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Contemporary Religious Life: Death or Transformation?

Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM

I. INTRODUCTION

No one who attends carefully to the present experience of religious life in North America can be entirely sanguine about its present or its future. Despite the celebratory character of this gathering (and certainly the twenty-five year work of the Institute for Religious is something to celebrate) we are all aware of the signs of diminishment that mark contemporary religious life: aging membership, decline in recruitment, dwindling financial resources in the face of relentlessly rising costs, loss of institutions, if we attend only to the material problems. When these are compounded by ecclesiastical harassment of individual members in their ministries and of congregations in their legitimate exercise of self-determination and by intense struggles within congregations over self-understanding and identity, the picture can look bleak indeed.

Some people confront these distressing data with a panic that is barely held at bay by reactive rigidity. Others take refuge in a fatalistic resignation expressed in a fatigued hope that the congregation will at least die with dignity. Still others try not to think about the situation and to get on with the day-to-day business of life and ministry while secretly hoping that they will not be the ones who finally have to turn out the lights.

Nevertheless, in the face of such indisputable cause for concern, other factors which suggest a different line of reflection seem to be at work among large numbers of religious, especially women. In the past few years I have been increasingly struck by two features of contemporary religious life that have puzzled and intrigued me. My data are not scientific. They are gleaned, however, from experience with a large number of individual religious, often in the context of spiritual direction or renewal work, and with religious congregations and their leaders, usually in the context of community events such as assemblies, workshops, and reflection weekends.

As I articulated this puzzling experience for myself my reflection became a bit clearer and I hesitantly shared it with several groups of religious. I gave a very short presentation on the subject to the sisters of the diocese of Oakland, California during a Sisters' Day of Reflection in the fall of 1990 and was surprised at the depth of response it elicited. In 1991 I hinted at the same material in a ten-minute contribution to a videotape designed for use in my own congregation, and that same year I gave a fuller presentation to a group of religious from a number of congregations at Maria Center in St. Louis. On both occasions I was again surprised by the resonance the material evoked in the experience of the participants. In January of 1992 I developed the reflections into a more coherent presentation as part of a weekend seminar that I gave for several hundred religious in New Zealand. Congregational leaders and sisters overwhelmingly agreed that that presentation, among the four in the seminar, was the most useful for their individual and communal reflection. I mention this history by way of saying that, on the one hand, these reflections are based on my own experience rather than on anything that has been or perhaps can be established by objective research, but, on the other hand, they seem to resonate with the experience of many other religious in a variety of congregations here and abroad.

Consequently, when I was invited to participate in this Anniversary Institute I decided to try to put the reflections in publishable form, and that effort is what I offer you today in hopes that your reflections will confirm or correct, challenge and enrich my own.

II. FEATURES OF THE CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

The two features of our recent experience as religious that have precipitated my reflections are the following: first, a paradox and second, a malaise. First, it seems extremely *paradoxical* that, on the one hand, religious congregations are exhibiting all of the sociological characteristics of declining institutions, and, on the other hand, they are not exhibiting the attitudes and behaviors that such decline usually precipitates.¹ Organizations predictably follow a life cycle of emergence, growth and expansion, decline, and demise, each phase characterized by typical observable traits. By any objective criteria most religious congregations are in the decline phase of the cycle and some are close to demise. The decline phase is manifested by diminishment in membership and material resources which decreases the group's effectiveness in accomplishing its goal. American women's religious congregations have declined from over 180,000 members in 1966 to 126,000 in the early 1990s. Today only one percent of sisters are under thirty years of age² while the median age in most congregations is over sixty. Congregations which

once attracted fifty or sixty postulants a year now receive one or two. The financial and institutional dimensions of congregational life are commensurate with this decline in personnel.

The typical attitudes and behaviors of declining institutions are despair, cynicism, self-interest, protective maintenance strategies such as internal "turf battles," hardening of boundaries, restriction of resources to in-house projects, and identification with external sources of wealth and power.

However, based on the widespread sampling of congregational documents by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) Task Force on Religious Life in 1985³ and on the paper, "Reflections Upon the Religious Life of U.S. Women Religious" prepared by LCWR for the Fifth Inter-American Conference on Religious Life in the same year,⁴ these materially declining organizations exhibit the kinds of outwardly focused attitudes and behaviors that are characteristic of expanding organizations rather than declining ones. Religious congregations, especially of women, are overwhelmingly characterized by energetic and visionary planning for the future, a willingness to risk, permeability of boundaries and increasing inclusiveness, active identification with the poor and oppressed, internal unity, a high level of personal commitment of members, and the relative absence of survival anxiety. One could interpret this paradox as expressing a denial of reality on the part of religious. Or one could wonder, as I have heard many congregational leaders do, at the healthy attitudes and ongoing commitment, in the face of overwhelming odds, of women who are clear-eyed realists about the organizational facts.

The second feature of contemporary religious experience which has captured my attention and which seems, at least at one level, to contradict the evidence of hope and commitment just mentioned is the profound malaise, the pervasive sense of darkness that marks the day-to-day experience of many individual religious and even of congregations. Even as religious go on with life and ministry with a remarkable courage and commitment there is a darkness which is not gloom, pessimism, or self-pity. It can only be called suffering. But suffering, which is a part of every worthwhile life, is not an occasional episode in the life of many religious today. It seems to be almost a state of being, a dimension of everything experienced or undertaken.

A number of writers have, in recent years, attempted to analyze and suggest remedies for this malaise. Most have suggested that the negative features of contemporary first world culture have infiltrated and undermined the original religious vision and resulted in a loss of corporate focus with consequent energy diffusion and depression among the members. Mary Jo Leddy, for example, working from the standpoint of political philosophy, attributes the current malaise to a widespread surrender by religious to the decadent liberalism of the late twentieth century American empire with its hedonistic

consumerism and destructive individualism and suggests that we experiment with radical pluralism in hopes that some small communities of shared vision will emerge to take up where morally exhausted large congregations have left off.⁵

Gerald Arbuckle, in a number of writings,⁶ has used the theoretical framework of cultural anthropology to analyze the current malaise. He suggests that religious congregations, following the normal life cycle of institutions, have become distanced from their founding myths and are experiencing the resulting potentially creative social chaos. The refounding activity of individual prophetic figures supported by authority and followed by the rank and file is required to actualize that potential.

Joe Holland has suggested that religious life has run its course in the history of the church⁷ and that it is time to resituate intense Christian life in the family and the work-place rather than in the non-biologically grounded contexts of parish and religious life.

The Vatican, of course, has attributed the malaise in religious life to what it perceives as widespread laxity or even infidelity of religious, especially American women, in regard to the so-called "essential elements" of religious life and proposes as a remedy a return to the totalitarian lifestyle of pre-conciliar convent life.⁸

The underlying presupposition of these and some other analyses is that the suffering in religious life today is an indication of something that is wrong, either morally or organizationally, with religious and/or religious life. The source of the flaw is modern culture or the relation of religious life to that culture. It is certainly a welcome sign of increased sophistication that contemporary analysts of religious life are taking more seriously the influence of culture on the experience of religious. And there is no doubt that religious today are susceptible to the same culturally generated problems and temptations that bedevil modern society as a whole.⁹ Finally, it is certainly true that the anthropological patterns and sociological dynamics that affect groups in general also apply to that form of community that we call religious life.

But, this being said, my experience with religious has left me with a sense that these analyses, while insightful and useful at one level, have somehow not connected with the deepest experience of most religious. My suspicion is that the real cause of the current suffering in religious life, although precipitated by cultural change, is deeper than culture—that it is, in the final analysis, spiritual. I also suspect that it is not due primarily to personal infidelity or corporate mistakes even though it is very much concerned with purification. In a nutshell, the thesis I want to explore is that religious are experiencing, corporately as well as personally, something akin to or analogous to what John of the Cross called the "Dark Night," a dangerous and painful purificatory passage from a known and comfortable but somewhat immature

stage of spirituality to a radically new experience of God. Perhaps the mystical tradition of the church can be a resource for understanding the current experience at a deeper level and finding some direction for living it faithfully.

III. THE "DARK NIGHT"

The Carmelite specialist in John of the Cross, Constance Fitzgerald, in a now justly famous article, suggested a few years ago that the category of the Dark Night of the Soul from the spiritual theology of the Spanish mystic might be useful for analyzing the current cultural experience of societal impasse in the face of the overwhelming problems and suffering of late modernity and especially the suffering of women in a patriarchal and sexist church.¹⁰ Although she recognized that John was writing about the interior experience, particularly the prayer experience, of the enclosed individual contemplative, Fitzgerald contended that his description of the spiritual journey, especially of its purificatory dimension, was applicable beyond the narrow boundaries of the author's intent.¹¹ I am proposing that it might be helpful to examine the suffering among religious in the same light.

For some time I resisted this line of reflection not only because most of the religious with whom I have contact are not enclosed contemplatives but especially because I am suspicious of the tendency of religious people, when faced with the inevitable pain caused by our own shortcomings or the systemic injustice of the institutions in which we participate, to take refuge in pious victimhood. This temptation is perhaps especially dangerous for women who have been taught to deny, absorb, or capitalize on suffering instead of doing something about it. But I have been led by several factors to re-examine the possibility that spirituality rather than culture, or rather that the conjunction between spirituality and culture, is the locus of the current malaise in religious life.

First, contrary to what has been suggested by some analysts of religious life, it is not my experience that the majority of religious, especially religious women, have sold out to the materialism of contemporary liberal culture. If anything, religious women work harder and longer for less pay than anyone in the church with comparable qualifications. They are more often than not too responsible for their own good. They remain in ministerial positions that are patently abusive because of their commitment to God's people. Without any coercive pressure from superiors these religious not only make their annual retreat (sometimes at the price of vacation) but attend summer courses, prayer workshops, days of reflection, personal development seminars, and lectures. They are voracious readers of spiritual books, seek out spiritual

direction despite high costs in time, money and travel, and spend semesters and even years in spiritual renewal programs. Religious participate conscientiously, often at the price of already scarce free time, in congregational tasks. In short, if my observations are at all accurate, religious women are at least as committed as they ever were to ministry, community, and their own spiritual lives. And the fact that these dimensions of their lives are no longer either provided for or enforced by authority means that they are acting out of personal conviction rather than routine or obligation.

Second, when religious give voice, often in the context of spiritual direction or faith sharing, to the pervasive suffering that I have observed, they tend to talk little about overwork, underpay, lack of job satisfaction and official recognition, or even clerical oppression. They talk about the inability to pray, the lost sense of God's presence, agonizing alienation from church and sacraments, fear of loss of faith, a sense of inauthenticity or shallowness in ministry because of the theological incoherence of their own positions on issues, their inarticulateness or even paralysis in the effort to share faith in community, soul fatigue.

In short, the suffering of religious who have survived the quarter century since Vatican II does not seem to be due, in the main, to serious infidelity, either individual or corporate. And it does tend to center in their religious experience rather than in external circumstances no matter how much the latter may exacerbate it. The Dark Night, as John of the Cross describes it, is the experience of purification that comes upon the person who has, for a long time, lived the interior life with fidelity and courage but who remains in need of purification not from gross sins of omission or commission, not from laxity or negligence, but from the roots of sinfulness to which the conscious mind does not have access and which are, therefore, not amenable to the direct action of the will. The apparent similarity between the character of the suffering that seems so widespread among religious today and the nature of the Dark Night as it is described in the classics of spirituality has led me to ask whether the two might be related in the current experience of religious.

Finally, there seems something significant in the fact that the Dark Night, which has always been considered the individual experience of particular people as they developed in the spiritual life, seems today to be a widespread and simultaneous experience of a whole group. That has led me to inquire into the relationship between the spiritual experience of religious and the ecclesial and societal situation of the American Catholic Church at the close of the modern period. For the sake of clarity I will discuss in succession what, in fact, has been chronologically overlapping, namely the effects of Vatican II and the effects of the death of modernity and the birth of the post-modern era. I will suggest, not as a theological proposition but as an heuristic hypothesis, that Vatican II worked upon religious something at least analo-

gous to the active phase of what John of the Cross calls the Dark Night of the Senses while the interaction of Christian faith with the shattering of the modern mindset is causing something analogous to the passive phase of that Night and perhaps even the beginning of the Night of the Spirit.

IV. VATICAN II AND THE ACTIVE NIGHT

Basic to all that follows is the proposition that the central meaning and foundational impetus of religious life is, and always has been, the search for God. Religious life as a sociological phenomenon is essentially an organized lifestyle that facilitates the God-quest in a particular historical and cultural setting. For ministerial religious service of others is integral to that quest but does not exhaust it or substitute for it. Therefore, whatever threatens, undermines, or seems to invalidate this God-search is bound to cause profound unease and disorientation for the authentic religious. The events of our lifetime have touched that God-quest in very intimate ways. My hypothesis is that, however inarticulate many religious are on the subject, the root of the pervasive suffering among religious today is the impact on the God-quest itself of the radical ecclesial and societal upheaval we have been experiencing.

For most religious alive today the period of their religious life up to the 1960s was one of extraordinary stability. The organization of religious life seemed perfectly suited to its ends, namely, the perfection of the religious and the salvation of souls.¹² Faith was laid out in catechism-clear propositions which no one questioned, the liturgy was rich and invariable, authority structures were clear and effective, the status of religious in the society of the church and their role in its apostolic work were well-defined and unchallenged. Religious were the "good sisters," the professional religious elite of the church. Nowhere perhaps was this more true than here in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, the period of the Sister Formation Movement, when women religious became not only a spiritual vanguard but some of the best educated and most professionally competent women in the world.¹³

Vatican II, in the space of a few years, occasioned the dismantling of this entire structure. Almost overnight, in historical perspective, the external overlay of religious life was stripped away, a stripping that religious themselves willingly undertook in the effort to renew their life according to the council's vision of a church newly in, with, and for the world after centuries of self-imposed exile and animosity. The council also changed every other sector of the church, clerical and lay, and these changes also had repercussions on religious life.

The ministerial explosion among the laity obscured the apostolate as a

reason for being a religious, throwing them back on the question of ultimate motivation not only for entering but for staying. The positive re-evaluation of marriage as a vocation to holiness called into question the assumption that consecrated celibacy was a higher state of life. The privileged status of religious was symbolically surrendered by the abandonment of religious garb and titles, and the allure of mystery vanished with the opening up of cloistered dwellings, raising the question of religious identity. Financial security, freedom from responsibility within the authority structure of a total institution, and escape from sexual issues in the monosexual community disappeared within a few years as congregations diversified their ministries, divested themselves of institutional holdings and property, changed their procedures for deploying personnel, and emerged from the convent as fortress into the ordinariness of neighborhood life. All the "perks" of the life such as instant identity, job security, and the assurance of institutional backing whether one was right or wrong disappeared. In short, all the unrecognized enticements to religious life that had played some role in virtually every teenager's vocation came out into the open and demanded honest re-examination.

Some interpreted this almost overnight dismantling of a centuries-old lifestyle as blessed liberation. Others saw it as unmitigated disaster. But what it surely did was throw all religious back on the one thing necessary. If religious life could not be justified by ministry, provided no securities and no escapes, did not make one mysterious or special, was not a higher or more perfect form of life much less an assurance of salvation, there was only one reason for continuing, and some discovered that that was not the reason they had entered or stayed while others concluded it was not enough of a reason to continue. As many left and few entered, religious who stayed got in touch in a new way with the real meaning of religious vocation, the naked God-quest at the center of their hearts which made a mysteriously exclusive and total demand upon them and to which they could only respond by the gift of their whole lives in consecrated celibacy, voluntary poverty, community, and corporate mission. Those who continued to choose religious life had now to choose it in purified faith because it was largely devoid of compensatory packaging.

Interestingly enough, this stripping to essentials is exactly what the first phase of the Dark Night of the Senses is supposed to do. It strips away the false sweetness of the spiritual life by definitively detaching the person from everything, good as well as evil, which competes with God in one's life.¹⁴ As John of the Cross says, the point is not that a person be actually deprived of all good things, but that one become detached from them, that they cease to be one's motivation or reward.¹⁵ But for most people actual deprivation is necessary for detachment to be achieved, and this educative deprivation

occurs through the surrender, willingly and finally, of everything that competes with the love of God by providing the satisfaction we yearn for.¹⁶

Religious deprived themselves in the years following Vatican II of all of the sociological and ecclesiastical comforts of religious life, a deprivation that cut much deeper than the relatively easy material mortifications of pre-conciliar convent life. The suffering of willing surrender of identity, status, power, a sense of societal worth, self-evident rightness, approval by ecclesiastical authority, spiritual superiority, all of which were at least ambiguous values, was deepened by the irretrievable loss of some very real goods. Scores, even hundreds of lifelong companions no longer walked with us. Institutions deeply entwined with our congregations' histories and our own vocations were closed. Cherished ministries were surrendered. Traditions and customs that nourished the corporate myth and helped sustain a coherent world slipped away. All of this was a stripping that left most religious very vulnerable even as they courageously ventured forth from the safe confines of the convent into new and dangerous missions in the fields of social justice, direct pastoral ministry, and even non-church related services.

V. POST-MODERNITY AND THE PASSIVE NIGHT

A. The Transition from the Active to the Passive Night

As John of the Cross says, the painful stripping of self that is undertaken in the active phase of the Night of the Senses cannot be compared to the suffering that characterizes the passive phase of this Night. But between the two phases there is a period of peace, a time in which the person is aware of being close to God, feels spiritually settled, enjoys an intense interior life, and willingly shares that life with others.¹⁷

Perhaps, if we can remember back that far, some of us will be able to see an analogy between John's description of these happy "beginners" (as he calls them), relatively free from carnal and spiritual attachments, basking in the maternal love of a generous God, and ourselves in the euphoria of the immediate years after the council. No task was too arduous, no risk too great, no meeting too long as we took up our new identity among the people of God. We poured ourselves into intensive community building, developed new prayer forms, made directed retreats, prepared beautiful liturgies, retrained for new ministries, marched for civil rights and peace, even went to jail to witness for justice. We gloried in our role of empowering the laity while bravely confronting the guardians of clerical turf. Like John's "beginners" we thought we had arrived at our true home. With our lay companions, in ecumenical solidarity, and strengthened by a personalized spirituality that

was psychologically honest and prophetically engaged we anticipated long careers building the city of God where our tears would be turned into dancing.

B. The Need for Passive Purification

John of the Cross warns his readers, however, that the period of and security between the two phases of the Dark Night is relatively brief and he devotes six chapters to an embarrassingly detailed description of what he calls the "imperfections of beginners,"¹⁸ that is, of those who have passed through the purification of the active Night. What John describes in these six chapters in terms of enclosed contemplatives is the deeply rooted and hydra-headed spiritual egoism that is too subtle to be recognized by the person herself or himself and which resists all one's efforts at self-purification, both through active detachment and through willing acceptance of life's misfortunes. There is a great deal we can do about our sins, our attachments, our selfishness, says John. But the roots of our sins lie far below the threshold of consciousness. It is not that we refuse to deal with these springs of evil; it is that we do not have access to them. Only God, through a purifying action that we cannot cause, escape, or control, can extirpate the very roots of alienation from self and God and bring the person finally into the fullness of the contemplative life.

Although John was talking about the interior life of individual contemplatives brought about primarily through and within their prayer experience, his teaching seems applicable in many ways also to the experience of ministerial religious because it is not really a description of a particular lifestyle but of the spiritual itinerary itself. The heuristic hypothesis I am proposing is that the cultural cataclysm that many analysts are beginning to call the transition from modernity to post-modernity is functioning in the lives of many religious in a way analogous to the purifying trials of the interior life that John describes apropos of the enclosed contemplative.

1. POST-MODERNITY

Historical periodization is tentative at best and ideologically distorted at worst. Women, people of color, the poor would probably not divide western history neatly into classical antiquity, the middle ages, and modern times. But many of our best cultural analysts, especially those who are sensitive to the voices of the marginalized, are coming to a consensus that at the close of the twentieth century we are standing on the cusp between the modern world which is dying and something new which is emerging if we do not destroy the planet or annihilate ourselves. A cultural transformation comparable in

depth and significance to the sixteenth century transition from the medieval to the modern world is happening. But we are much clearer about what is dying than about what is being born. Modernity, that is, the worldview, including the ideology, the values, the political and economic systems, and the characteristic projects, which has been the self-evident reality structure, at least in the west, for the last four centuries is crumbling around us. To call what is aborning "post-modernity" is a bit like referring to the forthcoming blessed event as "the baby." It is not very precise but we have no cultural sonogram machine.

The word itself, post-modernity, does give us some important clues. Not only is this new era chronologically subsequent to modernity, but it is tensively related to it in a way that modernity was not related to the medieval period. Modernity involved, to a large extent, the repudiation of the medieval world view with its three-tiered universe, interventionist God, dogma-ruled intellectual life, and church-centered social order. The renaissance, the scientific revolution, the enlightenment, and the Protestant reformation which shaped the modern mind changed the most fundamental presuppositions about reality and ushered in a worldview that had to replace, because it could not absorb, the medieval vision.

This no doubt explains in part the violent opposition of the church to modernity, or what it eventually called the heresy of "modernism."¹⁹ The medieval world was built by the church, explained by the church, and ruled by the church. In the modern world evidence, critical reason, pluralism, freedom of conscience, the autonomy of the individual, political diversity, and economic laissez-faire supplanted the world the church built, and the church resolutely resisted virtually every aspect of modernity right up to the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Of course, there were intellectual moderns in the church such as Loisy, George Tyrrell, and Teilhard de Chardin. But on the whole, the church managed to remain a medieval enclave in the midst of modernity preserving a papacy that was a sixteenth century divine right monarchy complete with titled nobility, liveried guards, sumptuous court ceremonies, inquisitions and symbolic executions of dissidents. It went on teaching a perennial philosophy which serenely ignored the developments in the physical and social sciences while denying the findings of the emerging human sciences such as psychology. It ran entire educational and social systems which enabled Catholics to live in a self-imposed ghetto from which non-Catholic "heretics" with their modern ideas were barred, and to propagate a theology that was internally coherent but increasingly out of touch with the moral, intellectual, and social experience even of its own members to say nothing of the rest of the world.

At Vatican II the church threw back the curtains and opened the windows on modernity. But what met its startled gaze was not the dewey freshness of

a dawning era but the twilight of a dying age. We only momentarily mistook the pollution-laden air for heady drafts of pristine modernity because we had lived so long enclosed that we had forgotten what fresh air smells like. Modernity was almost over when the church decided to engage it.

No one had lived the medieval life of the church in the modern world as totally and as committedly as religious, especially religious women. Our peasant dress, pre-electric lights horaria, romantic ceremonies and feudal titles bore eloquent witness to our alienation from modernity. Nevertheless, and perhaps precisely because we were so schooled to thinking with the institutional church in all things, no group in the church embraced the conciliar agenda with such fervor as religious women. We not only opened the windows to peek out but rushed out into the street as eager to embrace the modern world as we had been faithful in cherishing the medieval one. What has actually happened is that religious are being challenged to help bury a modernity in which we never participated and to enter into post-modernity without having learned the modern lessons needed to function in this new era. Religious are deeply enmeshed in this complicated situation.

Cultural critics are beginning to discern two major and largely incompatible strands in the emerging post-modern *Zeitgeist*. One is deconstructive and involves a repudiation of any worldview or unified vision of reality resulting in a nihilistic embrace of total relativism and a value-neutral absolute pluralism which despairs of any ultimate meaning. The other strand is constructive. Although it sees with increasing clarity the dead-ends to which the premises of modernity have led, constructive post-modernism does not envision a total repudiation or replacement of modernity but an integration of its genuine values (and there are some such as the ideal of liberty and equality and the intellectual honesty of critical thought) into a higher synthesis. In my view, deconstructive post-modernism is little more than a counsel of despair in the face of truly overwhelming contemporary challenges. But the constructive post-modernism, which is not a romantic or a sullen anti-modernism but a vision of an alternative world, seems our last best hope if we are to keep the human enterprise going.

Even a thumbnail sketch of a post-modern vision is well beyond the scope of this paper.²⁰ But for the purposes of this presentation I will try to give a sense of what is emerging by discussing three salient characteristics of modernity, the challenge to them of the emerging post-modern sensibility, and the effects of this clash of worldviews on the religious imagination and spirituality of people just emerging from the theological middle ages, namely Catholics in general but religious in particular. What I will be trying to suggest is that the interaction between a culture in transition and an ecclesial experience that is "out of synch" with either pole of the transition has generated a spiritual situation in which the God-quest of religious is seriously

threatened and that the effect is an experience that has some interesting analogies with what John of the Cross described as the passive phase of the Dark Night of the Senses.

2. MODERNITY AND POST-MODERNITY IN CONFLICT

The modern worldview which was born of the scientific revolution and developed through the enlightenment into the technological age has numerous defining characteristics, but three that underlie the others are pervasive rationalism, hierarchical dualism, and the myth of progress.

Rationalism, the boundless confidence in the capacity of the human mind to know everything by means of the so-called scientific method, is fundamental to the modern worldview. It has resulted in the repudiation of mystery as a meaningful category, the objectification of all reality, the justification of whatever destruction is necessary to extract the secrets of nature, a radically secular view of public reality within which there is no place for the religious, the reduction of reality to what can be scientifically investigated, in short, all the forms of materialistic positivism that have fragmented and impoverished our experience and alienated us from God, nature, one another, and ourselves.

A second feature of modernity is a pervasive *hierarchical dualism*. In the modern frame of reference all reality in every sphere is divided into two parts with one part being superior to and dominant over the other. Thus, mind over matter, objective over subjective, intellect over emotion, the demonstrative over intuitive, prose over poetry, God over humanity, humanity over nature, white over colored, clergy over lay, master over slave, European over Asian, rich over poor, light over darkness, adult over child, speech over silence, power over weakness, and on and on. Basic to this entire dualistic scheme is the fundamental dualism, male over female, thought to reflect the hierarchy of creator over creation which grounds its necessity, absoluteness, and immutability. Out of this schema has come an ideology of rape. Domination and subordination is the primary mode of all relationship.

The third feature of modernity is the *myth of progress* according to which change is always improvement and whatever is new is better. Progress is regarded as inevitable and therefore beyond moral evaluation. Whatever can be done must be done and therefore should be done. The ultimate symbol of the destructive tyranny of this myth over the modern mind is the deliberate creation of a bomb which could end life on earth.

The negative results of modernity are becoming ever more evident. Ecological disasters multiply, armed conflict is global, the abuse and exploitation of women and children is epidemic, our enormously inflated economy is out of control, we face reproductive chaos, the information glut causes growing confusion and paralysis, and cynical despair is pervasive.

What cultural critics are calling constructive post-modernism is the emerging worldview of those who have begun to realize that modernity has run its course. To continue to operate on the premises of modernity is cosmocidal. We need to re-envision the whole world order, reimagine the whole human enterprise if we are to survive, much less flourish. Against the reductionistic rationalism of positivistic science a new science and especially a new cosmology is emerging. The universe in this view is not a free-standing, objective, purely material substance which we have a right and a duty to dominate and exploit for our immediate ends but an infinite, complex process in which everything is related to everything else and nothing is standing still. It does not belong to us but we to it and it has been entrusted to our stewardship for generations yet unborn. This intricate whole is mysterious and beautiful and lovable. Reverence, care, and cooperation—even repentance—are the proper attitudes with which to approach this universe whose secrets we must ask for with appropriate humility and awe. And this tiny blue-green planet earth, a mere speck in the universe, is not a strip mine or a dump. It is our mother—raped, bleeding, and near to death—and the absolutely necessary condition of our life. We do not have much time in which to repent of the violent rationalism of the modern era.

Against the hierarchical dualism of modernity the post-modern worldview is characterized by its embrace of the feminist critique of patriarchy with its implied repudiation of hierarchical dualism in every sphere and its appeal for egalitarian mutuality in relationships and inclusive community not only among humans but of humans within nature and of creation with God.

And against the runaway myth of progress constructive post-modernism is, among other things, re-evaluating native patterns of life which affirm a reverence for reality that sets limits to human projects and calls for responsibly envisioning the results of our actions, not just for ourselves and future generations but for the whole of reality. It is beginning to ask qualitative rather than purely quantitative questions about what we are capable of doing. There may be many things we can do that we ought not to do and change can be regressive as well as progressive.

The attitudes and insights emerging as integral to constructive post-modernism are frequently in conflict with official church theology which is still a medieval pre-critical deductive dogmatism with a thin veneer of modern terminology not yet dry on its surface. But this is the theology upon which contemporary religious founded their spirituality. Increasingly, it is a theology which is incredible to, and therefore completely non-functional for, many religious who, after the briefest exposure to modern critical thought, are already caught up in the post-critical agenda of a new era.

These religious know, even when they are unable to articulate it, that there is no absolute, unchanging truth available to humans, that all human

knowledge is perspectival and limited and therefore relative, and thus that human infallibility is a contradiction in terms. They are learning that all reality is evolutionary, dynamic, interconnected and thus that everything is to some degree indeterminate and ultimately mysterious with ourselves the most mysterious of all. Claims about unchanging natures and non-discussable moral absolutes derived from them are increasingly unintelligible. They know that feminism is not a first world aberration threatening the family and making women aspire to functions beyond their nature but the *sine qua non* of a truly human approach to relationships; that hierarchy is at best terminally dysfunctional and at worst a systemic sin. The list could be extended, but the point is that most religious who have been active in the church since the council are living with a transformed consciousness, an increasingly post-modern worldview, which has little foundation in an organized theology because the medieval theology which they learned well in pre-conciliar days and even the minimally modern theology they have caught up on since the council have been rendered almost useless by the clash between modern and post-modern rationalities.

3. EFFECT ON SPIRITUALITY OF THIS CONFLICT

The effect of being enmeshed in the generalized incoherence of a cultural transition which renders one's functional theology inoperable is spiritual disorientation. Without attempting even to list the areas in which this disorientation is appearing, I will give a few typical examples.

God is a major problem for many religious, especially for those who really pray, who actually seek to reach God in some experiential way. The God of official, i.e. medieval, theology is non-credible. Modern explorations into outer space have made a God "up there" or "out there" inconceivable. Modern depth psychology makes a God "within" difficult to imagine and generates a healthy suspicion about the role of our own projections in our God-images. But post-modern sensibilities have exacerbated the situation well beyond the modern God-problem. How can a post-modern mind encompass a God who is totally transcendent, outside the universe, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, perfect, unaffected by our actions, absolute in "his" moral judgments which admit of no exceptions, and who exercises unaccountable and absolute power over all? And even if one could imagine such a God, could one relate to him? Is he not the very epitome of the modern nightmare: hyper-rational, dominating, non-relational?

Feminism, furthermore, has made an all-male, indeed triply male, God both incredible and repugnant to many women while increasing appreciation of the great world religions and of the religions of native peoples has made the absolutist and exclusivist claims of Christian theology sound arrogant if not imperialistic.

The God-problem is not ameliorated for many post-moderns by an appeal to *Jesus* as the Christ. Modern, and especially post-modern, cosmology makes a resurrected human being hard to conceive. Questions about where and how Jesus exists lead ineluctably toward the question of whether he exists. Is Jesus finally just a man, a singular historical example of what it means to live as a God-centered human, but one who has died and is available to us only as an example from the past? What can resurrection mean except that the community continues to believe in Jesus' message? Is prayer to Jesus realistic or just a projection of a celibate need for intimacy?

The problems are compounded when one gets to the *church*. Can the real God of all creation really be tied in some special or exclusive way to one narrow strand of human history that is only a few thousand years old? Can a patriarchal power structure which not only legitimates but sacralizes structures of domination really be a, much less the, privileged mediation of salvation? And if there are no clear answers to these questions, is it honest to propagate this church, at least in its institutional form?

The *liturgy and sacraments* present almost insuperable problems for many religious. Not only are there massive theoretical questions about what is really going on once a medieval theology of transubstantiation, real presence, and quasi-substantial sin-acts have foundered on post-substantialist post-modern premises, but the galling experience of sacralized male domination which comes to ritual expression in sacramental dependence is so enraging for many women that they simply cannot participate on a regular basis.

These questions are not the theoretical fantasies of underemployed academics. They dominate the consciousness of many religious, especially of those who pray. The effect of the constant nagging presence of these insoluble conundrums is profound darkness that enshrouds the very heart of religious life, namely, the God-search that is its *raison d'être*. Many religious, if my observations are at all accurate, are experiencing a serious crisis of faith which is affecting every area of their lives. They deal daily with the question of why they are in ministry given their personal uncertainty about the very existence, much less the character of God. They struggle over representing an institution they are not even sure should exist. They agonize over trying to build authentic community with people they suspect could hardly guess how profoundly alienated they are and who would be shocked if they could. They sit in prayer wondering if there is anyone, anything even, there in the darkness. They wonder how they can participate even once more in a liturgy, in sacraments which seem to be either the primitive private magic of semi-educated functionaries or the violent rituals of male power.

Even allowing such questions to formulate themselves is terrifying, or, worse, perversely seductive. The struggle is exhausting; the rage is overpow-

ering; the darkness is impenetrable. The ultimate question struggling for expression is "What is the meaning of religious life in the absence of God?"

VI. INSTRUCTION FROM THE MYSTICAL TRADITION

If the description above is at all true to the actual experience of religious who are trying to live a post-modern spirituality in a dying modern culture with the resources of a medieval theology and spiritual formation, there is perhaps something to be learned from the mystical tradition. Although the Dark Night bears upon several areas of spiritual experience, for the sake of limits and concentration I am going to deal with only one, namely, the purification of the God-image. I will use John of the Cross' systematic presentation of the Dark Night to pursue my hypothesis, namely, that the darkness which pervades the experience of so many religious today may have more to do with the journey from a kind of collective arrested spiritual development that characterized pre-conciliar religious life to the spiritual maturity required for participation in a new age than it does with cultural contamination.

John, in *The Dark Night*, Book I, discusses the passive phase of what he calls the purification of the senses or what we might view as the purification that takes place in the sphere where a person interacts with this world. For ministerial religious this is a primary sphere of their spirituality. John divides his reflections into a consideration of why this experience of purification is necessary, a description of what the person experiences, signs for discerning whether a person who is submerged in darkness and suffering is actually undergoing the purification that leads to contemplation or is simply disintegrating psychologically, and what a person can do not only to survive this experience but to cooperate with God's inner work. I will follow John's pattern drawing an analogy between what he has to say about the experience of contemplatives in prayer and what many religious seem to be experiencing today in their active lives.

A. Purpose of the Dark Night

John of the Cross, as we noted above, devotes a long section of Book I to describing the inner, unrecognized, and inaccessible roots of sinfulness that remain in the person who has successfully traversed the active night of detachment and grounding in virtue, a process most religious began in the uniform discipline of pre-conciliar convent spirituality and largely completed in the self-stripping that the conciliar renewal brought about. But something

remains unfinished in the spiritual project. Basic to all of what John calls the "imperfections of beginners" that remain to be dealt with is the inadequacy of their God-concept. John says, "They still think of God and speak of [God] as little children, and their knowledge and experience of [God] is like that of little children.... The reason is that they have not reached perfection, which is union of the soul with God."²¹

As we have said, the modern science of psychology, especially Freudianism, has made the same point more brutally and perhaps more convincingly. It has made us aware of the powerful role that projection of need plays in the construction of the God-image. It is not sin in the usual sense of the word but the deeply rooted and unhealthy compulsions of the ego, the fear of death, the alienation of authority and responsibility, the tyranny of the persona with its denials and shoulds, the need for immediate gratification, and so on which have functioned in our construction of a God of the gaps who meets our needs and solves our problems. This "God" fulfills our intimacy needs without making us face sexuality realistically. He tells us what to do without ambiguity and rewards our self-alienating submission with immortality. He protects us from harm and injustice and keeps our religious persona intact. He makes us special by calling us to a higher life. In short, he is a God made in our image and according to our needs. Furthermore, this God is also one who could be imaged easily and theologically explained with the tools of medieval theology. The theology of our youth connived with our lack of psychological sophistication to keep us spiritually immature.

The assault of modern psychology and science on this comfortable God-image has been aggravated by post-modern views of reality which have undermined the theological explanations of God that enabled us to think coherently about divine reality while making the classical attributes of God not only incredible but repellent. In other words, cultural developments may be playing the role of stripping us of any capacity to think God and therefore to relate to God. At one level this can be explained as a purely historical development: medieval psychology, theology, and cosmology have been replaced by new ways of thinking. But perhaps the deeper explanation is that only an assault which could get past the tight defenses of a need-dominated spirituality is capable of radically undermining the immature, ego-compulsed substitute for God that must be surrendered if we are ever to know, to encounter, the Holy Mystery who has no name. However this takes place in a Carmelite monastery, perhaps the way it takes place for a contemporary active minister is in her or his engagement with the thought forms of post-modernity. While we lived in an impregnable medieval enclave we did not have to take seriously what we now cannot avoid. We cannot have one mentality and sensibility for everyday life and another for prayer. What will not

wash, imaginatively or intellectually, from nine to five in the office will not function at six in the chapel either.

The purpose of the Dark Night, however it is precipitated, is the destruction of all that impedes the full union of the person with the real God. The ultimate source of this purifying action is the contemplative inflow of God into the person. The real God, ultimately mysterious and totally foreign to our projections, cannot coexist with the God of our immature imagination. It is hard to imagine a more effective assault on the false God-image than that which we have been undergoing since our emergence from pre-conciliar convent life.

B. Description

John of the Cross describes the experience of this Dark Night in words that are strangely relevant to contemporary experience as I have heard many religious articulate it. He says that in the midst of this purificatory fire the mind is plunged into darkness; the will is dry; the memory is empty; the affections are in anguish.²² God has disappeared from the horizon of experience. The heart of the religious project, the God-quest, seems pointless, futile, indeed impossible. The inner life becomes a war zone; one feels impure and weak and vaguely sinful without being able to point to anything concrete whose correction would make one feel more whole. Friends, spiritual directors, fellow religious seem distant and unreliable or even uninteresting. Reading is no help and prayer is utterly barren. There is deep inner fatigue, discouragement, a sense of worthlessness and hypocrisy in ministry. Sometimes passions long quiet surge up uncontrollably. Just getting up in the morning seems more than one can manage.²³

C. Discernment

This description, as has been pointed out often enough, sounds a lot like classic burnout, or psychological depression.²⁴ The modern tendency is to seek counseling, take a sabbatical, or go on vacation. And indeed all of these can be useful approaches. But John of the Cross cautions that one cannot "cure" the Dark Night. It must cure us. Consequently, even though psychological disturbance may be part of the experience and require appropriate professional care, it is important to be able to recognize the spiritual experience of purification so that we do not short-circuit the work of God.

John of the Cross offers three signs²⁵ that, when they occur together, indicate that the person experiencing this searing darkness is not simply disinte-

grating psychologically, but is actually undergoing the purifying action of the Spirit. Although it seems that people seldom can recognize these signs in themselves, partly because they are rightly aware of the part their own brokenness plays in their misery,²⁶ they often unwittingly express them to a spiritual director. The first sign is the darkness itself, the person's inability to find joy or satisfaction in anything. When the darkness is really the work of contemplation there is little inclination to compensate for the spiritual pain by sensual excess. The person knows somehow that there is no substitute for what has been lost.

But, and this is the second sign and one I see very often in religious, the person has a persistent concern about God, a kind of nostalgia for God. Such people long for God and suffer from God's absence. They are constantly searching for something, anything that will assure them that God exists or offer hope that they may someday once again glimpse God's face. Often what they most want from a spiritual director is just the experience that someone who seems credible to them still believes in God, even communes with God. And they are sure that it is their own tepidity or mistakes or lack of sincerity that is responsible for their abandonment. If only they could get it right, find the right form of prayer or the right schedule or the right book, the darkness would lift.

The third sign is the powerlessness of the person, despite deep desire and sometimes furious effort, to bring God back. The person simply cannot pray, and the harder one tries, the more impotent one is.

Often what the person cannot see, the gradually emerging fruits of the purifying suffering, is very evident to those around them.²⁷ The perseverance itself, the dogged day-to-day fidelity in the midst of total darkness and without inner support, is evidence enough that something positive is afoot. A new kind of humility and lack of affectation born of true self-knowledge lends a certain grace to their presence. Since they are nothing and have nothing there is no sense pretending anymore. Their solidarity with the "little ones," the poor, is no longer tinged with condescension or aloofness for they are the poor. Their fidelity to people and to the truth becomes uncomplicated by the power agendas and self-protectiveness of former times when the defense of the persona was of paramount importance. They seem to have just enough strength to suffer what has to be suffered for justice's sake and they are unwilling to burden others with their pain or to cause anyone else to share their doubts. They are not arrogant but they also can no longer be intimidated by power. Because they have nothing left to lose they cannot be bought. They hope against hope, not in brave speeches but simply by not walking away despite all the evidence that there is no reason to stay. The gift of wisdom is beginning to infuse all their actions. They are a kind of incarnation of Peter's "Lord, to whom can I go; you have the words of eternal life" (cf. Jn

6:68). As John of the Cross says, the transformation is taking place even though the person himself or herself cannot see or feel it.

It seems to me that the paradox with which this paper began bears many of the marks of this transformation. Religious who see their congregations diminishing, their works threatened, who are themselves suffering from violent sexism in society and church, whose ministerial efforts are frustrated again and again by the power structure in which they do not share, who find liturgy abusive and prayer empty are nevertheless steadfast in planning and hoping for a future they cannot imagine they will see. They are faithful in ministry and in prayer. They are not cynical or self-pitying. Their energies are turned outward even as the dark fire of the Spirit painfully consumes the inner dross.

D. Negotiating the Passage of the Dark Night

The passage through the Dark Night, spiritual authors warn, is perilous, and many people do not make it. Two serious temptations are characteristic of this passage. The first is to try to turn back toward the now outworn spirituality of one's former experience, an effort that cannot succeed. The second temptation, and by far the most dangerous, is to give up. Today giving up can easily take the form of a vocational or career change. If one cannot pray, if ministry seems rootless and hypocritical, if one cannot even believe in God, one might as well put one's efforts into something that has at least some human merit like an intimate relationship, raising a family, or becoming a secular professional in the helping fields. My suspicion is that some of the departures from religious life in the last few years have been the despairing surrender of people who could find no help anywhere in the midst of the Dark Night.²⁸

What is to be done by the person in this situation? What help can be offered? John of the Cross was talking to enclosed contemplatives and his advice bears mainly on their prayer. He tries to assure them that they should persevere in prayer but without trying to force any thoughts or acts. They should simply rest quietly, even though they feel they are wasting time, because the silent work of God that is going on within can only be hindered by mental or affective busyness.²⁹ This advice is certainly applicable to the contemporary individual who is furiously trying to make prayer "work" when the time for this activity is over. But I am concerned also with the Dark Night as a corporate experience of ministerial religious. What can we—as congregations and communities, as leaders and spiritual directors—do to cooperate with this purificatory process? Let me make a few very tentative

suggestions in light of the present situation which is very different from that of the sixteenth century.

First, we can explore, openly and courageously, the possibility that the problems we are struggling with have a deeper cause and purpose than we have been prepared to imagine and we can mobilize the resources of the tradition of spirituality to help us at least understand, and help others to understand, what might be going on.

Second, I think we need to undertake a serious, corporate theological re-education of ourselves. The theology which undergirded our spirituality in the past cannot be resuscitated and intelligent people cannot live a spirituality which is theologically bootless. We are, to a large extent, running on theological empty. It is not just people who are going to teach theology or run catechetical programs who need a broad and deep exposure to contemporary theology. It is every religious for whom the medieval theological synthesis does not and cannot function. Contemporary theology has made major advances in rethinking the God question, revitalizing christology, regrounding the sacraments in human experience, struggling with the anomalies raised by the encounter with the world religions, integrating the feminist critique into mainstream theology, interfacing moral theology and the contemporary human sciences. If we are convinced that every religious needs at least basic knowledge of psychology if she is going to have enough self-knowledge to deal with her own development, we should also be convinced that every religious needs a workable theological framework if she is to deal with the God-question today.

Third, in the vast array of reading material available to us today we have a resource that John of the Cross and his contemporaries could not dream of. There is readable, non-technical but very sound material available on post-modernism, psychology, contemporary philosophy, models of God and church, revelation, biblical interpretation, and almost every other dimension of the current crises facing us as individuals and as a society. Serious reading ought to be as much a part of the discipline of contemporary religious life as daily prayer.

Fourth, and suggested much more hesitantly, I think that if we could find a way to facilitate among us a faith-sharing that allowed us to speak of our negative experience, of our spiritual suffering, we could do much for each other. We tell our stories (somewhat expurgated), share our moments of insight, discuss issues and even values. But do we dare, even in very carefully selected groups, surface the deep issues of God, eucharist, Jesus, praying, believing? Would it be worth the risk to get to the bedrock level of faith with one another?

Fifth, we might try diversifying our prayer repertoire. The eastern religions in particular have developed methods for concentration and attention

that are non-rational, non-discursive and that might be of more help in the effort to be silent and receptive than traditional western forms. Zen and Yoga, Centering Prayer, awareness exercises have all proven helpful to some people.³⁰

Finally, something that most religious have always intuitively known and that seems a matter of conviction with most religious I talk to: perseverance in prayer no matter what happens or does not happen. This can be almost impossibly difficult when God seems totally absent, even non-existent over long stretches of time. But the feeble desire, the barely felt hope, even the wish against all hope that there is a God is prayer, and that prayer needs the nourishment of time and place and effort the way a match in a gale needs a protecting hand.

VII. CONCLUSION

If it is true that religious, not only individually in many cases, but corporately, experience a profound purification that touches not only our institutional holdings, our numerical and financial strength, our high status and privileged self-image but even more intimately our God-image, and the God-quest which is the very ground and reason for our life, then the passage through this crisis cannot be accomplished, ultimately, on any other than spiritual grounds.

If the preceding analysis has any validity the stakes are very high. Our entire culture is involved in a deep crisis, the crisis of transition from modernity to post-modernity on which our physical survival depends, but also a crisis of transition from the human-centered spirituality which banished God to his heaven and left the world to us to a genuinely theocentric spirituality on which our spiritual survival depends. If religious, who may be in the vanguard of this transition precisely because they are, as it were, obsessed with God, can lead the way through this darkness, they may be in a position to make a contribution to post-modernity far more important than the contribution of schools and hospitals in the modern period.

The future of religious life, from many points of view, looks quite bleak. This is especially true according to the criteria of well-being that modernity has taught us to use: quantity, numbers, money, power, leverage, status. But scripture offers another vision to our struggling hope. In the book of Deuteronomy God says, "For you are a people holy to Yahweh your God; Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for God's own possession.... It was not because you were more in number than any other people that Yahweh loved you and chose you, for you are the least of all peoples; but it is because Yahweh loves you and is keeping the promise sworn to your

forebears.... Know therefore that Yahweh your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love God in return" (cf. Dt 7:6-9).

Notes

1. Patricia Wittberg in "Outward Orientation in Declining Organizations: Reflections on the LCWR Document," *Claiming Our Truth: Reflections on Identity by United States Women Religious*, ed. by Nadine Foley (Washington, D.C.: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1988), 89-105 documents this paradox and suggests that the outward focus of declining congregations may be dysfunctional for organizational survival. I find her sociological description and analysis very clarifying but I am suggesting in this paper another kind of explanation of the phenomenon and a different response to it.

2. For statistics, see Marie Augusta Neal, *Catholic Sisters in Transition: From the 1960's to the 1980's* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984), pp. 18-22 as brought up to date by Lora Ann Quiñonez and Mary Daniel Turner, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 141 and Wittberg, "Outward Orientation," pp. 89-90.

3. Anne Munley, "An Exploratory Content Analysis of Major Themes Present in Selected Documents of United States Women Religious," in *Claiming Our Truth*, pp. 184-191.

4. Available in *Claiming our Truth*, pp. 173-181.

5. See Mary Jo Leddy, *Reweaving Religious Life: Beyond the Liberal Model* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990).

6. See, e.g., Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Out of Chaos: Refounding Religious Congregations* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1988).

7. See Joe Holland, "Family, Work, and Culture: A Postmodern Recovery of Holiness," *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), 103-122.

8. See the document "Essential Elements in Church Teaching on Religious Life," available in *Origins* 13 (July 7, 1983), 133-142.

For a very good sociological analysis of pre-conciliar religious community life as that of a "total institution" see Patricia Wittberg, *Creating a Future for Religious Life: A Sociological Perspective* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1991), pp. 11-35.

9. For a very insightful analysis of the cultural malaise of late modernity, see Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1992), esp. pp. 20-47.

For a theological appraisal see Douglas C. Bowman, *Beyond the Modern Mind: The Spiritual and Ethical Challenge of the Environmental Crisis* (New York: Pilgrim, 1990), esp. pp. 7-23.

For an attempt to draw out the implications for spirituality of the collapse of modernity, see David Ray Griffin, "Introduction: Postmodern Spirituality and

Society," *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), 1-31.

10. Constance Fitzgerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1986), 287-311. (This article first appeared in 1984 and is reprinted in the Conn volume with permission of the original publisher, Harper & Row.)

11. The legitimacy of the move from the original intention of an author to a current meaning of a text which has been resituated in a later context is the subject of textual hermeneutics. Very useful on this subject is the work of Paul Ricoeur, esp. his *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976). I have developed a theory of hermeneutical actualization of biblical texts which would be applicable also to texts from the history of spirituality. See Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), esp. pp. 138-150.

12. Although this formulation, which was somehow embedded in virtually all constitutions as the primary and secondary end of the Institute, is unacceptable to most congregations today because it is dualistic, other-worldly, and disembodied, it did express in the language of an earlier time the focus of religious life as the search for God.

13. For a brief history of the effect of the Sister Formation Movement on American sisters see Elizabeth Kolmer, *Religious Women in the United States: A Survey of the Influential Literature from 1950 to 1983* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984), pp. 19-31 and Quiñonez and Turner, *Transformation*, pp. 3-30.

14. See John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk. I, chs. 2-13 (available in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, tr. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Publications, 1979).

15. See *The Ascent*, Bk. I, ch. 3, parag. 4.

16. See *The Ascent*, Bk. I, ch. 4.

17. See *The Dark Night*, Bk. I, ch. 1, parags. 2-3.

18. See *The Dark Night*, Bk. I, chs. 2-7.

19. Although the term "modernism" can be traced back only to about 1905 and its formal condemnation by Pius X in the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* to 1907, the official church's resistance to the enlightenment and its implications for theology reaches back through the pontificates of Leo XIII and Pius IX. For a good description of the modernist controversy and its effects on the church see Gabriel Daly, "Modernism," *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987), 668-670.

20. See the references in note 8 for some clarifying presentations of post-modernism.

21. *The Dark Night*, Bk. II, ch. 3, parag. 3. Although John is here speaking of "proficients" (those who have passed through the purification of the Night of the Senses) at the beginning of the Night of the Spirit what he says is true *a fortiori* of "beginners."

22. *The Dark Night*, Bk. I, ch. 9, esp. parag. 7.

23. See *The Dark Night*, Bk. I, ch. 14.

24. One of the best explanations of the distinction between psychological disintegration and the psychic manifestations of spiritual growth is Roberto Assagioli, "Self-Realization and Psychological Disturbance," in *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 35-59.

25. Actually, John of the Cross gives two complementary presentations of the signs: *The Ascent*, Bk. II, ch. 13, parags. 2-4 and *The Dark Night*, Bk. I, ch. 9, parags. 2-8.

26. Fitzgerald in "Impasse," p. 297 writes: "The most confusing and damnable part of the dark night is the suspicion and fear that much of the darkness is of one's own making. Since dark night is a limit experience, and since it does expose human fragility, brokenness, neurotic dependence, and lack of integration, it is understandable that it undermines a person's self-esteem and activates anxious self-analysis."

27. See *The Dark Night*, Bk. I, chs. 12-13.

28. John of the Cross describes the plight of those who have "no one to understand" them in *The Dark Night*, Bk. I, ch. 10, parag. 2.

29. *The Dark Night*, Bk. I, ch. 10.

30. The writings of the Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello, such as *Sadhana: A Way to God, Christian Exercises in Eastern Form* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), have proven helpful to many.