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# The Ongoing Challenge of Renewal in Contemporary Religious Life

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## Sandra Schneiders' paper delivered at CORI Conference 25th April 2014



THE ONGOING CHALLENGE OF RENEWAL

YOUR IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS LIFE

Sandra M. Schneiders, ihm

### I. INTRODUCTION

It is a pleasure to be with you at this annual meeting of the Conference of Religious of Ireland in this just dawning “new era” of the pontificate of Pope Francis who has stirred hopes throughout the Catholic world

and perhaps especially among us Religious. But we have been here before. It is just 50 years since the close of Vatican II when we stood on the pristine peaks of a new beginning, surveying the broad vistas of possibility for genuine renewal in Religious Life and in the Church as a whole. In the next ten years the little dark cloud that appeared on the horizon with the death of Good Pope John became the thick black clouds of the “restoration.” The gathering darkness of the “reform of the reform” in which we found ourselves was further deepened by the explosion of the abuse scandals and the huge exodus of Religious, especially the younger ones, from our Congregations. Within two decades the bright hopes of the Council seemed more like a golden dream from which we had awakened in the cold reality of pre-conciliar ultra-montanism that took most us into the recent Conclave with little hope that “anything good could come out of Rome.” Once again, as with the election of John XXIII, the Holy Spirit confounded the best laid plans of some and the deepest despair of others.

Nevertheless, much as we have rejoiced at the appearance of that simple man “from the ends of the earth” who appeared on the balcony of St. Peter’s a little over a year ago, devoid of the trappings of empire, calling himself not the vicar of Christ and supreme ruler of the universal Church but simply “the bishop of Rome,” and who greeted us with a gentle “buona sera,” and then asked *us* to pray for him before *he* blessed us, it is understandable if we are hesitant to get our hopes up again.

Many of us, I think, if I can judge from what I hear so often among Religious, have come to think that whether or to whatever extent we are responsible for the departure of so many of our members, the ever-rising median age of those who have stayed, the closing of our institutions, the financial straits in which we find ourselves, and the persecution of Religious by a hierarchy that has not taken kindly to the loss of its cheap labor force, the fact is that Religious Life is on the rocks and recovery, even under Francis, is most unlikely. New ecclesial movements and various other kinds of lay initiatives might replace us but Religious Life as it existed when we entered is over. Some of us have decided to go down with the ship but cannot see much reason to entice anyone else to get on board, even if there were anyone interested in being enticed or a board to get onto.

I have been reflecting on this situation, from my own specializations of scripture, theology, and spirituality, as well as in the light of contemporary sociology, psychology, and anthropology, in an effort to discern where we really are, what the situation means, and if there is any constructive way of addressing it. I have not put any of this reflection in writing yet, but I decided I would try it out on you because your experience as congregational leaders could be particularly valuable. So, I am very interested in your reflection and responses. I ask you to hold in the back of your minds, as I discuss these questions, the Easter encounters of Mary Magdalene and Thomas with the Risen Jesus. Both of these representative figures in the Fourth Gospel have the same problem, captured beautifully by the evangelist in the metaphor of touch, that most intimate form of human contact. The problem was that the Jesus to whom each was fiercely attached has moved beyond their reach and they cannot see any way to go on unless he restores to them what his death had definitively ended. Mary Magdalene just wants to find the body so that she can weep over it forever, and Thomas, simply refuses to go on at all unless he has proof that the finality of Jesus’ death has been reversed.

## II. HOW DID WE GET TO WHERE WE FIND OURSELVES TODAY AS RELIGIOUS?

So, our first question is, how did we get to where we find ourselves today? It seems to me that, since the Council, two currents or movements, one negative at least for us and on the surface, and one positive, in itself but not necessarily for us, have been running through Religious Life.

### A. The Negative Current: Loss of Place and Identity of Religious in the Church

The reform movements set in motion by the theology, and especially the ecclesiology, of the Council — most of them long-overdue and very positive — ironically helped create a “perfect storm” for Religious. First, the theology of Vatican II correctly addressed the imbalances in the Church’s theological and pastoral self-understanding and institutional organization which were the legacy of the Councils of Trent and Vatican

I. The ecclesiology of Vatican II attempted to redress the massive over-emphasis on the hierarchy — almost to the point of making the hierarchy a synonym in the minds of most people for the “Church” itself — and the almost total centralization of ecclesiastical power and authority in the Vatican.

The Council re-emphasized the identity and dignity of the baptized which, in the minds of most people at the time, meant the laity because the clergy were seen as *more than baptized*, even “ontologically different” from the rest of the faithful, and non-ordained Religious were seen as quasi or *second class clergy*. So, the Council’s reform of ecclesiology was really centered on the vast majority of the Church who had been, since at least the Middle Ages, the serfs, the lowest tier, in the ecclesiastical system, namely those who were neither ordained nor professed.

The major theological innovation with regard to the laity was twofold. First, the Council insisted that *all* the baptized are called to *one and the same holiness*. This undermined the self-understanding of Religious as called to a special closeness to Christ, a superior holiness, and thus spiritual superiority. Second, the Council recalled that *all* the baptized, by virtue of the sacraments of initiation not by hierarchical permission, were called to *participation in the mission to the world of Jesus*, prophet, priest, and servant leader. This undermined the special role of Religious in ministry. Now, if one did not, by becoming a Religious, enter a superior spiritual state of life, nor, as quasi-clerics, have access to participation in ministries not open to the ordinary laity, why take on the obligations of Religious Life? In other words, much of the rationale for Religious Life — the call to superior holiness and privileged access to ecclesial ministry — was seriously undermined in the minds of most of the laity and many Religious. This probably helps explain why so many, especially the young, left Religious Life in the wake of the Council and few considered entering.

Second, and closely related to the new theology of the baptized, was the new ecclesiology which placed the local Church, i.e., the parish, at the center of the Conciliar renewal. The parish, was to be the locus of renewed catechesis, deepened spirituality, the celebration of the new liturgy, the development of lay ministries, the revitalization of evangelization which would be carried out by the newly empowered laity in partnership with the clergy. In other words, the Vatican II Church was to be a communion of local churches composed of laity and clergy.

Religious, especially women, were suddenly “placeless” and “roleless” in this renewing Church of which they had been, prior to the Council, in many ways, the backbone, the workforce, and the public face. Some Religious, as their institutions foundered, took up ministries in parishes or diocesan offices, roles which could be filled just as well by a competent lay person, and which were individual ministries of the Sister or Brother working for the hierarchical Church rather than ministries of their Congregations. In such cases the Religious was a glorified lay person. Some other Religious took up ministries for which a cleric was desired but unavailable, again as an employee of the hierarchy rather than as a missionary of her or his own Congregation. In these cases, the Religious looked and acted like second-class clergy. It was not at all clear, to Religious or others, that a Religious as a Religious had any distinctive place or role in the renewed Church.

This placelessness was exacerbated by two interlocking problems. On the one hand, there was a sudden exodus of many Religious because they could now do what they had originally entered Religious Life to do — namely, become holy and minister in the Church — without the burdens of the superstructure of Religious Life. On the other hand, there was a sudden decline, in numbers and influence, of the institutional ministries of Religious orders. So, declining numbers of Religious undermined the special apostolic institutions of Religious and the loss of these feeder institutions dried up the influx of new members. And, of course, as Religious lost, to some extent, their special place in local Catholic communities they also lost a major source of financial support. In short, the placelessness of Religious in the new configuration of Church led to declines in personnel, economic resources, and the institutions which had made Religious Life visible and attractive. And at the same time the choices of Religious themselves to de-emphasize exotic dress, secret dwellings, and medieval practices helped dissipate the fascinating mysteriousness of their lives.

Finally, for various reasons, some of the hierarchy decided that Religious, especially women, were a

threat to their status and authority — already threatened by the emergence and maturing of the laity — and mounted efforts to bring Religious to heel. So, another source of prestige and protection, namely, favored status with the hierarchy, began to erode.

## B. The Positive Current: the Embrace by Religious of the Conciliar Renewal

I want now to look at the positive current that was flowing simultaneously through the post-Conciliar Church and which, ironically, reinforced the negative current of the loss to Religious of identity, role, and resources. Religious were probably the cohort in the Church that was best prepared to receive and implement the Council. Under the impetus of Pius XII who had called women Religious to spiritual, professional, ministerial, psychological, and cultural renewal in the 1950s, Religious had been pursuing advanced professional development as their institutions became more integrated into secular structures requiring professional credentialing and accreditation. They were also more attuned than the laity in general and than many in the clergy to the “nouvelle théologie” which was developing in Europe and which was the immediate preparation for and theological underpinning of Vatican II. They were beginning to sniff the winds of the feminist movement which was stirring especially in North America and which created a natural affinity between Religious and the liberation theology developing in the southern hemisphere. These renewing Religious increasingly involved themselves in contemporary leadership training as their renewed vision of community life moved from the hierarchical absolutism of pre-conciliar Religious Life toward more egalitarian and communal forms of life within their Congregations. And this led naturally to an interest in the burgeoning psychological growth movements and to heightened attention to issues of health, human development, and spirituality in their communities. Religious, already sensitized to the agenda of renewal, were poised to plunge into the spirituality movements that emerged from the Council such as serious study of scripture and theology, directed retreats and individualized spiritual direction, contemplative experiences, and more personalized holistic health practices, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, and so on.

In short, the majority (though certainly not all) Religious were ready for Vatican II and joyously received it. By and large, they committed themselves to processes that enabled them to move forward together even if not fast enough for the most radical nor slow enough for the most resistant. Religious were among the first to study the Council documents in depth and to plunge into biblical and liturgical renewal. And they undertook seriously the Council-mandated renewal Chapters and reworking of their Constitutions that revolutionized many Congregations.

I said that this positive reception of and interiorization of the Council by Religious ironically reinforced the negative experiences of loss of distinctive identity and role marginalization in a Church that was increasingly centered on the laity. It was not clear exactly where Religious fit in the laity-centered Church of Vatican II. Nevertheless, Religious were *committed* to the very theological insights and ecclesial renewal that was, in fact, deconstructing their own special identity in the Church. Religious came to really believe in the Church as a discipleship of equals and ministry as service preferentially offered to the marginalized. They actually embraced, at least in theory, the relinquishment of their “favored nation” status in the Church. So the *spiritual conversion* from within the life was working in tandem with the *ecclesiastical deconstruction* from without to dismantle a lifestyle that had been consolidated over the past 400 years.

In short, what we called “apostolic Religious Life” as it was defined and approved in 1900 by Leo XIII’s apostolic constitution, *Conditae a Christo*, was not only the *creature* of the Tridentine-Vatican I understanding of Church; it was the very *embodiment* of that ecclesiology. So when that synthesis began to give way to the Vatican II ecclesiology of the Church as the Pilgrim People of God, the lifestyle of this form of Religious Life began to unravel. A new form of Religious Life was conceived in this period immediately after the Council but it was a long way from birth and the pregnancy encountered major problems as the restoration under John Paul II gained momentum and led to the “reform of the reform.” The vast majority of Religious, however, perhaps more than any other contingent in the Church, was simply not willing to abandon what they were deeply convinced was the work of the Holy Spirit in their own lives and in the Church. There was, and still is, a minority of Congregations who gladly embraced the restoration of pre-

conciliar forms of Religious Life and a few new so-called “traditional” groups were founded, not surprisingly by hierarchs whose minions they quickly became, but most Religious remained inveterate Conciliar Catholics and this resistance to the restorations dynamic could not fail to place them increasingly in tension, if not outright conflict, with the right wing of the laity and the hierarchy. This brings us to our second question: given all we have lived through, and the current state of affairs in the Church and the world, where are we, as Religious, now?

### III. WHERE ARE WE?

We can perhaps plot our current situation in relation to three “markers”: our relation to the institutional Church; theological insights which are central to our life at this time; and the changed cultural situation in which we find ourselves.

#### A. The first marker, our relation to the institutional Church.

If I had been giving this talk two years ago this section would be very different and a whole lot grimmer. No matter what happens in the near future the election of Pope Francis has qualitatively changed our situation in the institutional Church. This Pope is a Religious, respects Religious, and understands Religious Life. No matter what he is able to actually do about current situations, it is clear that it is no longer “open season” on Religious in the Vatican. Pope Francis has made appointments to the curial office in charge of Religious Life, CICLSAL, who are not adversaries of the life or oppressors of the people who live it. This changed atmosphere has allowed us to take a deep breath and perhaps will enable us to relativize the threat from the ecclesiastical power structure that has been consuming so much of our time, energy, and emotional resources in the last few decades. Francis has validated our best insights about the nature of Religious Life as a prophetic vocation in the Church charged to preach the Gospel in season and out of season, when we are approved of and when we are not, in the world that God so loved. It is much easier to hold to a steady course when there are at least some indications outside one’s own cockpit that one is on the right track. And it is easier to take the kinds of risks that significant development always entails if there is not someone waiting in the wings to pounce on and snuff out any signs of life that appear.

I do not think that we really *needed* Francis to tell us that our life is a prophetic life form in the Church and that our mission is to promote the Reign of God, especially among the oppressed and marginalized, rather than to function as an unpaid job corp or, even worse, as an ecclesiastical police force. Long before Francis arrived on the scene we had become deeply convinced of this. But it *is deeply affirming* to hear our most profound convictions about our life coming out of the mouth of the Pope. Rather than counting on him to “make everything all right,” something he may or may not be able to do, I hope that we will use the space he has opened up for us, the affirmation he has offered us, to catch a second wind in our Council-launched race to what St. Paul called the “prize” (see Phil. 3:14) of our life in Christ. We need to fill our sails with the breath of the Spirit, check our headings, and once again put out into the deep. I am going to make a couple suggestions later about what that might mean.

#### B. The second marker, our grasp of certain key theological insights.

So, to our second marker of where we are. We Religious, I think, have come into quite firm possession of some theological insights or convictions that I doubt we are going to surrender or substantially modify no matter what happens in or outside the Church in the near future. These insights are crucial to our self-understanding and our life in the Church and for world and they are the foundation, in my opinion, for the ongoing renewal to which we must commit ourselves if we are going to carry Religious Life into the future. One, which I just named, is our conviction that ministry is intrinsic to our form of Religious Life, not simply a behavioral overflow of a primary vocation to personal holiness. This ministry is the expression of a prophetic vocation and role in the Church rather than an institutional or functional one. Therefore, the people we serve, not institutions, are the primary object of our concern. We are agents of the Gospel, not of the hierarchy or even of the Church as institution. This legitimate, Gospel-based autonomy is not cocky self-assurance or an incentive to deliberate provocativeness, but it is the root of a calm resistance to manipulation and intimidation

or to the domestication or functionalization of our ministries.

A second theological insight is that, whatever might have been some of the secondary motivations that brought us into Religious Life thirty, forty, fifty years ago, there is only one reason in the present to stay. There is nothing we can *do* as a Religious that we cannot *do* as a lay person. “Religious” denotes a way of being, not a role or function in an institution. Religious Life is a free response to a personal and compelling vocation to a particular kind of relationship with Jesus Christ (namely, that expressed in consecrated celibacy) and a particular kind of participation in his mission (namely, full-time prophetic ministry). We do not need to do or produce anything in particular to justify our vocation in the Church, nor do we need to see ourselves as superior to anyone else in the Church in order to understand the specificity and distinctiveness of our vocation and life form. We do not need any special “props” — clothes or dwellings or practices — to tell us or others what our life means and why we choose it. And we do not need the permission or approval of anyone to follow where Jesus leads. In other words, I think Religious who have lived through the transition from the pre-Conciliar hybrid form of “apostolic Religious Life” *lived* in the cloister and *expressed* in institutional “works,” to the Conciliar form of “ministerial Religious Life” that I have just described, have come to a firm sense of identity that emerges from within rather than being conferred from without. This identity is deeply rooted in a mature spirituality, nourished by personal and communal prayer, and expressed in personally and communally discerned corporate, ministry. Suffering has wrought a kind of maturity in those who have stayed that is neither self-satisfied on the one hand, nor apologetic on the other. We do not claim to know what is going to happen in the immediate or long-term future, in the world, in the Church, or in Religious Life, but we do know in Whom we have placed our trust. “Staying” is not just a matter of not having left because there is nowhere else to go. It is a genuine relationship-based perseverance in a relationship and a mission even in the face of darkness and opposition.

### C. The third marker, our cultural situation

The third aspect of our current situation is what I want to describe in this section and develop in much more detail in the final part concerning what I think we are being called to for the future. Certain developments in our culture, I am hypothesizing, are calling us to recognize and appropriate what has been called by some psychologists and sociologists “a new normal.” This cultural development has implications for our theology, our ministry, our community life, our finances, our personal well-being, and our viability into the future. Whether or not we successfully negotiate the transition from the “normal” in which most of us entered Religious Life and which, in some sense, we are still trying to preserve, to the “new normal” in which we find ourselves, will probably determine whether we will be the last generation of pre-conciliar Religious, the generation which takes that form of the life to the grave, or the first generation of a new form of Religious Life that will flourish into the future.

Before getting to the heart of what I want to say about the “new normal” let me clarify what this term refers to. It is dependent on what we mean by “normal.” Our “normal” is the reality context that we assume, take for granted, live in, and according to which we proceed through our daily lives. It is what we do not have to re-negotiate every morning when we get up. It is precisely what a family fleeing into exile, for example, does not have.

A “new normal” refers to the situation of a person or group that has faced and successfully integrated the radical reconfiguration of their life that results when, because of some event or experience which is not entirely or sometimes even partially under their control, their life has been profoundly and irreversibly altered. The “new normal” is the situation of the exile who arrives in a new country, with no home, no job, no relatives, no money, little knowledge of the language or customs, and somehow has to make a go of it. The event or experience which challenges a person to face a “new normal.” Can be positive or negative or a mixture of both. It can be partly or even wholly due to the person’s own initiative, for example, when one chooses to emigrate, but very often it is not, for example, when one has to flee a revolution.

The event or experience that precipitates a “new normal” is qualitatively unlike the “bumps in the road” that we experience from day to day that cause us to momentarily lose our balance before we get our feet

back under us. A delayed flight that prevents us from attending an important meeting or receiving an unsought promotion just as we were beginning to get good at what we are doing are “bumps in the road.” No matter how cataclysmic these things seem at the time, they do not permanently and qualitatively change our life. The event or experience that precipitates a “new normal” not only de-stabilizes but qualitatively and irreversibly modifies our life-construction and we have to find a new way not just of coping with the event but of being and living. Our self-concept changes; our relationships change; we have to develop new coping skills; our values may have to be renegotiated and perhaps modified. We no longer live in the same world we lived in before the event or experience occurred that de-constructed our “normal” and now requires us to adjust to and find a way to flourish in a “new normal.” And the new situation is permanent. There is no turning back, not because we do not want to but because we can't. There is no “back” to return to.

We can all think of such pivotal experiences. It happened when we entered Religious Life. What we had experienced as “our world” was radically changed the day we entered. Our relationships with our family and friends, our use of money, how we lived and talked and dressed and even ate changed. In some regards, for example, participation in the life of our family of origin, the change was radical and irreversible. When we had to miss, for the first time, a family baptism or wedding, or even the birth of a new sibling or the funeral of a parent, we realized that we that we were not just “playing nun” or away at summer camp. We had begun to live a new life in a new world that was not the world we were born into or grew up in.

When a married couple have a child and they suddenly cease to be simply a couple but are now a family; when our second parent dies and we become an orphan no matter how old we are when that happens; when a beloved life-partner dies leaving a person emotionally and psychologically absolutely alone in the relational universe in which no one can or ever will fill that void; when a doctoral student graduates and the protectorate of the mentor ends; when one wins the Olympic gold medal and there is nothing further to strive for in the field which has defined one's very existence; when one learns that one has only a few months to live ... in such situations “normal” has irrevocably ended and one must find one's way to and in a “new normal” or one will simply die, perhaps not physically, but emotionally, psychologically, socially, spiritually.

Sometimes the event that ends our “normal” is something objectively positive, even desired, like the birth of a child or winning an Olympic gold medal. More often, however, such “normal-ending” events are, or are perceived as, negative. For example, for many people, realizing that no amount of exercise, botox, hair dye, face-lift surgery, or new clothes is going to bring back their one and only youth is perceived as a disaster, even though long life is, in reality, a great blessing.

These ruptures of our “normal,” whether perceived as negative or positive, have two common features. 1) They are not minor or temporary upsets after which life goes back, more or less, to what it was before. They are major, permanent, irreversible disruptions which bring a certain way of being to a definitive end. 2) They affect our whole life, not just some dimension of it. The “normal” which was our reality context prior to these events or experiences no longer exists. You cannot go home again because there is no “home” there.

This means that we not only have to find some way to deal with what has happened, but, much more importantly in the long run, how to live in the new situation in which we find ourselves as a result of what has happened. It is not only the fact of being diagnosed with a terminal disease that one has to deal with, but what that means for whatever span of life we now have.

For cultural and ecclesiastical reasons, largely not under our control, the “normal” of traditional Religious Life into which most of us entered has ceased to exist. I think that we have been, to some degree, flailing and floundering in a prolonged transition period, partly because we have been treating this situation as a collection of reversible “bumps in the road” that we need to overcome so that we can get back on our feet, that is, back to “normal”. For example, we often hear ourselves saying that we need to recruit new younger members. We need to start new ministries. We need to rework our models of community life. We need to redefine membership so that we can replace ourselves with non-vowed members who will carry on our works. We need to sell or re-utilize some of our property. We have to open up new revenue streams. And

so on. But in fact, the “normal” which we are using as the imaginative model for what needs to be done, namely, Religious Life as it existed at what seemed our highpoint, is irreversibly gone and it is not coming back.

Part of our problem, it seems to me, which often afflicts people faced with the end of their “normal,” is what we might call “false responsibility” or “responsibility falsely assessed.” This counter-productive attitude tempts us to look at the undesirable situation we are currently in as our own fault — if I hadn’t gone skiing I would not have had this accident; if I had not smoked I wouldn’t have inoperable lung cancer. Sometimes we are at least partially responsible — and there are usually people around who are happy to remind us of that — but, in any case, we are not usually in a position to undo the result. Our damning self-judgment that “I brought this on myself” really means “this should not have happened,” which leads to either “I have to get things back to the way they were” or “I can’t get things back to way they were, so the situation is hopeless.”

This scenario is exactly the one Cardinal Rodé tried to induce in U.S. Sisters when he launched the Vatican investigation in 2009. When pressed to explain why he was attacking the one group in the U.S. Church that seemed to be doing what the Council had asked he finally admitted that he was dismayed by the declining numbers of Religious (that is, the loss of the old normal of bulging novitiates and a teeming job corp) that seemed to presage the end of Religious Life in the U.S. and might spread to other areas of the world. Someone had to be responsible and he was trying to find out who. He had, of course, already made up his mind that it was the lax, secularist, feminist American nuns, — hence the investigation whose real point was to prove his analysis correct and justify remedial action to get things back to “normal.”

While the Sisters (and the laity in general) saw this line of reasoning as patently specious, it did plug into some of our own worst “false responsibility” instincts, namely, the tendency to use precisely the wrong criteria to analyze an evident crisis. We were using, or at least letting Rodé use, the criteria of size, money, influence, success — the corporate values of individualist free-market capitalism — to analyze the very real spiritual crisis we were and are undergoing which I am suggesting is really the challenge to move from one cultural “normal” that no longer exists into a “new normal” we still do not really understand. Our “false responsibility reaction” said that if we were doing what we should be doing, what God wanted us to do, the results would show up on the balance sheet. New recruits would be standing in line for a place in such an obviously booming operation; the bottom line would show healthy profits; our “brand,” would be excellent; our institutional holdings would be flourishing with new branch offices and outlets opening in more locations; we would be secure, influential, admired, and growing. Of course our spiritual tradition suggests that these are precisely not the criteria of the Reign of God. Jesus, who founded this venture, died on a cross, disgraced and condemned, his faithless disciples in hiding, his project in shambles. And in this he was following in the footsteps of Israel, which God chose not because they were a numerous and powerful people but precisely because they were weak, small in number, and without power or influence among their neighbors.

#### IV. A PROPOSED ALTERNATE INTERPRETATION OF OUR SITUATION

##### A. Introduction

In the time that remains to us I want to propose some ideas that I hope you will discuss, discard if not useful, or improve upon. My hypothesis is that we post-conciliar Religious have run up against a formidable challenge that we have not figured out how to name accurately or negotiate, namely, that the “normal” which obtained when almost all of us entered Religious Life is simply over. Neither it, nor a version of it, is going to come back. There is a “new normal,” both cultural and ecclesial, in which we have to not only learn to live but rejoice to live in if we are going to flourish into and within a future full of hope.

This “new normal” has a multitude of aspects and elements which we do not have time to even name, much less analyze and discuss. But I am going to single out one cultural feature of this new normal which I think is absolutely determinative of everything else, and one ecclesial feature that I think is having a major influence on our ability to move ahead. I hope that, by looking at these two critical features and seeing what it would mean to successfully deal with them, we can open up a more confident discussion on all the others.

Let me briefly recall what we are leaving behind, the “old normal.” It was captured in what we once called the two ends or purposes of apostolic Religious Life: the primary end of personal sanctification and the secondary end of the sanctification of souls. The project of self-sanctification was accomplished by separation from the world which was achieved by “convent” or “cloister” which meant living in the religious environment or world all day every day, “horarium” or participation in the common life of prayer, work, and community exercises, and “habit” which symbolized and protected the “total institution” lifestyle. And by participating in the institutionalized apostolic work of the Congregation the Religious contributed to the achievement of the secondary end, the sanctification of souls. So, cloister at home and institutionalized apostolate abroad constituted the “normal” of pre-conciliar Religious Life. If you think about it, virtually nothing of that “normal” exists today.

B. The (or a) determining cultural feature: demographic change

A, maybe *the*, major *cultural* change that has moved us permanently into a “new normal” is the demographic reversal in the age structure of society which is affecting all countries but most notably those in what used to be called the “first world.” When most of us entered Religious Life, in the 1950s or 60s, the largest segment of the population, fully a third, were children under 5 years of age, and a small minority were the aged who were generally 65 years old or younger. The largest segment were the middle-aged which meant people from 20 to 50 or so. Today that distribution is turning upside down and is completely different. In 2013 the number of people over 65 was equal to that of children under 5; by 2050 the number of people over 65 will be double the number of children under 5 and fully a third of the population will be over 60. In other words, the age span pyramid of the 1950s and 60s is lying on its side right now and will be upside down in a couple decades. Children are the rapidly declining minority and the elderly are the rapidly increasing majority. That, of course, has serious economic consequence for the shrinking middle aged population but that is not my concern here. I am interested in what this change in the human lifespan and the demographic distribution of the population means for Religious Life.

The average U.S. or Irish person alive today who entered when we did will live to 80 years of age which means, of course, that a large number will live beyond, or even well beyond 80. In the decade when most of us entered, that average age at death was 60 to 65. In other words we are not living in the same lifespan structure that was the case when we entered but many of us act as if we do and much of our reflection on our life and planning for our future and that of our Congregations is being done in that non-existent 1960s framework. An ordinary Religious Life that began early in the 20th century ran from age 20 to 60 or 65, about 40 years, with those in the last decade being really aged. Golden jubilarians when we entered were few and frail. For us, an ordinary Religious Life runs from 20 to 80, about 60 years and many golden jubilarians (like me) are not yet even retired. It is those celebrating 70 or 75 years in Religious Life — that is, more than the average total lifespan of those who entered in the first part of the 20th century — who are the stars of the jubilee show today. And a good number of them walk down the aisle unaided and eat the jubilee banquet in the dining room, not on a tray in the infirmary.

These are not *just* interesting facts. And they are not the *only* interesting facts. When most of us entered Religious Life the human lifespan had three stages: childhood which ended at 18, adulthood which lasted until sometime in your 50s, and old age which ended with death sometime between 60 and 70. Today there are clearly many more stages in the human lifespan which is much longer and the really interesting stages are not childhood or adolescence at the end of which one’s character, vocation, and future were supposed to be relatively settled, but the adult spectrum during which enormous changes are to be expected. After adolescence (which we now distinguish from childhood) we recognize Emerging Adulthood which can last into the 30s (which was mid-life in 1950), Adulthood I (or young adulthood) which runs from the early 30s to about 55 or 60 (which was old age in 1950), Adulthood II which goes from 55 or so until the late 70s or early 80s (which relatively few people lived to in 1950), and true Elderhood or Seniority which itself has two stages for more and more people, one in which the elder is fully independent, often working and highly productive, and a brief period at the end which gerontologists are telling us, for healthy people, is usually quite short, perhaps a couple years or less of steep decline before death. Increasingly, people in

their 80s (think Mother Teresa or John XXIII) and 90s (think Jimmy Carter, Nelson Mandela, Georgia O’Keefe, or Martha Graham) and beyond are fully active, productive people occupying positions of leadership and influence. Healthy people who go into “retirement mode” at 65 or 70, who begin to “cut back” because they “do not have the energy they used to”, who cannot possibly consider a major relocation or a foreign mission assignment or a congregational leadership position, who feel entitled to volunteer in congregational affairs on a free will basis “when they feel up to it,” could well be setting themselves up for 20 or more years of relative idleness primarily occupied in waiting to die. Nearly a quarter century of their Religious Life will be spent in a holding pattern as they lament the death of Religious Life because of the lack of adolescents in the novitiate. In fact, this is not the attitude or the behavior of many if not most Religious, but it may well be the Congregational culture we are working with.

If we were to begin to take seriously this cultural and anthropological “new normal” it would have massive implications for our personal lives, our Congregational planning, our ministries, and our role in Church and society. Let me suggest just some examples of what it might mean if we actually accepted the real lifespan of contemporary people (a “new normal” in relation to the time we entered), rather than that of the 1950s as the real context of contemporary Religious Life:

1) We would begin to realize that a healthy congregational age distribution chart *should* show the majority of professed members between 60 and 80 with a small number in the 40s and 50s and a very small number in the 90 to 100+ bracket. The person-power center of gravity of the Congregation is not, never will be again, and should not be thought of as in the 30s and 40s as it was when we entered. But you often hear Religious saying, “Just look at the age chart. Most of the Congregation is over 70. We are dying.” Are we still lamenting the loss of the old “normal” and wishing we had a crop of 20 or 30-somethings in the novitiate who could insure our future?

2) Our vocational recruitment would focus on emerging adults, i.e., people in their early 30s, not on adolescents. And it would focus on the kinds of people these emerging adults are, not the kind of people adolescents are or that we were in our 30s. That would affect where and how we do such recruitment and who does it. A major issue would be developing the assistance, financial and personal, that we have to offer to these candidates if entrance and perseverance is to be a real possibility. Have we even begun the analysis and planning necessary to attract the next generation of Religious?

3) Initial formation would have to be completely recast to deal with people who are already involved in first careers, adult relationships, and financial commitments but who may well be virtually un-catechised to say nothing of un-theologized and un-liturgized and without much if any significant experience of permanent relationships and/or community.

4) Ongoing formation for virtually all members would now have to include a relatively prolonged “renewal program” (6 months to a year) in their mid-60s or early 70s in which the person could evaluate and appropriate his or her 25 to 30-some years of Adulthood I and discern her or his spiritual and ministerial direction for the next 20 to 25 years as well as begin whatever new formal or informal education their Adulthood II life and ministry will require. That also means that we have to start creating those programs tailored to the transition from Adulthood I to Adulthood II which may mean re-allocating resources (personnel and money) from other programs now wrongly focused on people in the full flood of Adulthood I.

5) We probably need to shift the focus of our ministries from the first half of life (Catholic children and adolescents) and the extreme end of life (the sick and dying) toward the bulk of the population, Catholic or not, who are in Adulthood I and Adulthood II. And probably from supplying what these people can get elsewhere, e.g., formal education, job training, health care, etc., to what they can’t get elsewhere, e.g., faith development, spiritual formation, ministerial commitment, etc. I am talking about the re-location of our ministerial concentration toward the people most in need today, namely, adults, and in terms of what they most need, namely, support in their faith life and commitment.

6) Our expectations and what we propose to new members probably needs to change to expecting

that members will be ministerially active, that is, out in the field, at least into their late 70s and early 80s if not beyond. This has implications for location of ministries, housing, community constellations, health care, finances, congregational participation and the structures which facilitate it, etc. If our corporate culture prepares people to retire at 70, that is when they will begin to opt out. If it communicates the expectation that Adulthood II will be an active and vibrant period of their Religious Life they will live in terms of that expectation.

7) We probably need to change our ideas about leadership and expect that congregational leaders will normally be in their 70s — that is adequately experienced personally and ministerially to deal with the people who actually make up the Congregation and the ministries in which the Congregation is actually involved. People in their 60s then would normally be in the support roles, e.g., vocation and formation work, committees, senates, planning groups, financial advisement, property handling, ministerial decision-making, etc. In these roles they will both have major influence on the Congregation's direction and future which they will live, and be mentored into congregational leadership so that they will be ready, in their 70s to 80s, to take over that leadership.

This does not exhaust the implications of the changed lifespan structure. But I think you can see what I am driving at — that we need to leave behind the “normal” we grew up in which presumes that “real life” goes on from 20 to 55 or 60 and move into the “new normal” in which the bulk of life, for us and for the people to whom and with whom we minister, will unfold between 40 and 80. A 20 to 25 year difference, when one is talking about the life of an individual, is huge. I wonder if we are not, to a large extent, living individually and as communities in a “normal” that no longer exists?

#### C. The (or a) determining ecclesial factor: individualizing of ministry.

Let me turn now, very briefly to one, but I think the most important, ecclesial factor structuring the “new normal” of present and future Religious Life. One of the major developments in Religious Life since the Council is our realization that ministry is not the secondary behavioral “overflow” of our primary end, namely, our own sanctification, with the implications that ministry is a prescribed rather than a personal project and that it really does not matter a great deal what one does as long as it promotes the Congregation's apostolate. Rather, ministry is intrinsic to our personal identity and to the identity of our Congregations. It is built into our life by our founders under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and is just as constitutive of who we are, individually and corporately, as our quest for holiness through the life of the Counsels. But a huge change has occurred in our understanding and living of ministry since Vatican II. For purposes of clarity we could call this change “the individualization of ministry.”

When most of us entered Religious Life the secondary end of the life, the sanctification of souls through the particular apostolate(s) of the Congregation, consisted in assuming an assigned role in a congregational work, e.g., a system of hospitals, social service agencies, parishes, or overseas missions, etc. This situation has not just been modified. It is really over. Religious Congregations, in general, do not run such systems (or won't for very long), even if they still own the institutions in the system (which they increasingly do not). We cannot sustain, financially or in terms of personnel, this type of congregational apostolates and it may well be that the clientele they once served are not the people most in need of our ministries at this point.

The change in this major dimension of our life is not just quantitative (fewer of us in fewer institutions with diminished resources); it is qualitative. If we look at what has happened over the last 30 or so years we will see that from large, collective, institutionalized, congregational ministries we have increasingly moved, by discerning choice as much as by necessity, into much smaller, often individual, non-institutionalized, personal ministries, such as political advocacy, hands on work with the victims of social injustice, personal spiritual ministries, art ministries, holistic health and ecology projects, rehabilitative ministries, the practice of the professions, theological or scientific research, and so on. It is counter-factual to regard these ministries as “exceptions” to the Congregation's “real” ministry in Catholic institutions. The exceptions have become the rule.

This individualization is not “individualism.” The ministries are likely to involve inter-Congregational projects, working with lay associates, ecumenical and interreligious endeavors, and so on. But our members involved in these ministries are not alienated from the Congregation, out on the fringe, or somehow “doing their own thing.” Nor are they simply doing whatever jobs they can find because they do not fit in to congregational works. They are some of our best, most committed, most community-involved members. Our challenge is how to conceptualize, how to imagine, these diverse ministries, mostly exercised individually by one or two members of the Congregation, as integral to a truly corporate Congregational mission. The first step to this re-imagining is probably to recognize that this new configuration of ministry in the Congregation is not an aberration or exception or a concession to lack of resources for the “normal” apostolate of pre-conciliar Religious Life but part of the ministerial “new normal” that has developed since the Council.

The diversification and individualization of ministries is due to many factors which we could all enumerate. But there are some that we need, I think, to recognize explicitly and think about. One is, as I have just suggested, that the most pressing ministerial needs in the Church at the present time, just in terms of numbers and of lack of socially provided resources, are those of people in the full flood of adulthood, not small children or the sick and dying, and the parishes seem less and less able to meet the needs of these adult believers. Furthermore, the leavening of social institutions such as politics, law, projects in the areas of ecology, art, spirituality, justice, and peacemaking, as well as foundational research in theology and the social sciences, among others are as much unmet needs today as was once the education of youth or the health care of the indigent.

Another major feature of the ministerial “new normal” is that we have learned that one or two Religious animating a group of full or part-time committed lay ministers is often more effective and a much better use of our limited personnel than six or ten Religious running one institutional ministry. One rather than a group of Religious in a ministry which may not be exercised by anyone else in the Congregation is no longer an anomaly we hope to be able to replace with a collectively staffed institution. It is the new shape of Religious ministry today.

What will be involved in fully integrating this new ministerial consciousness into the “new normal” of post-conciliar ministerial Religious Life? Let me suggest just a few ideas.

1) Preparation of new members for ministry will not consist primarily of sending them to university for professional credentials. They will probably come in with that preparation. Ministerial preparation will be primarily about forming the person spiritually as a minister of the Gospel so that they can subsume their professional life into their ministerial identity.

2) As is increasingly the case in most Congregations, mutual discernment of ministry will have to replace top-down assignment by superiors. Our members are no longer cogs in the machine.

3) Community life will not be able to be based primarily, or perhaps at all, on the geographical location of ministers, their physical proximity to each other or the central headquarters of the Congregation. “Community” will not be 6 or 10 Religious who live together because they are all assigned to the same school or hospital or parish. Rather we will have to develop ways, many of them perhaps electronic, to create affective and spiritual community and foster congregational participation of all members, no matter where they live.

4) In the “new normal” virtually all members will experience one or more significant change of ministry within the course of the 50 or more years of their active ministry. That will present challenges of discernment, re-education, financial resourcing, and so on. We need to plan for this “new normal” in the active life-span of our members.

5) The relation between members as individuals and the Congregation as a whole are probably going to be quite different. Rather than policies being developed by leadership at the Congregational level and those policies being determinative of local communities and the lives of the individual Religious in those

communities, the diverse ministerial experience of the individual Religious will be increasingly determinative of the Congregation's policies and directions. And this will require considerably more and more skillful interaction among members and between members and leadership than was formerly the case.

In short, ministry today (or what was called the "secondary end" of the Institute) just as spirituality (or what was called the "primary end" of the Institute) has moved from the "normal" of the Religious Life we entered into a "new normal". The former no longer exists and it is not coming back. Either we move definitively, creatively, imaginatively, and joyously into the "new normal" that has replaced what we once knew or we will spend our lives lamenting the loss of the "good old days" as we wait to die or, as some groups are trying to do, attempting to recreate a "traditional" form of the life which is not truly traditional but just anachronistic.

Scripture is full of encouragement to choose the first. Mary Magdalene and Thomas both had to be urged by Jesus to realize that the "normal" of their life with the pre-Easter Jesus was really over. The dispensation of the Resurrection was the "new normal" — breathtakingly different, frightening, beautiful, unfamiliar, exciting. It was deeply continuous with the life they had known before the Crucifixion because Jesus was the same person he was before Calvary. But the new dispensation was also massively discontinuous because Risen Life is not just a modification of earthly life. It is a genuinely new Creation being lived, already, in history. We, like Mary and Thomas, have to realize and rejoice that there is no turning back. The only possibility for life lies in the new and unfamiliar present and the unknown future. Our life must proclaim in the Church and to the world the only message that can, finally, be life-giving: "We have seen the Lord and he entrusted this message to us."



Le chéile sa mhísean atá i gcoitinne againn

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