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# Foreword to Study Guides: Religious Life in a New Millennium

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## Foreword

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Since the study guide to the trilogy *Religious Life in a New Millennium* is not composed by the author of the three volumes and the guides to the different volumes are not all composed by the same person, it seemed necessary, or at least useful, to explain the project of the study guide, its relationship to the books themselves, and how the individual guides might be most useful to those who will use them.

After the appearance of volumes 1 and 2 in 2000 and 2001, respectively, a number of people and groups composed various kinds of study tools for use by those studying the books. Some sent me copies of the guides they had developed and asked for feedback. Others asked me to supply an “official” guide. At the time, I was occupied with volume 3 and could not respond to those requests, but they did make me aware of the potential usefulness of such a tool in studying the books, especially for people and groups relatively new to Religious Life, whose first language was not English, or whose theological and biblical backgrounds were limited.

As I reflected on what might be helpful, it seemed to me that having a study guide prepared by someone other than myself would be preferable to my constructing one. The fundamental purpose of the trilogy was not to teach or convince readers of a particular interpretation of or approach to Religious Life, much less to “indoctrinate” readers with my point of view. Rather, I hoped to engage readers in reflection on their own experience of the life, placing that experience in dialogue with resources from the human and personality sciences, the social sciences, history, Scripture, theology, and spirituality, and in relation to the experience of other readers. Since I was offering my own reflections in the pages of the books, I thought it would be more conducive to serious discussion if a competent reader other

than myself identified important points, raised questions about what I had offered, supplied alternative perspectives, and so on.

It seemed to me that a more objective approach could best be accomplished by having the study guide constructed not by me but by someone who could be a participant-leader in the discussion, much like a well-qualified facilitator of a book discussion group. Such a facilitator would not have any agenda (such as the author might have, whether conscious or not) in leading the readers in any particular direction or to any preconceived conclusions. If the author were not a kind of “ghost” in the room, discussants would be freer in raising questions, disagreements, or alternatives, and even contesting or rejecting what they found problematic. So, I decided to ask an experienced Religious with advanced theological and biblical credentials and skill in facilitating discussion among Religious to prepare the study guide, originally intended to be a single guide for the three volumes.

While I was completing the third volume slated for 2002, Margaret Brennan, IHM, prepared the guides for the first two volumes. She has a doctorate in theology, a long career as a professor of theology and spirituality, and many years of experience in coordinating a renewal program for Religious. In addition, she had served as a formation director and major superior in her own order, a leading participant in the earlier phases of the conciliar renewal of Religious Life, and as president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. The guides to the first two volumes were constructed according to a single pattern well suited to the material in those volumes. My capable research assistants edited the work to assure consistency and continuity throughout the two guides.

As readers know, volume 3 did not appear as planned in 2002, but was more than a decade in the writing, which delayed the production of the third volume’s study guide. This had several unanticipated consequences for the study guide project as a whole. By the time volume 3 was nearing completion, the author of the guides to volumes 1 and 2 was not available to construct the third guide. Furthermore, volume 3 had developed in the context of a very different historical stage in the reception



of Vatican II, both in the Church at large and among Religious. As I will explain shortly, there is more than a time gap between the first two volumes and the third, and that necessitated a somewhat different approach to the third study guide. As the third volume neared completion, I asked a colleague, Barbara Green, OP, a well-published Old Testament scholar, a fine teacher and group facilitator, and a Religious with decades of experience of the life as a member and participant in formation and leadership in her congregation, the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael, to undertake preparing the study guide for the third volume. She followed the general format of the guides for volumes 1 and 2 but modified it somewhat. While retaining the structure of selectively summarizing each chapter and then proposing a variety of types of questions for discussion, she replaced the "Horizon Analysis" questions, which focused more on the internal reactions of the reader to the material, with "Practical Questions," leading more toward application of the theoretical material to the reader's own experience. It is to be hoped that those who have dealt with volumes 1 and 2 will have developed a kind of "reading habit" implicitly involving "horizon analysis," and that the experiential questions will lead to a broadening of the study approach. Once again, my research assistant helped with the final editing of the third study guide for consistency while leaving its originality intact. Readers of the third volume will be well aware of the greater complexity of its subject matter, and, thus, the need for more engagement with the theoretical nature of much of the material. The third study guide might prove more challenging than the first two, but it is our hope that it will help take readers to the depth of discussion necessary to engage the very new context of the twenty-first century, which is now in its second decade.

In addition, I wish to thank my successive wonderful research assistants who, over the years this trilogy and its respective study guides were being produced, continually kept the guides synchronized with the texts and with each other. They edited, redacted, rearranged, and helped with consistency of form and content as well as retyping the study guides over and over as the project developed. The finished product owes a great deal to

their cumulative care. Readers owe much, as do I, to the work of Ray Maria McNamara, RSM; Joann Doi, MM; Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Ford-Friend; Shari Roeseler; and Jessica Taylor. I am especially grateful to Margaret Gorman, SND, as well as her community, who donated her time even after she had finished her studies and taken up responsibilities in her congregation, for the final electronic organization and production of the manuscript in 2011, and to Amanda Kaminski, my current research assistant, who prepared the outlines of the volumes and has seen the final copy to the publisher in 2014. As with so much in the spiritual life, and especially in Religious Life, we can do so much more together than any of us can do individually.

Between the appearance of volume 2 in 2001 and that of volume 3 in 2013, many readers asked, “Why the delay?” Given a choice, I certainly would have preferred a smooth completion of the project in 2002 as originally planned. The delay was not due primarily to an over-burdened schedule, priority given to other projects, or the usual production snags in a major undertaking. It was due to the rapidly changing reality with which the third volume deals. That is why the final volume is very different from the first two (requiring a somewhat different study guide) not just in size (nearly twice the size of each of the first two) and length of production (twelve years versus one for each of the first two), but also in content, style, and relation to its subject matter. If volume 3 had appeared as scheduled in 2002, it would have been completely out of date some years ago. Thus, I am inclined to attribute the subversion of the original schedule to the Holy Spirit even though it has created some bumps in what had been laid out as a smooth road from start to finish.

Despite the difference of volume 3 from its predecessors, the basic shape of the overall project remained intact. After dealing, in volumes 1 and 2, with the interior constitution of Religious Life as a perpetual commitment in consecrated celibacy lived in community, volume 3, as originally planned, deals with the outward thrust of Religious Life in mission and ministry, and with the vows that shape that world-engagement of the life and those who live it, namely, evangelical poverty and prophetic obedience. But the very rapid developments in the Church and



the world in the first decade of the new millennium created a context that was not only very different from that in which the first two volumes were conceived and written but also that was changing so fast that almost every chapter had to be rewritten (at least once, and, in some cases, more than once) by the time the subsequent chapter was finished. The ever-increasing scope of the material that had to be engaged necessitated not only a great deal of research but also a great deal of consultation with experts in fields outside my own, especially Church historians, canon lawyers, and social scientists.

Volumes 1 and 2 primarily involved describing and analyzing the renewal that Religious, individually and corporately, had experienced in the thirty-five years since the close of the Council. These were the turbulent decades of “the changes,” and almost all of the readers of these volumes were Religious who had lived through that period. The books were concerned with the life *ad intra* in the sense that Religious were trying to resituate themselves and their life in a Church that was very different from the one they were born into and a Religious Life that was very different from the one they had entered. But the questions were ones that were, in some sense, under their control. They were raising questions from within their own experience and trying to answer them with resources from that experience and for their own future. How were they to situate themselves in postmodernity? Who were they in a Church that had reappropriated its self-understanding as a community of equal disciples rather than a hierarchical structure in which Religious were an elite caste? What did permanent commitment mean and was it still, or in a new way, or not at all, a viable project in a postmodern context? What did community mean, and how could it be lived in a new kind of society and Church? And so on.

Volume 3 deals with a very different register of questions coming not so much from within Religious Life itself, but from a massively different world from which Religious are no longer even somewhat or theoretically “separated” but in which they are deeply involved. Furthermore, the depth at which Religious had appropriated and interiorized the theology and spirituality of the Council, especially in relationship to themselves

as participants in a new culture and a Church increasingly in turmoil as interior polarization increased, had precipitated previously undreamed-of conflicts with an institutional Church now firmly in the grip of a restorationist and world-rejecting agenda (or what Pope Francis has called, more gently but not less trenchantly, “self-referentiality”). The huge gap between the reception of the Council by Religious, especially women in the first world, and the reception of the Council by the hierarchy became ever more apparent and more conflictual as the first decade of the twenty-first century unfolded and unilateral initiatives from officials in the Church made it increasingly impossible to ignore or finesse these conflicts. This had enormous implications for the ministerial self-understanding of Religious, which was developing at a speed and depth that would have made analysis and appropriation very difficult even if there had not been increasing tension between the exercise of authority in the Church and the rapid development of their understanding of obedience by Religious.

Even as this study guide finally goes to press, the emergence of Francis as Bishop of Rome is qualitatively changing the ecclesiastical landscape in ways at whose extent and depth we can only guess. Certainly, the determined ministerial world-engagement that Religious have been pursuing through a minefield of opposition is suddenly being validated by the Church’s new leadership in ways no one could have anticipated. I suspect that many things in volume 3 will be read very differently now than they could have been read even a year ago. I trust that the study guide for volume 3 will be more useful in the present context than would have been the case had it not been constructed on a somewhat different pattern than its forebears. In any case, I am sure my readers join me in deep gratitude to those who produced the study guide, which I hope will stimulate much reflection, exchange, and personal enrichment as Religious and others who are interested in our vocation and its intersection with their own make their way through *Religious Life in a New Millennium*.

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