

Symposium on “Apostolic Religious Life since Vatican II...Reclaiming the Treasure: Bishops, Theologians, and Religious in Conversation”

Panel on “Apostolic Religious Life in the Post-Vatican II Church: Ongoing Challenges of Renewal”

Stonehill College, North Easton, MA
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“The View from the Pew” by Ann Carey

At the same time I began to think about what I would say here today regarding religious life after Vatican II, I covered a conference for my diocesan newspaper and Catholic News Service at the University of Notre Dame. That conference focused on how business schools in Catholic colleges and universities should use Catholic values and principles to form business leaders who will be guided by Catholic social teachings, rather than by raw ambition and the almighty dollar.

Some speakers reported that Catholic business schools tend not to identify themselves as “Catholic” on the Internet and in their mission statements, and that many Catholic institutions of higher learning highlight their relationship with their sponsoring religious orders, but often do not highlight or even mention their Catholicism.¹ Father David O’Brien, S.J., called attention to this phenomenon in his article “Jesuit? Si. Catholic? Not So Sure.”²

That revelation set me on my own review of the websites of several religious orders, and indeed I found that the words “earth,” “justice” and “oppression” were much more common on many religious orders’ websites and in mission statements than the words “Jesus,” “Catholic” and “evangelical counsels.” The websites often cited the good works their members do, but few described their ministries in terms of service in the

name of the Catholic Church or in communion with local bishops. And I found that vowed religious life is often depicted as barely indistinguishable from lay life. For example, when I Googled Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, I got a website called “SCN Family.” As the website explains: “We're ordinary people, young, old, women, men, and vowed religious—all bonded together by love.”³

This blurred description of what used to be a religious order reminded me of the 10 so-called “Transformative Elements for Religious Life in the Future,” which were originally developed at the 1989 Joint CMSM/LCWR Assembly and continue to be promoted by the leadership conferences.⁴ Among the transformative elements is number eight, which predicts:

“In 2010 religious communities will be characterized by inclusivity and intentionality. These communities may include persons of different ages, genders, cultures, races, and sexual orientation. They may include persons who are lay or cleric, married or single, as well as vowed and/or unwowed members. They will have a core group and persons with temporary and permanent commitments.

These communities will be ecumenical, possibly interfaith; faith sharing will be constitutive of the quality of life in this context of expanded membership. Such inclusivity will necessitate a new understanding of membership and a language to accompany it.

Religious life still includes religious congregations of permanently vowed members.”

The websites of many of the orders I saw also emphasized their religious tradition or heritage, but I wonder if Francis or Dominic or Benedict would even recognize their legacies if they saw some of the religious orders today that claim to be their descendants. For one thing, the men and women who founded the historic religious orders did so with the intention that their orders would serve God and the Catholic Church through prayer, contemplation and good works. However, the corporate-based spirituality that characterized religious orders prior to Vatican II has evolved in many communities into

an individual spirituality that often is not Catholic and not even Christian. Also, the so-called “justice” agenda espoused by many religious orders appears to be shaped more by politically correct secular trends than by the classical social encyclicals of the Catholic Church regarding justice.

That experience with the websites has helped me articulate the key point I want to make today, as a longtime journalist specializing in religious life issues and as the only lay speaker at this conference. And that point is this: The greatest challenge to renewal of religious life is the reality that the leadership of most religious orders in this country have distanced their orders from the institutional church, sometimes even rejecting the church, and they have diluted their identity as communities of consecrated persons.

Not only have many religious distanced themselves from the church established by Jesus Christ, they also have made it clear that they intend to remake religious life, and indeed the Catholic Church itself. In his address to last month’s joint LCWR-CMSM assembly, theologian Father Gary Riebe-Estrella SVD said that “Religious life today is neither dying nor dead. It is waiting to be created into a new reality, to be given new meaning. And you as leaders have been chosen to create the new reality of religious life”⁵

In the keynote address at that same assembly, Sister Elizabeth Johnson CSJ complained about “patriarchal values that, by any objective measure, relegate women to second-class status governed by male-dominated structures, law, and ritual.” And she went on to compare the church hierarchy to the prodigal son, saying that church officials should apologize to dissident members who reject the teachings and authority of the Catholic Church. Sister Elizabeth further told the leaders of American religious that it is

necessary for them to forgive the church so that “community can go forward in a liberating way,” but still continuing to “criticize and resist.”⁶ Indeed, that seems to be the agenda of many leaders of religious orders: They criticize the institutional church and resist that same church authority from which they derive their own status and authority. This attitude tells laity that these religious want the security of religious life and the freedoms of lay life, but they want the responsibilities of neither state of life.

Also at that LCWR-CMSM assembly last month, LCWR President, Sister Mary Whited CPPS, compared the institutional church to the Old Testament Pharaoh who enslaved the people and led an oppressive regime. And she compared the LCWR to Old Testament mid-wives, who refused to act on Pharaoh’s orders so they could bring new life and hope to the people.⁷ These comments by the new leader of the LCWR reveal not just a misinterpretation of that Old Testament passage, but more tragically, a heretical rejection of the church doctrine of apostolic succession established by Jesus to continue the mission of His church.

And just last year in the keynote address to the LCWR assembly, Sister Laurie Brink OP, admitted “We have lost sight that we are ecclesial women. We have tired of the condescension, and we have opted instead for ministry outside the church.” She observed that some religious have left the church, and she went on to ask: “Who’s to say that the movement beyond Christ is not, in reality, a movement into the very heart of God?”⁸ Isn’t it remarkable that the major speakers at the LCWR assemblies are so accepting of people who still claim to be members of religious orders but are no longer Catholic? Isn’t it remarkable that this conference continues to enjoy Vatican approval

while inviting speakers year after year who proclaim such radical positions that are reinforced time and again?

Take for example the remarks of Sister Marsha Speth SP, a member of the Sisters of Providence leadership team, who wrote earlier this year in the LCWR “Occasional Papers” that “I can agree that we have ‘slowly removed ourselves from church circles’.” And she admits to “the attractiveness of ‘dropping out’ altogether,” but hopes to “continue to wrestle with ‘reconciliation for the sake of mission’.”⁹ I have to ask: Just what is the mission of a religious, if not to exercise an apostolate in the name of, and by the mandate of, and in communion with, the church, and not as an individual?¹⁰ Furthermore, Sister Marsha’s suggestion that membership in the Catholic Church is simply a means to facilitate her work reveals a crass utilitarian attitude and an alarming crisis of faith, especially for a member of a religious order. It is no wonder that the leaders of religious orders often compare themselves to the Israelites as 40-year wanderers in the desert.¹¹

Indeed, in the 43 years since the issuance of *Perfectae Caritatas*, many of those leaders have been on a self-imposed journey in the desert, unwilling to accept the church’s guidance on renewing religious life and instead spending their energies and resources on a perpetual search for nebulous new forms of religious life that remain forever elusive. Brother Ben Scanlan FSC has noted that:

Current commentators on religious life have vied with each other in promoting new models that include refounding, reweaving, re-imagining, and now reframing. When they have exhausted the re-runs (maybe with retreading the retiring), we might hope for a new crop of the more positive “pro” series. Could we start maybe with Proclaiming and Provisioning Religious Life?¹²

Father Ray Dlugos OSA, a psychologist, has noted that religious men and women may be strongly attracted to, and feel a sense of call to some of the aspects of religious life, but not necessarily all of them: “We would like to have the piece of religious life that is attractive to us and consistent with our strengths be the defining aspect of religious life, while paying lip service to our minimizing the importance of the others. ...”

He urged religious instead to: “... look at all the essential elements of religious life such as living the life of the Gospel based on the evangelical counsels, living the common life, giving love and service to others and being a prophetic witness to God’s presence in this moment in history.” The role of leaders, he continued, is to raise expectations and call religious to examine what it is about religious life that their members don’t really accept and then call them to conversion in those areas.¹³ Instead of what Father Dlugos suggests, it appears that too many leaders of religious orders see their role as trying to adapt religious life to the lowest common denominator of whatever it is all of their members are willing to accept, regardless of the church’s definition of religious life.

It is ironic that *Essential Elements*, the document issued 25 years ago to summarize the characteristics of religious life, was routinely rejected by many men and women religious who insisted on finding their own way. Today many of these religious remain desert wanderers, no longer valuing the approval of the institutional church and no longer perceiving religious life as the radical following of Jesus through permanent consecration of the evangelical counsels.

This alienation of women and men religious from the Catholic Church has profound ramifications, both spiritual and material, within the church and in the wider

world. Lay Catholics have valued the guidance and the example of religious men and women, expecting them to reflect the teachings of the Catholic Church, but now we are realizing that some religious—particularly those in leadership roles—do not speak for the church and do not even respect the teaching authority of the church. And we wonder if those leaders don't really speak for the majority of members of their orders, either, because many of us know grassroots religious whose loyalty to the Catholic Church is absolute and who do not approve of the path chosen by their leaders.

In the public square, families have been battling the assault against traditional Judeo-Christian values regarding sexuality, marriage and human life. And now in the church we are witnessing vowed religious who not only are accepting, but are promoting that same agenda and showing no deference to church teachings on many issues like homosexuality, contraception and abortion.¹⁴ No wonder Catholic politicians feel free to publicly disagree with church teachings when we see religious do so with impunity!

Furthermore, some religious also feel that they need not accept church authority on ecclesial issues like women's ordination, liturgical celebration and the importance of the sacraments. We are wondering why these people represent themselves as consecrated religious when in reality, they no longer are ecclesial people, and at least some are perhaps not even Catholics.

This distancing from the institutional church also has meant that many religious are virtually invisible to us because, while they may be doing good works, they are not working in Catholic institutions and are invisible as religious where they do work. Laity realize that fewer religious means fewer personnel to staff Catholic institutions, but we are confused and disappointed when men and women religious make themselves

available to work for secular causes—like political lobbyists or teachers of pagan spiritualities—when there are so many understaffed Catholic ministries where the witness of religious is needed. For instance:

- Most of our schools and religious education programs are desperate for catechists and administrators because our children, and often many adults, know very little about their faith
- Many of our colleges and universities have forgotten the principles of their sponsoring orders because few, if any, members of the order are trained or willing to serve on the campuses
- Our hospitals are lacking the spiritual atmosphere and the bioethical guidance that used to be provided by the sisters and brothers who staffed and supervised the floors.
- Our social service institutions are so confused about morality that one of them even recently procured an abortion for a young girl.

Laity also realize that maintaining old buildings is very expensive, but we are pained to see many properties of religious orders—which our parents and grandparents sacrificed to finance—being sold or given away or turned over to secular or ecumenical purposes such as organic farming or arts and crafts or massage classes. And we are upset that sometimes elderly religious are displaced so that the buildings still owned by an order can be used for purposes unrelated to the religious apostolate.

One elderly sister friend wrote me last month that: “We are farmed out: a room here, a suite there, a half a room elsewhere” And she voiced a frustration shared by many other elderly religious: “The older Religious ... have never been invited to a

meeting, nor asked for proposals, nor to evaluate nor to comment on the agenda—and the conclusions reached are supposedly ‘unanimous’. We have only been informed of all the other ‘dialogues and discernments’—after the fact.”

What a scandal: Not only are the senior religious—who should be esteemed for their wisdom and service—being simply warehoused in some orders, but even worse, they are being deprived of a voice and forced to live a lifestyle they did not choose. And they often being subjected to pagan rituals that are substituted for traditional Catholic liturgies and devotions, even having the traditional Liturgy of the Hours corrupted by unauthorized feminist versions of the public prayer of the church.

Laity also rightfully wonder why giving away church property to non-Catholic groups is permitted. One blatant example is the Benedictine Sisters of Madison, Wisconsin. The two remaining sisters in that order, who were leaders by default, created an ecumenical group composed of themselves and a Protestant minister and then transferred their 130-acre property and buildings over to that new three-member group before renouncing their vows as Catholic sisters.¹⁵ I discovered when researching my article on this situation that the sisters simply signed over the property of their religious order to a secular corporation they had created to receive the property, and no church officials were aware of this loss of ecclesial property until after the transaction was complete. How many more times is this going to happen?

Laity who must work for a living and manage family finances carefully also are disturbed to see what appears to be wasteful use of resources by some religious orders. For example, the president emerita of my alma mater recently wrote me that for the first time in her life as a religious, she wasn’t living in what she called a “real” convent.

When her order separated the college from the high school academy and built a new campus in the 1960s, a convent building was constructed with over 20 rooms for the sisters. Sister had lived there until two years ago, and she explained what she called her “sad leaving” from the convent building in this way: “We had dwindled to two [sisters in the convent building], with several [sisters] living in apartments. For me, it’s ridiculous leaving a building for religious to inhabit an apartment.”

Likewise, many communities claim to be in “solidarity with the poor,” but at the same time, some of the members indulge themselves in training sessions in Riki or Sophia wisdom or the enneagram, and some enjoy frequent trips or sabbaticals to “explore transitions” or to “discern” their futures or to walk a garden labyrinth.

Many laity wonder why we are asked to contribute every year to the collection of the National Religious Retirement Office to help care for retired religious when some of the orders that receive that money spend their funds on activities like last year’s “Earth Spirit Rising” conference that featured self-proclaimed pagan and witch Starhawk.¹⁶

Also on the financial front, laity wonder why many orders still beg for contributions to support their elderly, but seem to find the money to invest in the latest earth-friendly trends. For example, the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters of Monroe, Michigan accomplished a 56 million dollar “green” renovation of their motherhouse that included building one of the country’s largest geothermal fields consisting of 232 bore holes 450 feet deep to tap into the earth’s heat to warm their buildings. Yet, these IHMs still collect about a quarter of a million dollars a year from the Retirement Fund for Religious.¹⁷ The IHM Sisters at Monroe have a median age of 86, so it seems fair for

laity question the rationale behind such an expensive energy project when the order's future is so dubious.¹⁸

Similarly, those of us who struggle to make the family car last just one more year and who long for a more gas-efficient vehicle, are astonished at a report that half of the 50 vehicles owned by the 84-member Wheaton Franciscan Sisters are Toyota Priuses.¹⁹

Some of the religious so consumed with ecological matters clearly seem to have chosen that as their priority while paying lip service to living out the gospel values Jesus preached and modeled. A recent letter from the president of one community of sisters noted that some members profess an additional vow of "ecological sanity." This emphasis on ecology reflects the disorder in many religious communities, because care for the earth seems to be the one thing that all members of a religious order can agree on. In any event, surely stewardship of the earth should be an important aspect of everyone's life, and indeed that has become one of the major themes of Pope Benedict's pontificate, but a perusal of the web pages of many religious orders gives the impression that they put more effort into celebrating the summer solstice than the feast days of the church.

Of course, all of these images of religious that laity see also impact the vocations picture. Religious often say that they aren't getting new members because we laity are having fewer babies and we're raising our children to be too individualistic and too afraid of commitment. I plead guilty to all of those charges, but the biggest reasons young people are not joining religious orders today is that they don't see religious life as distinct from lay life, and they don't find the agenda of many religious orders to be very compelling. Religious life in many communities seems to be a journey toward self-discovery, as opposed to a union with Christ and service to the people of God.

Furthermore, young people are not attracted to religious orders that do not know what they are about or where they are going: They don't want to be a part of re-imagining or re-threading or any of the other "re-" buzz words. And they don't want to join a religious order to do battle with the church, which so many religious are doing today, as we see in Sister Elizabeth Johnson's depiction of the institutional church as the prodigal son and Sister Mary White's similar comparison of the hierarchy to Pharaoh.

This isn't just my opinion, either: This year's Second Annual Survey of Trends in Religious Vocation, sponsored by Vision Vocation Guide,²⁰ reported that among the people discerning a vocation to religious life, 90 percent ranked living a life of faithfulness to the church and its teachings as either very important or essential. Other aspects considered very important or essential were devotional prayer and praying in community. As Archbishop Charles Chaput OFM Cap. reminded the LCWR/CMSM 2008 joint assembly: "All of us who are religious share that same commitment to love and obedience – love FOR and obedience TO Jesus Christ, to the Church and to her pastors."²¹ Similarly, in a Vatican Radio interview earlier this year, Cardinal Francis Rode CM observed that religious who visibly live their vocation "in the joy and peace of the heart" give testimony to the beauty of the consecrated life and invite others to join them simply by their existence.²²

Indeed, Pope Benedict noted when he addressed the superiors general in February, that those orders that have carefully renewed are receiving the bulk of vocations today. And he identified "signs of a positive recovery ... especially when communities have the courage to return to their origins to live more in harmony with the Founder's spirit."²³ Certainly, there is much talk today by religious about recovering their founders' spirit,

but in many cases that “spirit” seems to have been re-invented to conveniently coincide with the New Age agenda of the order’s leadership.

Father Benedict Groeschel CFR sees promise in the fact that some dedicated young people “surprise us by their willingness to join religious orders that exhibit theological confusion and little observance of their traditional rule.” He is optimistic that these young people may help rescue and revive such orders, and he made this wry observation: “In some communities there is an absurd phenomenon similar to a theological sandwich: The youngest and the oldest, who are in agreement, are like slices of bread. The age group in the middle reminds us of mayonnaise.”²⁴

We all know that too much mayonnaise makes a sandwich fall apart. If religious life is going to be renewed and re-take its place at the heart of the Catholic Church, ecclesial authorities must insist that religious conduct themselves as religious or else depart their orders. Now, this is a free country and certainly, people should be free to follow the paths they feel called to. If they feel called to re-imagine or re-invent some new form of life, they should leave their orders and pursue their calling. But they should not be allowed to re-make the religious life that has been “a treasure at the heart of the church” for centuries. People who claim to be religious and who enjoy the financial security and freedoms of religious orders—but who reject and even denigrate church authority and teaching—are living a lie, and they damage religious life and the entire Catholic Church.

Moreover, the presence of these “mayonnaise people” in religious orders—and often even in leadership positions—is an injustice to the other members of the order who

desire to live religious life according to their vows, the founding charisms of their own orders, and the essential characteristics of religious life developed over the centuries.

If religious conduct themselves as the ecclesial people they represent themselves to be, and if they drink of the springs of the Catholic Church's knowledge and tradition, they will successfully renew their orders and end their desert wandering. In turn, the Catholic Church and indeed all of society will be enriched by these consecrated people, who we laity do treasure as an "outstanding sign in the Church."²⁵

¹ June 11-13, 2008, conference at the University of Notre Dame on "Business Education at Catholic Universities: Exploring the Role of Mission-Driven Business Schools."

² *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, 1994, 6:4.

³ <http://www.scnfamily.org>.

⁴ A "Transformative Elements" brochure printed in 1995 by the CMSM/LCWR noted that "Over the intervening years, the conferences' various regions and religious institutes have found reflection and work on these elements helpful in their endeavors to move religious life into the future." For many years the elements were posted on the LCWR website, and in her closing remarks to the 2004 LCWR Assembly, President, Sister Constance Phelps, SCL, urged revisiting the Transformative Elements.

⁵ <http://www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/GREestrella.doc>

⁶ <http://www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/ejohnson.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/Presidential%20Address%20-20Mary%20Whited%20CPPS.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/2007/assembly/Keynote.pdf>

⁹ LCWR Occasional Papers, Winter 2008, p. 20.

¹⁰ *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 675, §3

¹¹ LCWR Occasional Papers, Winter 2007, p. 19.

¹² "On Gurus," Province Newsletter (Australia), 1995, Vol. 4, No. 1: p 9.

¹³ LCWR Occasional Papers, Winter 2008, p. 10

¹⁴ See *Our Sunday Visitor*, April 6, 2008, pp. 11-14.

¹⁵ *National Catholic Reporter*, Aug. 17, 2007

¹⁶ <http://www.earthspiritrising.org/cosponsors.html>

¹⁷ See Annual Report at www.retiredreligious.org

¹⁸ *Detroit Free Press*, Jan. 26, 2003 and <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/23671932#23759490>

¹⁹ *National Catholic Reporter*, Feb. 22, 2008.

²⁰ <http://vocation-network.org/articles/show/156>

²¹ <http://www.lcwr.org>

²² <http://www.zenit.org/article-22107?l=english>

²³ <http://www.zenit.org/article-21823?l=english>

²⁴ *First Things*, June/July 2007

²⁵ *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 574, §1.

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