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Religious Orders, Roman Catholic: Forms of Religious Life

Sandra Marie Schneiders

Jesuit School of Theology/Graduate Theological Union, sschneiders@scu.edu

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Luther* belonged) called for renewal and reformation.

Religious Life as Apostolic Service to the Church. This was initiated by Ignatius* (1539), who wanted to free himself from the old and decaying structures of the Church. A religious community ceased to be an entity in its own right. Ignatius continued to call for the individual's experience of God (*Devotio Moderna*) and affirmed centralized authority in the religious community, but he required neither habit nor choral prayer, a reflection of the development of personalism in Western culture. The community became the matrix of apostolic work, a support for the pastoral commitment of individual members. In the same period, congregations for women devoted themselves to social work, especially among girls (*Angela Merici**). Belonging to the Church involved working together; thus obedience became essential, and religious life contributed to the edification of the church.

In the late Middle Ages, objections arose to religious life: it was asserted that neither Holy Scripture nor Jesus Christ supported life in religious orders and that it was a form of "Pharisaism" because members of religious communities considered themselves better than other Christians.

Expansion of Religious Orders. The 16th and 17th c. were times of expansion of religious orders. In the great abbeys, certain monks specialized in and published scientific works. Thus, e.g., the Maurists* preserved much of the ancient cultures (both Christian and non-Christian cultures); seminaries and vocational schools flourished. Many religious communities sought their identity in secondary elements of Christian faith, e.g. the adoration of the Eucharist.

General Secularization. In the 18th and early 19th c., secularization* went further than a separation between state and religion. The saying was: only what is useful is valid; and in modern society, religious orders and their life were not considered useful. Hence many orders and congregations were abolished. Even prominent theologians thought that religious orders and

their life were dead. But in the 19th c., there was an astonishing growth of religious establishments and religious groups of all sizes. Nearly all modern congregations devoted themselves to an active goal: caring for the sick, teaching, providing schools for everyone, creating presses, caring for the poor, housing the homeless, caring for unwed mothers, helping juvenile delinquents, and carrying out missionary work in foreign countries. The Redemptorists*, the Montfortans, and the Fathers of the Holy Spirit were founded to address the need for pastoral services among the lowest classes. This disinterested commitment to the needy is characteristic of modern congregations and reflects the devotional and individual spirituality of that age. While Ignatius's spirituality placed Jesus at the center, many modern congregations adopted particular saints, such as Mary, Joseph, and Barbara.

Cultural Crisis. Between 1960 and 1970, especially in Europe, there was a sharp decline in the number of religious, there were no new vocations, and young people did not seem interested in the way of life of a religious order. Secularization took on a new significance; the autonomous human person became the judge and the end of all things. Only what can be observed in human experience is true; thus the existence of a transcendental reality is denied. Yet even in this situation, there are signs of a new beginning. For members of religious orders and other Christians, the goal of religious life remains the same: contributing to the realization of the Reign* of God. New forms of communal life with more specialized activities are emerging, emphasizing interpersonal relationships in smaller groups. In countless groups, abandoning the world takes the form of being socially critical in the name of the Christian faith. Is this a sign of revival of religious life?

T. J. VAN BAVEL, OSA

Religious Orders, Roman Catholic: Forms of Religious Life. Religious life has taken many forms. It arose within 60 years of the Crucifixion in response to Jesus' resurrection. Some Christians,

predominantly women, convinced of the active presence of the risen Jesus in their lives, and liberated by faith in the resurrection from the fear of personal or social extinction through death, felt personally called to express the totality and exclusiveness of their relationship to Christ by lifelong consecrated virginity*, characteristically interpreted as espousal to him. The first virgins usually lived in their own homes, participated as specially honored members in the life of the local church, and devoted themselves especially to a life of prayer. Virgins were a prime target of Roman persecution*, both because as Christians they refused to participate in the cult of the emperor and because virginity itself constituted a withholding of their reproductive capacities from the service of the Empire. Some, e.g. Agnes, appear in the calendar of Christian saints as "virgins and martyrs," highlighting virginity as a chosen way of life.

A parallel phenomenon was the institution of consecrated widowhood*, to which 1 Tim 5:3-16 testifies. These widows, who chose not to remarry, were recognized as a special order in the church that carried out caritative ministries, catechized* new converts, and prayed unceasingly for the church.

When the church, freed from persecution, became increasingly involved in the life of the Roman Empire (3rd c.), some Christians fled to the deserts of Egypt and Arabia, seeking refuge from the secularization of the institutional church. Desert monasticism* retained the original features of religious life, namely virginity or celibacy as a form of total consecration to Christ, ecclesial recognition, dedication to prayer, and service to the neighbor. In addition, there was an emphasis on rejection of the "world," which was understood to be the sinful secular order, and rigorous asceticism* of mind and body in quest of an ideal of contemplation*. Antony* (c250-350) remained the prototype of the desert hermit, while Pachomius* (d346) founded the first monastery in Egypt. Cenobitic* monastic life (in community) was codified in the Rule of Basil* (c330-379) in the East and the Rule of Benedict* (c480-534) in the West.

As the church spread into diverse geographic and cultural contexts in Europe and eventually the New World, religious life diversified. During the medieval period, monasticism remained the dominant form among both men and women. But from the 12th c. to the Reformation (which suppressed religious orders among Protestants), the mendicant* religious life, typified by the Franciscans* and Dominicans*, modified classical monasticism. The apostolic energy of this new form of religious life eventually fueled the emergence of nonmonastic male clerical orders like the Jesuits* and lay male orders like the Christian Brothers, which were devoted to the work of evangelization at home and abroad. Efforts to found apostolic women's congregations such as the Ursulines (see Angela of Foligno; Merici, Angela; Religious Women's Orders Cluster: In Europe and North America) were repeatedly suppressed by ecclesiastical authorities in their attempts to enforce cloister. Finally, in 1900 Pope Leo XIII recognized what the people who had been served for centuries by committed religious women providing health, educational, and social service had long known, namely that these members of the "congregations of simple vows," like members of traditional cloistered orders, were indeed religious. During the 1800s and early 1900s, the number of women religious increased to the hundreds of thousands, and women religious outnumbered their male counterparts three to one.

The Second Vatican* Council called religious to renew their life according to the gospel and their founding charisms* and to modernize their lives and ministries. This renewal effort precipitated 30 years of turbulence from which religious life is slowly emerging. Contemporary religious life is no longer seen, by its members or others, as an elite or superior form of Christian life but as a distinct life form in the church characterized by the total commitment of its members to Christ in prayer and ministry expressed in the perpetual profession of vows of consecrated celibacy, voluntary poverty*, and obedience, lived in community.

SANDRA M. SCHNEIDERS, IHM