the perfection of

¹⁰ Many Catholics seem unaware that the Council called for “the appropriate renewal” of religious life, that the Holy See required the participation of all the members in this renewal, and that experimentation contrary to canon law was permitted. As a result, they may judge harshly what resulted from a sincere effort to comply with the Council’s expectation.

¹¹ *Lumen gentium*, 39-42 (chapter 5).

¹² *Perfectae caritatis*, 3.

¹³ *Gaudium et spes* 1, 21, 27, 43, et al. The challenge was addressed principally to the Catholic laity, in view of their specific vocation “to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will” (*Lumen gentium*, 31), but many religious heard in it a stirring and profound invitation to reconsider their own mission.

charity according to their state of life, what is special about religious life? Some apostolic religious, troubled by this, imagined that the emphasis on the universal call to holiness diminished the value of their own vocation. They asked: If perfection can be attained in other ways of life, why make the sacrifices called for by the vows? Many others embraced the new emphasis. They gladly announced their solidarity with the laity and renounced any vestiges of privilege, deliberately distancing themselves from whatever might signify “elitism” or imply the “superiority” of the religious vocation.¹⁴ In their desire to repudiate “elitism,” however, some abandoned not only the privileges they now disdained but also some of the ascetical disciplines and devotional practices that gave public witness to their quest for holiness of life. The effort to avoid “elitism,” in fact, led some women and men religious to make adaptations that have obscured their identity as publicly consecrated, ecclesial persons, and sometimes scandalized the laity.

So what is distinctive about the religious life? The Council teaches that the difference lies in the special call religious receive—a gift of the Holy Spirit—and in the response by which we commit ourselves to the pursuit of Christian holiness under a new “title.”¹⁵ We are called to give a more radical expression to our baptismal vocation and to follow Christ “more closely” by means of our vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. As Pope John Paul II pointed out in *Vita consecrata*,

[A]ll those reborn in Christ are called to live out, with the strength which is the Spirit's gift, the chastity appropriate to their state of life, obedience to God and to the Church, and a reasonable detachment from material possessions: for all are called to holiness, which consists in the perfection of love. *But Baptism in itself*

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II insisted, however, on the “superiority” of consecrated virginity over marriage. See *Mulieris dignitatem*, 20-22 and General Audience of April 7, 1982 (*L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 19 April 1982, pp. 7ff.).

¹⁵ The new “title” would be the profession of vows or similar sacred bonds; see *Lumen gentium*, 44 (Abbott translation) and the *Code of Canon Law*, canon 573 § 1.

*does not include the call to celibacy or virginity, the renunciation of possessions or obedience to a superior, in the form proper to the evangelical counsels.*¹⁶

The religious life, undertaken by means of the vows, presupposes “a particular gift of God not given to everyone . . . a specific gift of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ We have received this vocation to strive for holiness by means that are “over and above” what is required of all the baptized.

Much attention has been given to the meaning and “witness value” of the vows since the Council. In an effort to “accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative,” some have proposed that the vows actually commit us only to the practice of the virtues, e.g., that poverty means “living simply,” chastity means “loving generously,” and obedience means “listening for indications of God’s will.”¹⁸ But one cannot vow to do what is already required! The vows are promises made to God “concerning some good that is possible and *better*.”¹⁹ What is this “good”? It is the good of a covenant relationship by which we freely and publicly bind ourselves to the following of “the Lord Jesus, who, virginal and poor (cf. Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58), redeemed and sanctified [us] by obedience unto death on the cross (cf. Philippians 2:8).”²⁰

While it is true that the “perfection” of the vow lies in the practice of the virtues, the vows themselves commit us to very specific obligations that, taken together, give distinctive shape to our way of life. By chastity we oblige ourselves to perfect continence

¹⁶ *Vita consecrata* (1996), 30 (emphasis mine).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ In 1986 Sr. Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM (*New Wineskins* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1986]) proposed that the vows be understood as profession of a way of life rather than a commitment to undertake specific obligations. According to Fr. Diarmuid O’Murchu, MSC (*Consecrated Religious Life: The Changing Paradigms* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005]) chastity may be seen as a vow for relatedness (or a commitment to erotic liberation); poverty, a vow for mutual sustainability/justice-making; and obedience, a vow for mutual collaboration.

¹⁹ Canon 1191 §1: “A vow is a deliberate and free promise made to God, concerning some good which is possible and better. The virtue of religion requires that it be fulfilled.”

²⁰ *Perfectae caritatis*, 1.

in celibacy; by poverty, to be dependent upon our religious institutes and to observe their laws about the use and disposition of goods; and by obedience, to submit our wills to our lawful superiors when they command in keeping with the constitutions.²¹ We freely choose to do this out of a desire to return love for love by making a total gift of self. We make a serious, public commitment, on the order of marriage, and the Church, by accepting our vows, consecrates us—sets us apart—as public witnesses to the transcendent value of belonging wholly to the Lord and seeking first the coming of his kingdom.

In relation to our distinctive vocation, then, let us examine our consciences. Have we accepted one of the new “theologies” of religious life that empties the vows of their specific objects and obligations? Have we used our desire for “solidarity” with the laity to excuse ourselves from the asceticism that our life requires if we are to build up the Church by the prophetic witness of holiness? Have we become so “laid back,” “relaxed,” and immersed in the world shaped by TV and consumerism that we no longer constitute a sign for others, that is, that we are indistinguishable from generous lay persons whose good works are motivated by faith?

2. Adaptation for the Apostolate and the “Monastic” Ideal

Perfectae caritatis directed that the “manner of living, praying and working” of men and women religious should be suitably adapted not only to the modern physical and psychological circumstances of the members but also, as required by the nature of each

²¹ Canons 599-601.

institute, to the necessities of the apostolate, the demands of culture, and social and economic circumstances.²² This has been a tall order.²³

The challenge to make adaptations required by our contemporary situation in ministry led us to consider critically the differences between an “apostolic” as compared to a “monastic” lifestyle. There were immediate and direct implications for religious whose identity as “semi-cloistered” prevented them from everyday interactions with the laity, but the choices we made in this regard have ultimately affected almost all of us. During the years of experimentation, we evaluated practices and patterns that were once assumed to characterize religious life (e.g., a set schedule or horarium, daily liturgical prayer and spiritual exercises in common, a distinctive habit, a local superior in every community). Some of us have abandoned these or made them optional, on the grounds that these elements were vestiges of a “monastic” lifestyle no longer required of or appropriate to apostolic religious.²⁴ The increasing professionalization and “parochialization” of the ministries has, in fact, seemed to require much more flexibility with respect to certain of them (like the horarium, daily Mass in common, and the religious habit). But it is high time to assess the impact these adaptations have had on

²² *Perfectae caritatis*, 3.

²³ Several interrelated factors have conspired to bring about a change in the way many apostolic religious are employed and assigned: the impact of the many departures from religious institutes; the priest “shortage” and consequent demand for religious to supply certain pastoral services; the growing “professionalization” of ministries open to the non-ordained, lay as well as religious; and the need religious now have for adequate compensation in light of their responsibility for their aged and infirm members. Some of these developments are the result of our own choices; others are outside of our control. In any event, the move towards professionalization has had profound consequences both for common life and for the possibility of supervising and coordinating the ministries of apostolic religious to insure their conformity with the institute’s charism. See Sr. Patricia Wittberg, SC, *From Piety to Professionalism, and Back? Transformation of Organized Religious Virtuosity* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

²⁴ St. Ignatius Loyola made similar adjustments in establishing the Jesuits. In general, religious priests have enjoyed much greater freedom to dispense with the “monastic” elements than women religious.

our own lives, on the witness we hope to give, and on our ability to attract new recruits.²⁵

If an institute has abandoned practices the Holy See identifies as “essential” to religious life,²⁶ for example, one must ask whether it should plan to reclaim that element,²⁷ or whether it may now belong to some other category of consecrated life

One such “element” is the obligation of common life. This continues to be the subject of vigorous debate. Some favor re-defining “common life” in such a way that it may be understood to include religious who live alone for the sake of their ministry but come together regularly in small groups for mutual support; others want to insist that it entails actually living together under one roof on a daily basis and under the direction of a local superior.²⁸ These debates are greatly complicated by the realities of ministry placement (e.g., the difficulties involved in arranging a corporate contract, finding ministries in the same locale, and securing housing). Some may urge that the institute’s apostolic goals should take priority over common life, which they regard as a “monastic” value. It is not clear how this tension should be resolved, and the resolution will differ from one institute to another, but these debates should not proceed without reference to the Holy See’s determination that common life belongs to the definition of religious life, including apostolic religious life—by contrast, for example, with secular institutes.²⁹

²⁵ Common life has taken on heightened importance now that young adults have the option of pursuing a career in lay ministry. It becomes one of the distinctive elements that is attractive to many of them.

²⁶ See Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes (SCRIS), *Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to the Works of the Apostolate* (*Origins* 13 [July 7, 1983]), 18-22.

²⁷ According to CICLSAL’s “Fraternal Life in Community” (*Origins* 23:40 [March 24, 1994], 65 [e]), religious institutes in which the majority of members no longer live in community “would no longer be able to be considered true religious institutes.”

²⁸ *Essential Elements*, 2; canons 607 §2 and 609.

²⁹ For an enumeration of these differences, see Fr. David F. O’Connor, ST, “Two Forms of Consecrated Life: Religious and Secular Institutes,” *Review for Religious* 45 (March-April 1986): 205-19.

Common life is prescribed not simply for reasons of convenience and economy, nor even for mutual support in ministry, but because it manifests our communion in Christ. By our consecration, we share the same traditions, spirituality, apostolic purpose, resources, and constitutions. Our sisterly or brotherly communion announces that persons who love God are able to love and sustain each other, accept one another's gifts and limitations, share joys and sorrows—despite differences in age, race, language, nationality, culture, temperament, and ministerial competence. Because the asceticism of community life demands love, forgiveness, patience, and mutual self-giving, it contributes to growth in holiness. Vowed life, in fact, has serious practical consequences chiefly for those who live together. In an age of exaggerated individualism, community life is truly a prophetic sign. By living together, even at great cost, religious are able to bear striking witness to the Trinitarian mystery of self-emptying love.

As regards our adaptation for the sake of mission, let us ask: Have we—out of necessity or by our own choice—abandoned elements that are, in fact, essential to religious life? Does our common residence function only as a “hotel”? Are we content to make “common life” optional, as a matter of practical necessity, or do we actively seek ways to live together? Are we willing to give it greater priority for the sake of attracting vocations? Given the “professionalization” of non-ordained ministries, is it possible to reclaim common life even if we want to do so? What factors within and outside of our control now militate against it? What might our bishops, vicars for religious, and pastors do to enable and support common life for apostolic religious?

3. Commitment to Social Justice and the Direct Proclamation of the Gospel

A third challenge faced by most apostolic religious during the immediate post-conciliar era came from the Council's emphasis on social justice.³⁰ We took up the task of adaptation and renewal during the era of the civil rights movement, the War on Poverty, the Vietnam War, the "second wave" of the feminist movement, the Equal Rights Amendment, and "liberation theology." Apostolic religious who read *Gaudium et spes* and the 1971 Synod of Bishops' document, "Justice in the World," took very much to heart the assertion that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear...as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel."³¹

Apostolic religious have taken up this challenge with enthusiasm, eager to correct what was for some a rather exclusive preoccupation with the Church's internal life and health, to the neglect of the justice issues of the times, such as racism. Our commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation continues to have high priority in many apostolic institutes.³² When we discuss our priorities in mission we should not feel forced to make a choice between the commitment to social justice or the direct proclamation of the Gospel with the intention to convert individuals to Christ and bring them to sacramental life in the Catholic Church. These objectives belong together.

³⁰ Pope John XXIII wrote the encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in terris* (1964). The Council produced *Gaudium et spes* (1965) and soon afterwards Pope Paul VI wrote the encyclical *Populorum progressio* (1967), and the Apostolic Letter, *Octogesima adveniens* (1971).

³¹ *Justitia in mundo*, 6.

³² When religious committed to "justice issues" remain silent about abortion or become advocates for political positions contrary to Catholic teaching, however, their capacity to bear witness suffers a grievous wound, which may injure their credibility over all.

Evangelization, in the broad sense given it by Paul VI, is not limited to the conversion of individuals to Christ; it must also touch and transform cultures.³³

Having said this, however, Pope Paul insisted, “There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed.”³⁴ More recently, Pope John Paul II called for a “new evangelization” of nominal Christians, those among the baptized who live far from Christ and his Gospel.³⁵ We have, in last spring’s report from the Pew Forum,³⁶ evidence that many Catholics in the U.S. no longer have a sense of living faith. Several studies of young adults and reports from Catholic colleges confirm our suspicion that we may lose another generation to the faith.³⁷

How shall we respond? Which of our founders entrusted to us the task of educating the Church’s children and youth? Have we stopped worrying about their eternal salvation? The proclamation of the kingdom must include handing on the Gospel message by word and example, in accord with the charism of our own founders. It involves introducing young people to Jesus Christ, calling for conversion of heart, and leading them to full participation in the Church’s life.³⁸ It is puzzling and even a cause for embarrassment that two of our national leadership conferences, LCWR and CMSM, focus so resolutely on the world’s agenda and global issues and give so little attention to

³³ See Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), 18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁵ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris missio* (1990), 33.

³⁶ “The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” published by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in April provided disturbing evidence about major changes among U.S. Catholics. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops took this up at their June, 2008 meeting.

³⁷ See the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) reports of the past few years, on-line at <http://www.cara.georgetown.edu/carapr.htm>.

³⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, in the encyclicals *Deus Caritas Est* (2005) and *Spe Salvi* (2007), reminds us that faith is the source of the Church’s charitable activity, and that “faith in progress” is never cumulative because human freedom includes the possibility of sin.

the urgent needs of the Church. Why do they seem to care more about the future of Earth than the future of the Church? If it is not a matter of “either-or” but of “both-and,” what accounts for their selective emphasis? My guess is that the answer is related to the influence, direct or indirect, of the fourth, unexpected challenge, namely, contemporary theological proposals about the nature of the Church.³⁹

A Fourth, Unexpected Challenge: Competing “Ecclesiologies”

The fourth challenge has been the advent of unprecedented theological pluralism and public dissent within the Catholic Church. The period of adaptation and renewal coincided with a time of trial for the whole Church in which many religious mourned the departure of friends and colleagues, debated optional celibacy, protested against *Humanae Vitae*, engaged in a succession of liturgical “experiments,” and endured endless meetings. Some undertook civil disobedience on behalf of civil rights and in opposition to the Vietnam War, and applied the lessons learned to internal congregational and ecclesial issues, spurred on by the logic of liberation theology. Many women religious, caught up in the feminist movement, claimed the right to self-determination as regards the future of their own institutes;⁴⁰ became advocates for lay ministry, and took the lead in the movement for women’s ordination. In 1983, when the revised Code of Canon Law was promulgated and the Holy See proclaimed that the period of “experimentation” had come to an end, many women and men religious had little or no interest in dialoguing

³⁹ A fuller account of the difficulties would include Christology, the doctrine of God, and divine revelation. See the report of the doctrine committee of the Spanish episcopal conference, “Theology and Secularization” (2006) at <http://www.conferenciaepiscopal.es/documentos/Conferencia/teologia.htm>.

⁴⁰ Sr. Sandra Schneiders, IHM, in *New Wineskins*, explained: “Rather than testing the validity of their experience by its conformity to the theory [as proposed by the Congregation], [women religious] have tested the validity of the theory by its adequacy to their experience” (2).

with the bishops on how they measured up to the *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life*, a document prepared by the Holy See as an assessment tool.

It was more than a matter of poor timing or self-assertion, however, for critical theological questions were part of the mix—questions concerning method and content, doctrine and morality, historical consciousness and the development of doctrine. I referred earlier to a crisis of faith with respect to the origin, nature, and authority of the Church, and thus of the relation of religious life to the hierarchy, “the institutional Church.” Some apostolic religious have approached these questions as “justice issues,” in line with this assertion from the 1971 Synod of Bishops: “While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes; hence, we must undertake an examination of the modes of action, of the possessions, and of the lifestyle found within the church itself.”⁴¹

It was easy to move from protesting injustices in the social order to protesting what were alleged to be injustices in the Church: mandatory celibacy for the clergy, Pope Paul's decision (against the majority opinion) in *Humanae vitae*; the formal disciplinary measures taken against theologians, like Hans Küng, Leonardo Boff, Charles Curran, and the priests and religious who signed the “abortion” ad in *The New York Times*; and disciplinary measures against various men and women religious involved in politics. By 1975, the reservation of priestly ordination to men was added to the list of “justice issues,” and since that time many Catholics continue to claim, on this account, that women are unfairly barred from “full participation” in the Church. The list of alleged

⁴¹ *Justitia in mundo*, 40.

“injustices” grew,⁴² and public protests continue to be forthcoming. Today, for example, the issues include claiming certain “rights” for divorced and remarried Catholics and persons with homosexual inclinations. The revelations of clerical sexual abuse and the painfully inadequate response of their bishops and major superiors served to confirm the suspicions of conservatives and liberals alike that the hierarchy cannot be trusted to have the good of the people at heart.

Many apostolic religious, perhaps in response to these decisions and the bitter disappointments of the recent scandals, claim the “prophetic vocation” to denounce injustices in the Church.⁴³ Some call for “structural change” in the Church. At first this was a way of insisting that women and married men ought to be eligible for ordination to the priesthood; ordination was seen as the route to “full participation.” Many today, however, no longer seek priestly ordination because they now envision the “reform” of the Church as its transformation into a “discipleship of equals” which has no place for the ministerial priesthood and apostolic hierarchy.

Some leading feminist theologians publicly promote one or another version of this agenda,⁴⁴ and their opinions have influenced the thinking and attitudes of many women religious. Some religious priests also lodge complaints against the hierarchy and even reject the Church’s teaching, reiterated at Vatican II, that the ministerial priesthood differs in kind (essentially) and not only in degree from the common priesthood of the

⁴² Many were identified at the 1976 “Call to Action” conference in Detroit.

⁴³ See Fr. Michael H. Crosby, OFM Cap, *Can Religious Life Be Prophetic?* (New York: Crossroad, 2005).

⁴⁴ Sr. Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM, writes: “Although the symbolic flash-point of the confrontation is the ordination of women, the actual and comprehensive object of the feminist project is the dismantling of the patriarchal system of domination and subordination that structures the institutional Church and its replacement by a system of Gospel equality, justice, and love.” *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000), 35.

faithful.⁴⁵ Dissent on whether there is an “essential difference” between the ordained and the non-ordained touches on the sacramental structure and divine constitution of the Church. This inevitably raises the question of authority in the Church.⁴⁶ Who has the right to teach and to make decisions in and for the Church—only the clergy? Should not everyone have a say in what touches everyone? Should not all members have a say about Church teaching and participate directly in decision-making? Have the bishops and the pope simply arrogated to themselves an authority or power over the rest of the baptized that Jesus never intended?

Apostolic religious— theologians, publishers, social activists, major superiors— have been entertaining these critical questions, some as protagonists for change and others as protagonists for “fidelity to the magisterium.” These disputes have inevitably had an impact on the way we responded to the three challenges mentioned earlier, and have divided us from one another. Even those who want to stand fast in the “radical middle” inevitably feel the influence of these currents of thought.

Polarization: Hierarchically-Structured Church vs. “Discipleship of Equals”

One hears apostolic religious explain their differences by saying, “We have “different ecclesiologies,” and they are correct.⁴⁷ They usually claim one of two positions. On the one hand, there are the “conservatives” who accept the Church’s hierarchical structure, teaching authority, and jurisdiction; they are eager to collaborate with the bishops, gain their approval, and be publicly associated with them. On the other

⁴⁵ See *Lumen gentium*, 10.

⁴⁶ In a recent article in *Commonweal* 135: 7 (April 11, 2008), “Why Not Ordain Women?” by Fr. Robert Egan, SJ, this logic is evident. See also my reply and his rejoinder in the July 18, 2008 issue of *Commonweal*. I acknowledge that I (mistakenly) overstated his position.

⁴⁷ I leave to one side the still deeper issue of different philosophical and theological choices, e.g., the question of “post-modernism” identified by Sr. Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ in a “white paper” she prepared at the request of LCWR, “Between the Times,” *Review for Religious* 53 (January-February 1994): 6-28.

hand, there are the “liberals” (or perhaps, the “radicals”) who distinguish between the Church as “the People of God” (which they profess to love) and the “institutional church” (from which they feel alienated). They are wary of distinctions based on sex or status or power, and they long for the day when all “dualistic hierarchies” are brought down and replaced by a “discipleship of equals.”⁴⁸

Apostolic religious in the second group are at odds in various degrees with the “institutional Church,” that is, with the clergy, and especially the bishops, including the Bishop of Rome. Some of them (“radicals”) reject hierarchical authority outright because they think it represents the triumph of patriarchy (“father-rule”) and is “contrary to the message of Jesus and antithetical to the reign of God.”⁴⁹ Others (“liberals”) do not reject the hierarchy as such, but only certain of its doctrinal and disciplinary judgments or what they regard as its abusive manner of exercising authority. In either case, apostolic religious in this group claim to owe allegiance to the “People of God,” but envision this “People” as an unstructured community of believers, devoid of hierarchical authority.⁵⁰ This “model of the Church” is incompatible with Catholic doctrine.

Although radical feminism provides the ideological foundation for this critique, there are male as well as female religious who publicly espouse and promote these anti-hierarchical options. There are others who do not promote the critique directly but do so indirectly by turning a deaf ear to the magisterium’s teaching on religious life, moral questions, and matters of doctrine and liturgy. Some who embrace a “prophetic call” to

⁴⁸ This expression, which is in itself quite legitimate, has been given a specific anti-hierarchical meaning in the work of feminist theologian, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 184-87 and *passim*.

⁴⁹ This formulation of the feminist analysis is found in Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure*, 355.

⁵⁰ One has only to re-read *Lumen gentium* to notice that the Church is by divine institution an internally-differentiated, hierarchically-structured community. Chapter II on the People of God is followed by Chapter III on the Hierarchy.

inaugurate the “reform of church structures” assume the role of the “loyal opposition” vis-à-vis the hierarchy. Religious priests in clerical institutes, because they are ordained, have the capacity to develop “alternative” or “parallel” ways of “being church.” Some of them exercise considerable influence through their parishes, their preaching and teaching ministries, their retreat and sabbatical programs, and their sponsorship of seminaries, universities, journals, and publishing houses.

By contrast and often in deliberate response to these developments, other women and men religious have firmly and publicly claimed their ecclesial identity, as traditionally understood. They stand as witnesses against their liberal sisters and brothers in religion.⁵¹ The public perception of apostolic religious is that we are divided, as institutes and within many of our institutes, by our “ecclesiologies,” our relationship with the hierarchy. We are categorized as “true believers” or “rebels,” “restorationist” or “renewed.”

I hasten to acknowledge that many apostolic religious remain aloof from this dispute. They are the “silent majority”—men and women religious who do not want to return to pre-Vatican II patterns but are not ideologically committed to the “radical” program of Church “reform,” in spite of some disillusionments and setbacks.⁵² They are deeply immersed in their ministry and feel no responsibility for the state of religious life as a whole. At best, they may be troubled by the dearth of new vocations in their own institutes or worried about losing their “job” and having to find a new one. They might pick up a book about religious life on retreat and set it down as offering disturbing or

⁵¹ See Fr. Benedict Groeschel, CFR, “The Life and Death of Religious Life,” *First Things* 174 (June/July, 2007): 12-15.

⁵² What does their silence indicate? Reluctance to break ranks with those identified as experts by the LCWR and CMSM? Fear of being on the “wrong side” of an issue on which they are challenged to be “prophetic”? A loss of faith?

alien advice, but they probably do not mention this for fear of seeming out of step. If a sister or brother is giving the homily at Mass instead of a priest, they may ask why, but they accept someone else's assurance that under some circumstances this is permitted. They may wonder why the community now prays from an alternative Breviary with non-scriptural readings and an alternative doxology, but they assume someone more learned than they knows the explanation. In fact, they probably try to avoid calling each other's judgment into question in order to steer clear of controversy. Perhaps only those in leadership, vocation recruitment, or formation are paying close attention to the consequences that follow from the "radical" or "anti-hierarchical ecclesiology."

The "Discipleship of Equals" Ecclesiology: Some Consequences

What are the consequences, for apostolic religious, of adopting the "discipleship of equals" ecclesiology? First, with respect to our understanding of the vows as a distinctive element in religious life, it must be said forthrightly that those who reject the God-given authority of the hierarchy, for whatever theological reason, simply cut the ground out from under the vocation to "religious life" as the Church understands and regulates it. An anti-hierarchical ecclesiology provides absolutely no justification for professing public vows, in particular, for making a vow of obedience. At most, we could promise *each other* that we will seek God's will, cooperate in carrying out the institute's mission, and take responsibility for participating in community affairs.⁵³ We have no reason to promise obedience to *God* unless we believe that the person who exercises authority does so in his name.⁵⁴ If we accept the authority of the hierarchy we do have

⁵³ This view corresponds rather well to some reinterpretations of obedience that have been proposed.

⁵⁴ See canon 601: "The evangelical counsel of obedience, undertaken in a spirit of faith and love in the following of Christ obedient unto death, requires the submission of the will to legitimate superiors, who stand in the place of God, when they command according to the proper constitutions."

reason to do this because we understand that the authority the religious superior exercises “proceeds from the Spirit of the Lord” through the hierarchy, that is, because the Bishop or the Holy See “has granted canonical erection to the institute and authentically approved its specific mission.”⁵⁵ We accept the authority of the hierarchy—its teaching authority and jurisdiction—because we believe that Jesus Christ entrusted his ministry to them. This is part of our faith in the Church as the unique mediator of salvation. This is what justifies our decision to imitate the saving obedience of Jesus by surrendering our wills to another whom we confidently believe mediates God’s will to us.

With respect to adaptation for the needs of apostolic ministry, we might expect proponents of the “discipleship of equals” to advocate common life as a way of modeling the transformation of the Church they hope to bring about. In practice, however, it seems that the community they envision is based more on a doctrine of equal rights than on a response of self-emptying love. There is no need for a superior with personal authority in their model; it is sufficient to have a facilitator who will insure that everyone has the opportunity to participate and that nothing be imposed that is not supported by the consensus of the group. Dialoguing with the goal of reaching such a consensus is more likely to lead to independent living, communities chosen on the basis of compatibility, or simply “hotel living” than to the witness of common life envisioned by our founders. Apart from the desire to follow Christ even to the Cross, community members with diverse “mindsets” and even diverse “belief systems” will not be motivated to transcend their own interests in self-emptying love.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Mutuae relationes* (1978), 13 and *Essential Elements* (1983), 42.

⁵⁶ For an example, see www.lcwr.org/lcwrprogramsresources/SystemsThinking/Handbook/pdf, pp. 15-19. Accessed 2/10/2007. The case studies in “Systems Thinking” make no appeal to the norms that govern religious life, much less to Catholic doctrine. See, for example, the case regarding sisters who object to

As regards the “social justice” agenda, we have seen that it leads some to assume a “prophetic” vocation to eradicate alleged injustices in the Church. They justify this by appealing to moments in the history of the Church when apostolic religious brought about the doctrinal and moral reform of the hierarchy.⁵⁷ They are on a collision course with the magisterium, however, if they regard the ministerial office instituted by Christ as itself “unjust”; or if they caution us against collaborating in the pastoral care of the faithful lest we shore up the “unjust” clerical system; or if they offer theological and pastoral “alternatives” to Catholics who dissent on matters of faith, morals, or discipline. Can advocates of Church “reform” who defy or ignore the magisterium be trusted to exercise an authentic “prophetic” ministry? Should those who invite apostolic religious to “leave the Church” in order to serve God’s cause more faithfully be given a platform in assemblies and institutions sponsored by religious orders?⁵⁸ Why should we expect women and men religious who hold these views to be interested in the “new evangelization”?

Some Questions

Apostolic religious did not expect to become caught up in this kind of controversy, but it has become unavoidable. Ideas have consequences, and the anti-hierarchical option—which is really “congregationalism,” a Reformation option—continues to be tolerated and seems to enjoy the approval and support of some women and men religious who serve in congregational leadership and in the leadership of two of

“priest-led” liturgies in *Systems Thinking*, p. 16. The author of this manual acknowledges that community members have different “mindsets” and diverse “belief systems.”

⁵⁷ As history shows, founders and religious orders have often called the clergy and the hierarchy to genuine reform by demonstrating an evangelical alternative, but these modern “prophets” propose a politically-inspired alternative.

⁵⁸ Fr. Diarmuid O’Murchu, MSC is being sponsored in several such institutions. For a critique of his views on religious life, see “A Doctrinal Note on the Book *Reframing Religious Life*,” on www.ewtn.com.

our national conferences, LCWR and CMSM. Do not these leaders unwittingly perpetuate the divisions within their (and our) institutes? Are member institutes, or individuals within them, free to question the directions they have taken?⁵⁹ Is a not-so-subtle attitude of resentment against the “institutional church” being perpetuated and passed on to new generations by the very bodies that are charged with coordinating our relationships with the Holy See? Are our institutes well served by these conferences? Is the Holy See well served? Is it time, perhaps, for a formal “visitation”?

Perhaps the crisis of “followership” is just as problematic as the crisis of leadership. How can those religious institutes that once flourished and now flounder proceed with the necessary renewal if there exist among their numbers men and women religious who have freely adopted a “different ecclesiology” based on the feminist critique, some other anti-hierarchical ideology, or the “new cosmology”? How can a superior deal with what are really irreconcilable differences among community members, not only in their “ecclesiologies” but in their commitment to the Catholic faith as a whole? Once the issues have been framed in terms of power and rights, leaders may feel helpless, for in the absence of a voluntary self-surrender—the free gift of self each of us made at our profession—what recourse do they have? What responsibility do they have, however, to the congregation as a whole and to its future?

What about the hierarchy? Have our bishops turned these issues over to vicars for religious who themselves favor the “prophetic” witness aimed at reforming the hierarchy? Bishops may fear that confronting leaders of women and men religious will “only make things worse.” But can it actually get worse? Have they no interest in the

⁵⁹ One problem, of course, is that those who have vowed obedience are reluctant to deviate from the judgment of their superiors.

spiritual well-being of religious who find themselves exiles in their own institutes?⁶⁰

Have our bishops washed their hands of us? Are they content to extend the annual collection for the support of retired religious and move on to other matters? We do not expect or want our bishops to tell us what to do, but they need to be part of the solution, especially for religious institutes of diocesan right.

The “Treasure” and a Fifth Challenge

What “treasure” do women and men living the apostolic religious life want to reclaim? What has been lost and what do we long for? Let me offer some reflections as a starting point for today’s symposium.

Naming the “Treasure”

What is the “treasure”? In the first place, the treasure is our covenant relationship with Jesus Christ who has chosen us and whom we have chosen in return; no one can take this treasure from us. In the great winnowing of the past forty years, each of us has found some way to live our consecration in intimate communion with him—whatever distress we might experience in trying to live it out in our religious institutes or in the Church. We would not be here today if we had not. With St. Paul, we know that we bear this treasure—“the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ”—in earthen vessels “to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor 4:6-7).

But we cannot have Christ without the Church! We cannot claim to belong entirely to Christ and at the same time repudiate the covenant community which he

⁶⁰ Ibid., 15 and 43.

established, which he loves, for which he sacrificed his life (Eph 5:25).⁶¹ Pope Paul VI said as much in the Apostolic Letter *Evangelii nuntiandi*, in response to certain anti-hierarchical strains in liberation theology. He refers with sorrow to well-intentioned but misguided Catholics who claim “to love Christ but without the Church, to listen to Christ but not the Church, to belong to Christ but outside the Church.”⁶² This dichotomy is absurd, he says, as anyone knows who recalls the Lord’s saying, “Anyone who rejects you rejects me” (Lk 10:16)

In response to the dichotomy often proposed today, I would add: Nor can we claim to love “the People of God” and at the same time reject the “institutional church,” those consecrated and sent by Christ to teach, sanctify, and govern that people.⁶³ This dichotomy, too, depends on a distortion of Catholic doctrine and the application of a norm extrinsic to our faith, a secular conception of “equal rights” that has no inkling of the desire for self-sacrifice that love alone inspires. The Church cannot be reduced to a sociological entity and then reinvented according to our intuition about what best expresses “equality.” The Church is a gift from God in Christ, an internally-differentiated priestly community. It cannot be our “prophetic” vocation as apostolic religious to repudiate the ministerial priesthood and the hierarchical structure of the Church! This does not mean there is no place for “fraternal correction,” for we may indeed call one another to a more faithful living out of the Gospel. We may lament the failures of our brothers in the hierarchy, who like us are “earthen vessels,” but we cannot reject the

⁶¹ Nor can we claim to love Christ but refuse to participate in the celebration of the New Covenant sealed in his blood, the sacrifice of the Eucharist.

⁶² *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 16.

⁶³ See Avery Cardinal Dulles, “Nature, Mission, and Structure of the Church,” in *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 3-36.

Church as a hierarchically-structured community that mediates Christ's salvation. We must expect the Church's pastors, in turn, to call us to fulfill our vocation—our public, ecclesial vocation, in fact, the “prophetic” vocation entrusted to us by our founders.

The Fifth Challenge: Spiritual Renewal according to the Founding Charism

There was one more challenge the Council put to apostolic religious, namely, the challenge to spiritual renewal according to the Gospel, the legacy or charism of the founder(s), and the authentic traditions of each institute. We may have taken this up years ago, but perhaps the only way to reclaim the treasure now is to return to that task with fresh vigor and determination. If we want to regain the moral authority once enjoyed by apostolic religious, if we long for that “full participation” in the Church's life which is identical with holiness, the perfection of charity, let us “start afresh from Christ”⁶⁴ and from the charism of our founders, free of “politically correct” considerations. Why did our founders request canonical status? What is the ideal that attracted us to this institute? How faithfully are we expressing it? What is it our institute continues to offer the Church today?

Let us study, along with our founding stories and documents, the many exhortations addressed to apostolic religious by the Holy See—from *Perfectae caritatis* to the most recent instruction on Authority and Obedience. Let us really study them, and use them for individual and communal self-examination. Are we still willing? Do we still desire to profess the poverty, chastity, and obedience of Jesus Christ “freely, willingly, and purely for the love of God”? Shall we help each other to do this?

⁶⁴ The CICLSAL issued this powerful invitation to persons in the consecrated life at the outset of the 21st century in “*Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium* (*Origins* 32 [July 4, 2002]): 129. 131-48.

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. Beyond that, the “treasure” might be the confidence that our consecration makes a difference; that we belong to Christ and to his Church in and through the mediation of our religious institute, and that our charism and mission are valued by others in the Church—laity and hierarchy—as a gift of the Holy Spirit. We would like to get beyond the stress of being suspicious and being under suspicion, and enter into a realm where we are recognized as a resource, where we are needed and wanted, where we can make a corporate impact through ministerial service that is coordinated with or supplements diocesan plans.⁶⁵

Those of us who choose to remain, and who embrace the obligation to live the religious life as the Holy See defines it, long for the rebirth of relationships in which our place in the Church is clear and unambiguous, and in which we can ask of one another the witness of holiness according to the nature, purpose, and spirit of our institutes. We desire to develop apostolic initiatives that will allow us to live and work together so that our efforts will build up the Church, give striking witness to her mission, and attract vocations so that our charism will continue to be a gift to the Church. Let us keep our eyes on the “treasure.” Let us renew our willingness to “sell everything” to possess it.

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⁶⁵ Where these supportive relationships are in place, we are free to be creative and we can flourish through the ups and downs that inevitably attend ministry. This requires mutual trust, a trust that can be re-built only if our members can be counted on to support the Church’s teaching and discipline and to collaborate generously with diocesan clergy and laity under the direction of the bishop.