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# Evangelical Equality: Religious Consecration, Mission, and Witness Part 2

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## PART II: AMERICAN RELIGIOUS AND EVANGELICAL EQUALITY

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## Sandra M. Schneiders: Evangelical Equality: Religious Consecration, Mission, and Witness

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Reforms inspired by the Second Vatican Council have led to radical shifts in concepts of vocation and the practice of leadership among religious and lay members of the American church.

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## **PART II: AMERICAN RELIGIOUS AND EVANGELICAL EQUALITY**

THE call for evangelical equality evoked by Vatican II twenty years ago struck a responsive chord among American religious. As pre-Vatican II Catholics, we had lived in a church whose theology, structure, and discipline had been virtually monolithic for nearly four hundred years. Thus, the immediate and challenging appeal of the People of God image was, for religious, exceptionally striking, especially when contrasted with our previously held belief in the Church as an unchanging, hierarchical institution.

Following the close of the Second Vatican Council, American religious, especially women, moved with amazing speed to implement this conciliar vision. With a kind of instinct that is still striving for adequate theological formulation, women religious placed the call to evangelical equality at the center of their religious efforts. No one, however, talked of equality in the beginning. We talked of reconciliation, liberation, solidarity, participation, collegiality, collaboration, and dialogue. But the common (although unnamed) element in all of these behavioral ideals was indeed Gospel equality.

It is something of a mystery why women religious who had been so totally identified with and participant in the power structures of the pre-conciliar Church responded with such alacrity to the Council's repeated but hesitant challenge to rethink the entire question of ecclesial community. Perhaps it had something to do with our American experience of democracy. No doubt it was also due, in part, to the fact that as women we shared the so-called hermeneutical advantage of the marginalized. Those who are excluded from the system in many ways have a certain objectivity about that system's claims to adequacy and legitimacy.<sup>(1)</sup> But whatever the social causes, only grace can adequately account for the intensity and honesty with which American women religious began to scrutinize first their own lives, then their relationships with the rest of the Church, and finally their interaction with the world around them.

Without in any way questioning the selfless dedication and generosity with which generations of American religious have served the Church in the past, we can, from the perspective of reforms brought about in the first years after the Council, appreciate the depth of conversion to which religious felt called.

### **CLASS DISTINCTIONS**

Among the first areas of reform were the structures of inequality found within our own

congregations. The class distinction between so-called lay and choir religious was a glaring anomaly and was accurately pointed out as such in *Perfectae Caritatis*, the document on renewal of religious life (PC 15).<sup>(2)</sup> It was immediately abolished by most congregations. The titles “superior” and “mother” were quietly retired. Further, the ruler/subject, adult/child relationships which these titles both expressed and encouraged were deemed inappropriate in a community of co-responsible adults called to Gospel friendship.

Monarchical forms of government also appeared increasingly problematical in a community of co-disciples and ministers, so religious began the arduous task of developing truly collegial ways of ordering their lives together. Dialogue began to replace unilateral assignments and collaboration became the preferred approach to shared ministry. In each of these reforms there was a discernable move away from superiority/inferiority relations and toward Gospel solidarity within the community.

Led by the early experience of cooperation within the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, communities began to recognize and repudiate the exclusivism and rivalry that had characterized inter-congregational relations. Mutual isolationism gave way to friendship; cooperation replaced competition, and women religious began to see themselves as a community of communities in the church instead of separate groups vying for dominance.

It took longer for religious to hear the call to conversion in relation to their lay colleagues in ministry and to the laity in general. The ideology of “specialness” which had separated religious (by virtue of their presumed superior vocation) from the rest of the laity, had previously been expressed in the relegation of lay co-ministers to subordinate positions in our institutions and exclusion from decision-making roles. However, realizing and accepting our solidarity with those often regarded as the “lowest” in the Church — the laity — has been a more difficult and painful conversion for most religious than any other of the intra-religious changes, and it is the one which has raised the very questions with which we are concerned: what is the meaning of religious consecration, mission, and witness? Can these realities, central to religious self-understanding, be understood in terms other than those of superiority? We shall return to that question.

Another extremely difficult reform that is still very much in progress among women religious is the repudiation of our previously unquestioned subordination to the clergy. Living out of an internalized patriarchy, i.e., the sense of inferiority bred into women religious — both as women and as non-ordained — is also destructive of Gospel equality

and ecclesial solidarity. Selfliberation continues to be painful and arduous because oppression, however burdensome, is much safer than freedom; subjection is always easier than co-responsibility. Subjection is, however, as contrary to the example Jesus set us as is domination. Respectfully — but insistently — women religious are now claiming their equal dignity as Christians and demanding the recognition of their co-discipleship and the validation of their ministries.

The external signs of the conversion of women religious toward evangelical equality both within their congregations and in relation to other religious, to the laity, and to the clergy have sometimes attracted more attention than the conversion they express. But all religious are well aware of the deep reason underlying their abandonment of the trappings of superiority, the mechanics of separation, the structures of domination, and the patterns of servility. That reason is that a new vision of Church can only be realized by concrete actions expressing conversion. The Church which would trace its origin to the itinerant preacher from Nazareth is a community of equal disciples, called first to solidarity in friendship among themselves, then to the evangelization of the world. And so, under the influence of the Spirit of love, religious women began the process of transforming their congregations from ecclesiastical power structures into ecclesial communities of co-disciples.

## **EVANGELICAL EQUALITY AND RELIGIOUS CONSECRATION**

Let us consider a question raised earlier, one which has gradually emerged as religious have pursued the conciliar vision of solidarity with all people. As religious have broken down the barriers — both among themselves, and between themselves and others both inside and outside the Church they have become aware of the extent to which these barriers were the incarnation of an ideology and a praxis of superiority the nerve of which was the understanding of religious consecration. Consecration is central to both the theology of religious life and to religious selfunderstanding. The question which has become primary in current discussions of religious life is “What meaning, if any, can be assigned to the concept of religious consecration that will affirm both the special character of religious life in the Church and solidarity in equality of religious with all other disciples of Christ?”

The urgency of this question appears to be a special grace of our historical situation, an invitation from the Spirit to examine an area of ecclesial life that has developed without adequate reflection. Since post-apostolic times, the Church has lived out of an understanding of consecration that is, to a very large extent, more characteristic of the Old Testament than of the New, and has failed to explore the radical transformation of the concept that was

brought about by the Incarnation.

## **MAKING SACRED**

Even among the Jews whose God was close to them in covenant love, a chasm existed between the human world and the divine, between the profane and the sacred prior to the Incarnation. Humans bridged that chasm by various forms of consecration. They took profane realities such as space, time, objects, and persons and separated them from profane use in order that they might become go-betweens or mediators between an inaccessible God and common humanity. This separation made these human realities superior to their profane counterparts. The Sabbath, the Temple, the sacred vessels, the priests, the animals for sacrifice, and the Law became — by consecration — sacred rather than profane and superior to ordinary places, times, things, behaviors, and persons.

By means of the Incarnation, the direction of commerce between God and humanity was reversed. God, in Jesus, crossed the divide from heaven to earth. Rather than human things becoming divinized, the divine became human. Humans need not be separated and made superior in order to mediate between earth and heaven; rather, God became human, entered profoundly into solidarity with us, renounced divine inaccessibility and became our equal and our intimate, not just to bridge, but to abolish the distance between God and humanity. Jesus says in John's Gospel that he was "consecrated and set into the world" (Jn. 10:36). Just before his death he prayed that his disciples might be "consecrated" by God as he is (Jn. 17:19), not by being taken out of the world, but by being established in truth and kept from evil (cf. Jn. 17:15-17). In the synoptic gospels Jesus insists that nothing that is created remains profane; nothing requires to be set apart but only to be used rightly (cf. Mk. 7:1-23). The Sabbath is for humans, not humans for the Sabbath (Mk. 2:27). The veil of the Holy of Holies is rent as men and women are drawn into the heart of God by the sacrifice of Jesus (Mt. 27:51). A simple meal of friendship between Jesus and his disciples replaces all sacrifices. All those who are baptized are now a new creation in Christ (II Cor. 5:17). The Incarnation has sanctified and consecrated all that is human. Nothing needs to be set apart or separated any longer. Because Jesus has become the one eternal mediator between us and God (cf. Heb. 9:11-14), we do not need to set certain persons apart, to make them superior so that they can gain entrance to a God from whom ordinary people must shrink.

In other words, consecration in the community of the New Testament involves neither separation nor superiority. Jesus, through his work of unification between God and humanity and among people has given us a radically new understanding of consecration. To be

consecrated is to be holy, to be united with God in the love poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit of Jesus (cf. Rom. 5:5). It means to be in the world the furnace of divine love that enlightens the darkness, that sets the earth ablaze with the fire that Jesus came to enkindle (cf. Lk. 12:49). We have been sent into the world as Jesus was sent into the world — to bring salvation by solidarity with, not by separation from, those to whom we are sent.

Religious are first and foremost Christians, disciples of Christ. They do not have a different vocation from that of other baptized Christians. Fundamentally, religious consecration cannot mean something different from, much less be in opposition to, what Jesus revealed consecration to be. Like the vows of matrimony, religious profession is the giving of a particular shape to our baptismal consecration. Religious undertake to live their baptismal vocation in celibacy freely chosen for the sake of the Reign of God and in the particular kind of ecclesial community that shared celibacy and ministry create. It is appropriate to refer to this shaping of the common baptismal vocation as “consecration” because it carries that fundamental self-gift to maturity (cf. LG 6:44). Just as baptismal consecration constitutes us as the very presence of Christ in the heart of the world, religious consecration, effected by the profession of freely chosen celibacy, enables us to be Christ’s presence in the world in our own particular way. This way is not superior to that of other Christians; it is different.<sup>(3)</sup> We will examine the reason for that difference in a moment. For now, suffice it to say that religious consecration can be understood without recourse to categories of separation or superiority. But it can only be so understood if we take seriously the transformation of the very idea of consecration which was effected by the Incarnation.

## EVANGELICAL EQUALITY AND WITNESS

Embracing a truly incarnational theory of consecration also cannot fail to transform our understanding of witness. Witness can no longer be understood as the testimony brought to “seculars” of the divine world to which all religious have privileged access. Just as all Christians are consecrated in baptism through their incorporation into Christ, so all are sent into the world to bear witness to the infinite love of God definitively revealed in Jesus Christ — both among themselves and to all people.

Religious are not called to witness more or better than other Christians; religious witness is not clearer or more important to the Church. What religious are coming to realize is that their witness is not superior; it is different. In other words, religious and other Christians are equally called to witness to the infinite love of God, but the richness of that mystery requires a variety of expressions. The witness different Christians are called to give is not

distinguished by location on a scale of comparative excellence but by the aspects of the mystery of divine love which come to special expression in their various lifestyles. The witness of each Christian vocation is rich but limited; therefore, adequate witness to the mystery of divine love can only be given in mutuality and complementarity.

The central mystery of Christian revelation is the love of God for humanity. Every fully Christian life is the incarnation, limited but real, of that mystery. But divine love, experienced in all its richness by each, is too multifaceted to be manifested by any one life. Matrimony is a consecrated lifestyle which manifests, in the church and to the world, the fidelity and fecundity of God's love through the faithful and life-giving love of spouses united in the Spirit. The incarnation of divine love in human flesh and the resulting divinization of humanity comes to expression in the mutual sanctification of husband and wife in sexual intimacy. Religious, who have chosen not to marry, not to experience the fullness of human sexual love, need the witness of marital consecration if they are to resist the tendency to seek a disembodied holiness in isolation and self-absorption.

Religious life, on the other hand, is a consecrated lifestyle which manifests in the church and to the world, the fullness of personhood which grounds each individual's relationship with God. It expresses the absoluteness of the divine claim upon the life of each person, and the capacity of union with God to satisfy all the yearnings of the human heart while energizing the person for total self-gift to the coming of the Reign of God. Married Christians, who have not chosen the path of celibacy, need the witness of religious if they are not to lose themselves in the intimacy of human love, relativize their search for God, and so turn their energies inward toward their families that they forget their baptismal vocation to foster the Reign of God.

Consecrated celibacy, i.e., religious life, and consecrated marriage, i.e., sacramental matrimony, are mutually necessary vocations which together witness to the central mystery revealed in the Incarnation, the never-ending redemptive intimacy of God-with-us. Everyone is called to experience the fullness of this mystery, but each is called to witness to it in the limited way made possible by one's own gifts incarnated into one of the many lifestyles open to us. The humility by which we simultaneously realize both our limitation and our giftedness opens us to an appreciation of the mutuality of witness in the church. We surrender our need to claim superiority for our own form of witness, cease arguing over "who is the greatest in the kingdom," and begin to rejoice in the shared poverty which establishes us in the lowest place. It is there, where we recognize ourselves as the least and the servant of all, that we discover our solidarity — not only with all other Christians who

have become as little children, but also with Jesus who is among us, meek and humble of heart, as one who serves.

## EVANGELICAL EQUALITY AND MISSION

A renewed understanding of religious consecration and witness must also affect our understanding of mission and, consequently, of ministry. Vatican II recalled to all members of the Church the truth that the Church does not simply have a mission; it is mission. Just as Jesus' name in John's Gospel is "the Sent One," so the Church is in the world as herald, sign, and instrument of the Reign of God. To be baptized is to be missioned (cf. AA Intro. 1;1:2, 3), to be consecrated and sent into the world as Jesus was. But the emphasis must be on "as Jesus was." We are not sent to the world as emissaries from another sphere, as outsiders bearing a message from heaven (to which we as Christians alone have privileged access) to the secular domain. On the contrary we, like Jesus, are one with all humanity, sharing its joys and hopes, its griefs and anxieties (cf. GS Pref.1). We bear the love of the living God within us, not as a private treasure to be dispensed under special and stringent conditions to those we judge worthy, but as the overflowing goodness of divine compassion incarnate.

Under the influence of the conciliar teaching on the Church as mission, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*, religious have embarked on a major re-thinking of their own mission. Defensive separation from the world, and an unconsciously complacent conviction of specialness in the church must give way to an embrace

of all that is human and a cherishing of our solidarity -not only with Christians but with all people. Our cautious offering of our services only from within the safe confines of our own institutions, generous and dedicated as it has been, has begun to appear too restricted an expression of our universal mission. Like Jesus we must begin to walk the highways and byways of our world, not to "win souls" for the Catholic Church, but to share ourselves and thus the Spirit dwelling in our hearts with all whom we meet.

This "opening out" of the understanding of mission has had unsettling effects on our ordered lives. We have had to face, and must still face, many questions about diversity of ministry, the Catholic identity of our institutions and involvements, the forms and consequences of political ministry. And it is clear that no definitive and permanently valid answers to those questions are likely to be developed. In yet another sphere our safety and certitude must be sacrificed to the creativity of the Gospel.

## CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Our realization of the universality of our mission and the solidarity we share with all Christians in ministry has also created tensions in our relationships with church leaders. Ministry in various areas has made it clear that some religious women are called to and qualified for ordained ministry. The barring of these women from response to their vocations cannot, in the long run, be accepted. The subordination of religious ministers to the ordained, regardless of qualifications, and the attempts to confine religious to ministries deemed “appropriate” or “safe” for them when these restrictions impede the preaching of the Gospel and conflict with the vocations of individual religious can no longer be tolerated. The challenge to religious in these situations is to sustain the dialogue and not to lose patience or become disheartened in the face of restriction, frustration, and coercion.

These and other problems in the area of mission and ministry have long historical roots. It is not surprising that they are tenacious and complex. What is surprising is the widespread, sincere, and increasingly effective efforts in the American church to deal with them.

Ordained, religious, and lay ministers are struggling to build genuinely collaborative team ministries. Dioceses are striving against long traditions of superiority and subordination to establish structures of participation and accountability. Bishops and leaders of religious congregations are coming together in open dialogue in the effort to understand one another’s problems, affirm one another’s ministries, and cooperate in the search for solutions to shared problems. Even in cases of genuine conflict we are slowly learning that dialogue is not only more evangelical than confrontation but also more effective. Most importantly, friendships are being formed across the long-standing barriers between men and women, church leaders and their believers, ordained and lay, and between religious and those called to other vocations in the Church. Rather than competing for ecclesiastical turf we are gradually learning to say, “I call you friends, because all that I have I choose to share with you in order that, together, we might announce, incarnate, and bring about the Reign of God.”

## CONCLUSION

Chronologically we are only twenty years from Vatican II; theologically, however, the distance between pre- and postconciliar ecclesiology is enormous. No one could have predicted that the developments in our understanding of ourselves as Church would have been so rapid and go so deep. It is hardly surprising that the progress has been erratic, uneven, and at times extremely painful. Perhaps no group within the Church has been more profoundly affected by the advances in ecclesiology than religious. Certainly no group has

changed, in response to those advances, more radically. In this, religious life is playing its historic (though long-neglected) prophetic role in the church, a role replete with both suffering and divine intimacy. But the suffering involved in the incarnation of the vision of evangelical equality in religious life cannot finally be compared with the joy of that solidarity in love which Jesus inaugurated when he said to his disciples, “I no longer call you servants . . . but I have called you friends because all that I have received from my Father I have shared with you” (Jn. 15:15).

## NOTES

1. Cf. M.A. Tolbert, “Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 28 (1983): 113-126. See esp. pp. 119-120.
2. All references in the text to documents of the Second Vatican Council are denoted by the initials of the Latin title of the document followed by chapter and/or paragraph number(s) according to *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W.M. Abbott (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966).
3. Vatican II, in PC 12, praises consecrated celibacy as a “surpassing gift of grace” but significantly refrains from citing, even in a footnote, the teachings of the Council of Trent (Dz. 1810) that it is better and holier to practice virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God than to marry.

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