Conclusion to Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World

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Conclusion

Transforming Renewal

I. Introduction

The end of this volume is also the end of a project which has taken almost twelve years to complete, namely, an examination, interdisciplinary analysis, and spirituality oriented theological interpretation of Catholic Religious Life as it has emerged and is continuing to develop from the renewal of Vatican II, and is now manifesting itself with ever-increasing confidence as a renewed and transformed reality in the Church. This renewing lifeform is both deeply continuous with its two-thousand-year history and startlingly different from anything anyone alive today knew as Religious Life until close to the last quarter of the twentieth century. The conciliar renewal has transformed Religious Life which is, in turn, transforming the conciliar renewal from a dream of the heart to an incarnation of hope, not only in Religious Life itself but in the Church as a whole.

When I entitled the work Religious Life in a New Millennium I had no idea it would be more than one volume in length and never suspected it would take more than the first decade of the new millennium to complete. But as this final volume goes to press I discern the breath of the Spirit of God in what has often seemed merely interminable human impediments to finishing the project. If the work had not been able (indeed forced) to take account of the developments of the last decade it would be far less adequate as a treatment of contemporary Religious Life and probably much less usable for the immediate future. The last few years in particular have seen a weaving together, partly
under adverse ecclesiastical pressure on American women Religious, but mainly through the increasingly confident appropriation by Religious of what they have been living and becoming since the Council, of many experimental strands into a strong fabric whose pattern is increasingly clear and hopeful. There is today a new sense among many Religious of identity, solidarity, and enthusiasm for the future that feels like the “end of the beginning” of renewal and the beginning of a transformed maturity in the history of this life. This writing project began at the turn of the millennium with the publication of the first volume in 2000 and it will be completed, fittingly enough, with the publication of this third volume in 2013, during the golden jubilee of the Second Vatican Council.

Within the overarching title of the trilogy, Religious Life in a New Millennium, each volume has borne a title accommodated from the little parable in Matthew 13:44: “The Reign of God [here applied to Religious Life] is like a TREASURE hidden in a field which a person found and out of joy SOLD ALL s/he had to BUY THAT FIELD.” The accommodation of the biblical text, however, is not fanciful or far-fetched. Applying the parable about the Reign of God to Religious Life is recognition that this lifeform is not something other than or separate from the Church (as might have been the image projected by the “other-worldly” preconciliar form of Religious Life), but one way of being Church that is herald, sacrament, and servant of the Reign of God. This distinctive way of being Church is complementary to, but not superior to nor normative of, other ways.

Just prior to this parable (in Matt 13:36–42), Jesus had explained to his disciples the allegory of the weeds and the wheat by saying explicitly that the field in his parables is the world; the Sower is the Son of Man; the wheat are the children of the kingdom; and the weeds the children of the Evil One. So the overall theological interpretation of Religious Life that this work is propounding is that Religious Life is, for those called to it, the treasure of a vocation to a way of life in the Church that demands and consists in the total self-gift to God in Christ for the sake of the world that God so loved.
II. The Project of Renewal: Ressourcement, Development, Aggiornamento

It has often been remarked that *Perfectae Caritatis*, the conciliar “Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life,” published just before the end of the Council in October 1965, and a mere twenty-five articles in length, contained very little that was new or particularly enlightening, galvanizing, or creative. (This perhaps explains why this rather bland product of a truly revolutionary Council is a favorite text of those, in and outside of Religious Life, who found the Council’s call to profound renewal deeply distressing.) But, as John O’Malley pointed out in his remarkable analysis of the Council, *What Happened at Vatican II*, the decree on Religious Life is the only conciliar document which explicitly mentions all three categories with which the Council wrestled throughout its history and which continue to fuel the struggles between those in the Church who embrace the Council and those who have been trying for fifty years to neutralize or even reverse it.

These three categories, whether functioning individually, in tension with each other, or in mutual interaction, were invoked repeatedly in the herculean effort that the Church-in-Council was making, after centuries of increasingly sterile immobility, to come to grips with the fact of the Church’s historicity. The transcendent mystery embodied in the Church can only be preserved, rejuvenated, and effectively communicated in the changing conditions of temporality. This transcendent mystery, God’s salvific interaction with humanity, is incarnate, historical, and therefore not only immersed in time but also conditioned by change. The three categories, unevenly grasped and appropriated by the Council Fathers, and embodied in the documents with uneven success, were first, *ressourcement* (return to the sources); second, development (real change in substantial continuity); and third, *aggiornamento* (adaptation to the changed conditions of the contemporary world).

I would suggest, for reasons I will explore in the next section, that Religious Life, especially that of women, has embraced
more integrally and creatively this three-pronged agenda than any other group or institution in the Church. This may help explain why women Religious have been, in the past half century, not only a primary source of support and courage for the renewal-minded in the Church but a lightning rod for those in the hierarchy and the laity who are committed to the restoration of the preconciliar version of Catholicism.

Attending briefly to the way in which Religious embraced these three coordinates of conciliar renewal can help us understand both the depth of the transformation of the life that has resulted and the tensions with the institutional Church that the transformation has generated. However difficult the tensions continue to be, for Religious it is the transformation that needs to be claimed, celebrated, and focused if ongoing renewal is to draw Religious Life into the future.

The return to the sources (ressourcement) to which the Council urged Religious was twofold. First, they were to return to Scripture, especially the New Testament, which Dei Verbum, the dogmatic constitution “On Divine Revelation,” called “the pure and perennial source of the spiritual life” (DV VI, 21), as the “supreme rule” of their life. Second, they were to return to the charisma and vision of their founders, which Religious interpreted expansively as embracing not only the life and writings of the founders themselves but the “deep narrative” in which that heritage has been lived out since the foundation.

Religious enthusiastically plunged into the study of Scripture discovering there a fountain of spirituality that irrigated the often-dry lands of a way of life that had become overly rule-bound and tradition-encrusted. In their encounter with the Word they found life and freedom, creativity and courage, a call to Christian maturity and responsibility for the world that God so loved as to give the only Son (see John 3:16). In the stories—often long obscured, deformed, or even deliberately suppressed—of their foundations they discovered the motivating visions, the imagination and daring, the remarkable courage and creativity of women and men who were years or even centuries ahead of their time. Far too often they (especially women) discovered as well the long process of ecclesiastical
domestication that had absorbed those exciting foundational dreams into institutional uniformity and subordination to external authorities.

Updating (aggiornamento) both preceded and followed development. What began gingerly as small “experiments” with dress, horarium, titles, or customs, experiments that the authorities assumed could be reverted to preexperiment status if they caused any upset, rapidly became major ventures in personal, community, Congregational, and societal development. Religious Congregations accelerated, expanded, and deepened the education of their members and the members broadened their interaction with the world around them including engagement in political and social concerns once completely excluded from convent life. Religious soon realized what ecclesiastical officials found hard to grasp: that human “experiments” were not controlled laboratory tests that could be reversed or abandoned if they did not “work out” as planned. Action and interaction among humans changes the people and the institutions involved and, while adjustments can be made, reversal is not possible. In many ways, what happened rapidly in the postconciliar period was a “growing up” of Religious, personally, communally, professionally, and societally. One cannot reverse the process of maturation.

Development (which interestingly never had a culturally determined synonym, like ressourcement from the French or aggiornamento from the Italian, but had to be translated anew into each language) was actually a way of talking about a global approach to human experience based on a historical rather than a classical understanding of the Church and the people who compose it. It is development, finally, whether in an individual person or an institution, which makes that reality actually different from what it had been in its own past. The mature person is still who she or he was in childhood or adolescence but is remarkably, irreversibly, and even substantially different, for example, now capable of producing and raising a family. If such change does not take place, for example, when a thirty-five-year-old still feels, behaves, and relates as a five-year-old, the situation is recognized as abnormal or even pathological.
The return to their roots of Religious and the resulting adjustment of their life to their contemporary situation changed Religious and their Congregations in all the ways we have discussed in these three volumes. Reversing this development is inconceivable, even if individuals or groups desired to do so. Attempting to resurrect the lifestyle, relational patterns, ministerial self-understanding and engagement, spirituality, or even something as external as the archaic dress of earlier times would result not in a restoration of a previous form of the life but in an artificial mimicry like that of the characters in a historical pageant. When Religious say about the renewal of their life that “there is no turning back” they mean simply that life, which is historical and therefore developmental, does not run backward but forward, whether or not one finds the later stage preferable to the former. Even when Congregations have judged that a particular adaptation or new way of being or acting is less productive than they thought or hoped it might be they realize that correcting course cannot be done by reverting to attitudes or behaviors previously abandoned but only by finding better ways to pursue the original goal.

Besides entering with total seriousness into the dynamics of the conciliar renewal Religious also entered deeply into the content of the Council’s teaching. Renewing Congregations did not restrict themselves to meditating on the rather thin theological offerings of Perfectione Caritatis. Instead, they drew more deeply on chapter VI of Lumen Gentium, “The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” which, though not especially forward-looking from our present standpoint, more adequately situated Religious Life in the context of conciliar ecclesiology. Lumen Gentium, which was hotly contested behind the scenes and on the Council floor, reflected the irresolvable tension between the biblical ecclesiology of the Church as Body of Christ and People of God (in chapter II) on the one hand and the preconciliar ecclesiology of the Church as transcendent hierarchical institution, indeed as an absolute divine right monarchy (in chapter III) on the other. Religious resonated much more with the ecclesiology of chapter II as the context for reading chapter VI devoted to Religious Life. However, this
major document, and “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” *Gaudium et Spes*, faced Religious with some of the most important and challenging issues of renewal within Religious Life itself and between this vocation and that of others in and outside the Catholic Church.

In particular, Religious had to come to grips with two features of the Council’s teaching that deeply challenged their traditional self-understanding, both within the Church and in relation to the world. First, the Council reaffirmed a long-obsured teaching that all the baptized are equally called to one and the same holiness (*LG* V), which implied that Religious Life could no longer be understood as an elite vocation to a “life of perfection” that made its members superior to other Christians. Second, *Lumen Gentium* (see chapter IV) declared that all believers, in virtue of their baptism and confirmation, are equally called to participation in the prophetic, priestly, and royal mission of Jesus. Religious could no longer claim unique access to quasi-official ministries from which the rest of the laity were excluded.

Closely related to these intra-ecclesial challenges to the long-held self-understanding of Religious were those implied in the radical reorientation of the Church as a whole to the world and its history that the Church had for centuries rejected. The “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” *Gaudium et Spes*, renounced the virulent antimodernism that had sealed the Church off from its historical context and alienated it from the great achievements and projects of the post-medieval world for almost four hundred years. For Religious, who had defined themselves in terms of rejection of and separation from the world, this turn of the Church toward the world created an enormous challenge of conversion in self-understanding. The resultant attitudes and behaviors would integrate their life into the conciliar Church’s professed project of solidarity with all humanity in its pilgrimage through history. Indeed, in some respects Religious have been more consistent and coherent in their turn to the world than has the institutional Church itself.

The Council’s resituation of the Latin Church in relation to its sister churches of the East and of the Reformation as well as
to non-Christian religions has led Religious Life not only out of the cloister but also into challenging ecumenical and inter-religious relationships that would have been unthinkable in preconciliar days. This has posed a steep learning curve that Religious have undertaken seriously, unlike some, even among the hierarchy and the clergy, who have sidestepped it. The process of integrating this much wider angle of vision into their understanding of their faith has been profoundly disorientating at times and it has positioned Religious in relation to “the others” in ways that are often not understood nor accepted by ecclesiastical officials.

Finally, and closely related to the preceding, perhaps the most revolutionary teaching of the Council, “The Declaration on Religious Liberty,” Dignitatis Humanae, opened up social and political questions that had been simply foreclosed in the preconciliar Church. The implications of this new position on freedom of conscience touched not only the personal lives of Religious, demanding a new level of moral maturity and responsibility in relation to the official Church, but also their social and political commitments and their ministries in ecclesiastical institutions.

Religious, in short, did not read their call to renewal narrowly or superficially, attending only to the rather conventional exhortations of Perfectae Caritatis explicitly addressed to Religious Life itself. They read that call integrally, mining the implications for their life of the full depth and breadth of the conciliar vision expressed in all the major documents of the Council. They committed themselves, individually and corporately, not just to cosmetic revisions, but also to profound and holistic conversion. One does not emerge from such a process the way one entered it. Indeed, the subject of real conversion does not emerge at all because ongoing conversion becomes a way of life. Furthermore, conversion is not a solitary process. As the person or the group changes, their conversion affects all those with whom they relate. So we should not be surprised that, in a way, the whole Church has been affected by the renewal, the conversion, in Religious Life. For some people the renewal of Religious Life has been a source of scandal and a cause of
opposition and even of persecution. For many more people it has been a source of challenge, encouragement, hope, and energy.

III. The Process of Renewal: Turning Toward the World

It would be naïve to think that Religious sat down in 1965, read the Council documents, and set out to systematically reform their life accordingly. Vatican II did not elaborate a new theology from scratch. The theological renewal, especially in the areas of Church history, patristics, liturgy, and Scripture (the “sources” to which the Council appealed), had been underway since the late 1930s and 1940s and was gathering momentum right up to the time of the Council, especially among French and German-speaking scholars in Europe.

The most prominent theologians, who were censured and even condemned right through the 1950s for their dangerous “originality” in relation to the Tridentine synthesis, were virtually all present as periti or scholarly advisors at the Council. And these nouvelles théologiens of primarily historical and pastoral bent were now accompanied by systematic theologians, particularly ecclesiologists, anthropologists, and missiologists. The Council articulated, not always completely coherently but sufficiently so to make its originality excitingly clear, a new theological understanding of the Church in relation to history, the world, and “the others” that had been developing for half a century even while antimodernism and world-rejection continued to exercise its dominance.

Different analysts have proposed different “central insights” as key to the meaning of the Council. The Church historian John O’Malley, for example, identified the issue of coming to grips with historicity as the major challenge faced by the Council. How could “development”—so key to the understanding of the modern world—be integrated into the life and teaching of the Church without invalidating its claim to divine foundation, protection from error, and possession of the fullness of
unchanging truth which it alone had been commissioned by God to teach and all people were bound to accept? How could an institution that had understood itself as immutable, atemporal, and transcendent in relation to history situate itself in relation to a world that had changed profoundly over the four hundred years of the Church’s antimodern self-isolation and was changing even more rapidly in the twentieth century?

I have suggested that the most significant insight and choice of the Council, at least from the standpoint of Religious Life, was turning the Church toward the world it had rejected, to a large extent, since the end of the Middle Ages. Actually, coming to grips with historicity and turning toward the world are very closely related. For the Church to affirm its temporality, its involvement in change, its historicity, the actual and necessary development in its doctrine and practice, was to immerse itself in the world, to espouse a valid and salvific “secularity” as God in Jesus did by Incarnation. At the Council, the Church as Body of Christ began to renounce a kind of ecclesial docetism and face the difficult consequences of the fact that Christ’s mystical body, like his humanity, is not a dispensable material shell housing a timeless spiritual reality, but a time-immersed, historical, developing reality that must grow in wisdom and grace as it ages through the centuries.

Religious were affected by this radical conversion of the Church to the world in a way most other elements in the Church were not, or at least not to the same degree. Religious Life was an extreme embodiment of the Church’s antimodern world-rejection. The life was virtually defined by separation from, indeed death to, the world. Consequently, the Council’s turn toward the world challenged Religious to a radical redefinition of themselves as well as their life. Religious felt the impact of the conciliar changes in every aspect and detail of their lives.

The business of Religious is precisely religion, which was not, for them, a Sunday interlude in an otherwise largely secular existence. Preconciliar Religious Life was pervasively sacralized, not only interiorly by intention but in all aspects: time, space, dwelling place, work, community life, material goods, even clothing. Religious, as seen by others, did not dress, eat,
recreate, converse, get tired, or emote like other earthlings, but lived a mysterious, quasi-angelic life immune to change, unaffected by personal or institutional development, in serene and unquestioning possession of untroubled truth, without the doubts or temptations of ordinary mortals. Indeed, even the sight of a nun sitting cross-legged, playing cards, or eating a hot dog fascinated onlookers as if they were seeing a cocker spaniel typing. A burst of anger from a nun was not just surprising; it was scandalous.

Consequently, and paradoxically, precisely because of its enclosed and hidden preconciliar character, Religious Life became a kind of fishbowl where the effects of the Council’s immersion of the Church in the historical reality of the world were more visible—even shocking—than anywhere else. For example, probably the most conspicuous change most Catholics observed in the immediate aftermath of the Council, apart from the liturgy, was Religious becoming inconspicuous by replacing their strange anachronistic habits with ordinary contemporary clothes. In the demystification of Religious Life, in the reinsertion of those who had “left the world” into the world God so loved, people could see the Church itself in a process of desacralization, of descent from its transcendent heights by engagement with the world of time and change and by increasing solidarity with the people and projects of the modern world. The timeless was becoming temporal, the anachronistic was becoming contemporary, the enclosed and exclusive was becoming open and welcoming, the exalted and unavailable was becoming ordinary and companionable. Like God becoming human in Jesus, the Church was becoming part of the world to which, as the Body of Christ, it was sent. This drawing near of the Church to the world undoubtedly helps explain why the “changes” in Religious Life met with such vehement rejection, even anger, by those elements in the Church, both lay and hierarchical, which resisted or even repudiated the spirit of the Council.

While some Religious thought the opening of their lives toward the surrounding context in the wake of the Council proceeded with glacial slowness, others thought the renewal was
occurring with reckless speed. In fact, Religious Life moved out of the total institution and into the full floodtide of renewal in less than two decades, between the end of the Council and the beginning of the 1980s. This was probably one of the most cataclysmic periods in Western history. Feminism, the Civil Rights Movement, the antiwar protests, the Cold War, the student revolts against all forms of authority, and the end of the post-World War II suburban tranquilization of American society were all under way. The space age was dawning, the antennas of the communications revolution were sprouting up like mushrooms after a storm, the younger generation was “going East” in search of enlightenment, psychology was challenging religion as the path to salvation, and the sexual revolution was placing on the silver screen and the front pages of the newspaper language (and the behavior and concepts to go with it) that had rarely if ever been heard in polite society. All of these phenomena were part of the social, economic, and political globalization that was birthing the postmodern world. This postmodern world—not the modern world that the Council thought it was engaging—was where Religious, most of whom had entered the convent in the tame and respectable first half of the twentieth century, found themselves in the aftermath of the Council.

In the wake of the Council those Religious who persevered through the great “exodus” from the convent between 1965 and 1975 were coming to realize in a profoundly new way that their life was meant to be one of free, personal, intense union with God and total self-gift in ministry to the world that God so loved. The uniformity, rigidity, routinization, and control that had marked preconciliar Religious spirituality was giving way to an emphasis on personal prayer, directed retreats, individualized spiritual direction, wide and deep spiritual reading especially of Scripture and the mystics, theological development, psychological exploration arising from personal need and interest, creative forms of community prayer and faith sharing, liturgical experimentation—in short, to a deep personalization and interiorization of the spiritual life. Contemplative prayer was no longer seen as a dangerous domain that the “ordinary” Sister should avoid lest she be drawn into something “singular” but as the cul-
tivation of the relationship with God on which her life was centered. Silence and solitude were not narcissism or flight from community but the necessary context of that relationship.

At the same time, Religious were claiming the intrinsically ministerial dimension of their lives that they had discovered in the “return to the sources” of their Congregations. Many no longer saw themselves as extensions of or adjuncts to the clergy, or as an obedient work force staffing ecclesiastical projects. They were beginning to realize that they were not “founded for” particular tasks such as staffing Catholic institutions but that they were founded to preach the Gospel to every creature, and that the “how” and “where” of that ministry was not necessarily predetermined even by what the Congregation had traditionally done. As individuals and as Congregations, they were assessing the needs of the People of God in a new, postmodern world and trying to find ways to meet those needs. Increasingly they were finding themselves in relationship, even colleagueship, with laity, with non-Catholics, and even with people and in projects that were not explicitly Christian or Church related.

The intensification of the interior life and the diversification and individualization of ministry, which was increasingly recognized as intrinsic to the life rather than an “overflow” or secondary end in relation to a primary end of personal sanctification, was taking place in the context of a reinvention of community life. Religious explicitly espoused the principles the Council had recognized as characteristic of the Church as the People of God; namely, equality, collegiality, and subsidiarity, with their consequences of mutuality and co-responsibility. Only in hindsight can we grasp how remarkable was the incorporation of these principles, in the space of a couple of decades, into a life that had been modeled, to a large extent, on the patriarchal family, the military, and divine right monarchy.

The first thirty-five years of the renewal were a profoundly turbulent time in Religious Life. Virtually every aspect of the life changed dramatically if not radically. By the turn of the century the pace and dramatic character of change was decreasing. The ecclesiastical and secular spotlight on Reli-
gious Life was less glaring. Those who had stayed through the great exodus were committed for the long haul. It was beginning to seem possible to get enough perspective to reflect, not simply on what Religious Life had once been but no longer was, but on what it was becoming. That was the context for the beginning of this project. I must confess that I had no idea, as I started, how complex that task would be.

IV. Reflecting on the Process: Discernment, Interpretation, and Articulation

A. The Project in Retrospect

Let me briefly recall the stages in the reflection that comes to a close with this volume. In volume one of the trilogy, Religious Life in a New Millennium, entitled Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context, I engaged in a “search” within our modern/postmodern context for the treasure of Religious Life. This lifeform, once so unmistakably distinctive in the Church and even in the surrounding secular context, seemed to have been “lost” to view or obscured to some extent in the conciliar reconceptualization of the Church, both internally and in its relationship to the modern world. How was this life to be recognized, identified, situated in this new context?

In volume 2, Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life, I dealt with the inner constitution of this treasure for which some people throughout Christian history have been willing to sell all they possessed, that is, to give themselves totally. This treasure of Religious Life is, in fact, constituted by the single-hearted quest for God through self-gift to Christ, to the exclusion of all other primary life commitments, which is symbolized (i.e., expressed and effected) by the lifelong commitment in consecrated celibacy lived in community.

In this third volume, Buying the Field: Evangelical Poverty, Prophetic Obedience, and Mission to the World in Catholic Religious Life, I invite readers to return to the starting point, the post-conciliar Church within and missioned to the world. The world
is now recognized not simply as modern but postmodern, no longer seen as a foreign context from which we must extract the treasure of Religious Life and then abandon in contempt or fear of contamination. The world is not simply an extrinsic context, positive or negative, of the Church or Religious Life. Rather, the world is that which God so loved as to give the only Son that those who believe in him might not perish but might have eternal life (see John 3:16). The Church’s mission is to proclaim, symbolize, and promote the Reign of God in the world and this, à fortiori, is the mission of Religious Life. Therefore, the non-enclosed and non-monastic form of Religious Life that is the subject of this trilogy is intrinsically ministerial in nature. Ministry is not an appendage to ministerial Religious Life. It is integral to its raison d’être.

The first task of this final volume, then, is to inquire into the meaning of “world.” Religious Life had been understood, for much of its history, as antithetical to the world. This negative stance toward the world reflected in a particularly intense way the extreme negativity toward everything outside the Church, which had been so characteristic of the preconciliar ecclesiastical institution. The negativity was especially virulent during the Church’s long struggle against “modernity,” which escalated from the end of the Middle Ages to its apotheosis in the ultramontane antimodernism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This volume, then, had to deal with what I have suggested may turn out to be the most profoundly transformative development of the Council, the Church’s “turn toward the world.” The three chapters of part 1 are devoted to a biblical, historical, theological, sociological, and psychological exploration of the meaning of “world,” the identity of Religious in relationship to the world, and the nature and inner dynamics of the mission of Religious to the world.

Part 2 of this volume is devoted to evangelical poverty. Of the three vows, poverty is certainly the most ambiguous because poverty is both an ideal proposed by Jesus to his followers and an evil that Christians are committed to eradicating from human experience. The primary resource for understanding this ambiguous reality is Scripture. Whatever Religious mean
by this aspect of their lives must be evangelical, that is, Gospel poverty, not human destitution on the one hand or some kind of economic strategy on the other. Against the background of this biblical material, I explore poverty as the economics of the Reign of God and try to put this theological reality into realistic relationship with the concrete facts of the present economic and financial situation in which Religious Life must function, both in terms of community and of ministry. Finally, I turn to the unitive or mystical dimension of evangelical poverty, its role in the spirituality of Religious.

Part 3 of the volume is devoted to prophetic obedience. The daunting challenge of this section was to rethink obedience against the background of the horrors committed in the name of obedience in recent history, the deep ambiguities surrounding obedience in contemporary, especially first world, culture, the highly problematic theology of obedience operative in the Church today, and the long history of inadequate modeling of obedience in Religious Life itself. Philosophy, history, sociology, psychology, and political theory were mined in search of resources for re-imagining the nature of obedience as a human phenomenon. Theology and especially Scripture, particularly the teaching and practice of Jesus against the background of Old Testament prophecy, were used to develop a new prophetic model of obedience and its practice in community and in ministry. The final two chapters are devoted to the unitive or mystical dimension of this vow, its role in the spirituality of the Religious.

Through more than a decade of research, reflection, listening to and consulting with Religious and other interested parties in both the United States and other parts of the world, lecturing and teaching and writing on the subject of Religious Life, I have been struggling to discern and articulate a coherent interpretation of this life in and for a new millennium. In the process, I have come to some convictions about its nature, meaning, purpose, and direction which seem to me to be deeply consonant with its long history but which are also very different from the understandings that had petrified into a kind of Procrustean bed in the two centuries prior to Vatican II.

This preconciliar hardening into a uniformity that was
increasingly airless and narrow was the reflection in Religious Life of the sclerosis in the Church as a whole that the ant-modernist period, especially between Vatican I and Vatican II, had generated. It was this great Roman-centered institutional monolith that had in some ways virtually entombed the People of God that John XXIII wanted to open up to the rushing wind of the Spirit. Through the Council, this Spirit of newness released into the postmodern world the energy of a renewed Church. This conciliar Church no longer understood itself primarily as an essentially hierarchical institution, perfect, finished, and unchanging, but as People of God on its pilgrim way to the fullness of life that Jesus came to bring. Religious, especially women, were eagerly poised to respond.

But no one could have predicted how the Council’s call to renewal—not just to a superficial “updating” of externals but to profound interior conversion—would challenge Religious Life itself and its members. Huge numbers of Sisters, for various reasons related partly to what was happening in the Church but also to what was happening in the world, left Religious Life in the decade immediately following the close of the Council. Those who stayed struggled with the wrenching emotional losses of cherished companions and institutions, drastically reduced personnel and financial resources, confidence-destroying ecclesiastical persecution by an increasingly right-wing hierarchy, deep spiritual darkness precipitated by theological upheavals that undermined the massive unquestioned synthesis upon which their life had been built, while the long-overdue shift of ecclesiastical attention to the laity and their parochial context left Religious increasingly invisible and often “placeless” in the Church. The necessarily piecemeal and unevenly paced experimentation with renewal subverted the reassuring sense of total coherence that had characterized preconciliar Religious Life itself creating a pervasive sense of continual disorientation and even, at times, a seeming loss of meaning.

It is now fifty years since the Council opened. At least two generations of younger people were born after the greatest event in modern Church history closed and cannot really grasp what “all the fuss was/is about.” A vigorous and disheartening
restorationist program, promoted by John Paul II (and now kept in motion by his successor) and bolstered by a well-financed and ideologically unified contingent of Tridentine laity, was underway within two decades of the end of the Council and its energy is far from spent. In this half-century Religious Life, especially that of women, has undergone a sea change unparalleled by anything in its history. And most of the people in Religious Life today have lived through this entire development, well able to remember the preconciliar life that has changed so radically.

Now what, if anything, can we say with clarity and confidence about ministerial (i.e., non-monastic) Religious Life? Attempting to answer that question has been the burden of this three-volume work, which obviously cannot be summarized in a few pages. However, I want to articulate, as succinctly and clearly as I can, what seems to me to be a valid, and I hope life-giving, interpretation of Religious Life at this point in what, surely, will be an ongoing process of renewal. I want to examine not only clear gains but also ongoing problems, not only answers but also unanswered questions. I will speak at times in the first person by way of taking responsibility for my own articulation even though nothing I am suggesting is “mine” in any exclusive sense. But I want to recognize that there is wide pluralism among Religious in regard at least to emphases and often enough with regard to substance, and my interpretation has no claim to exclusivity or superiority. In the midst of a lively and ongoing conversation about this life, a conversation that must and will continue probably long after this work is out of print, I offer these conclusions, confidently but also tentatively, as one way of understanding what Religious Life has become.

I am confident, even though these conclusions constitute a “still take” on a moving reality, because virtually everything that has finally come to expression in this work has been tested against the experience of the people who are currently living this life. In many ways I feel more like a “scribe” of our collective experience than an individual theorist working in the abstract. As long as readers realize that what is here proposed is an existential picture of an evolving lifeform and not an essen-
tialist definition or prescriptive formulation meant to arrest further development, this relatively coherent picture based on theological reflection on shared experience can perhaps provide a standpoint for ongoing progress. But I offer these conclusions tentatively precisely because they are necessarily provisional conclusions about a living reality whose continuing development no one can predict. In other words, I hope that articulating what seems relatively clear, at least to me, at this point can be a basis for continuing the process of interpretation that must go on as long as the life is a life and not just a fossil in a museum.

B. Articulating a Synthesis

The conviction underlying this entire trilogy is that, in its deepest reality, ministerial Religious Life is a Christian mystical-prophetic lifeform, given to the Church by the Holy Spirit for the sake of the world, and constituted by perpetual Profession of consecrated celibacy, evangelical poverty, and prophetic obedience lived in transcendent community and ministry. Without trying to summarize or even recall the salient points of three volumes of reflection I will try to indicate the crucial issues to which each element of this global description points. In some cases, for example, the vows, very little remains to be said since whole chapters have been devoted to the topic. But in other cases, such as the Christian and ecclesial character of the life, I have taken this feature for granted but not engaged the contemporary problems and controversies surrounding it. In regard to the first category, I invite the reader to return as desired to the much lengthier developments that have led to this point and pursue the discussion, perhaps with the aid of the Study Guide, with others involved with the topic. In regard to the second category I will give the topics careful attention here in order to complete and conclude the global presentation of a theology of Religious Life which is the purpose of this trilogy. My objective in this concluding chapter is to articulate positively what is distinctive about ministerial Religious Life in order to affirm the life and to support the hope of those who live it and those who look to Religious for companionship on the journey. At the same time,
and actually for the same purpose, I will also acknowledge honestly the painful, at times agonizing, tension between Religious Life as a charismatic lifeform in the Church and the Church as ecclesiastical institution, with confidence that there is power in truth for progress toward reconciliation and resolution.

1. Religious Life is a lifeform

In earlier times Religious Life was called a “state of life.” This term, which is still useful in some contexts, can risk suggesting that the life is static and its constituent features fixed and unchanging. In choosing “lifeform” I have tried to suggest that the life is organic; not an extrinsic combination of essential elements but a living entity whose unity is achieved and maintained by the complex, ever-changing interaction of related and ordered features, coordinates, dynamics, experiences, processes, and so on. My imaginative model has been a living being, whose identity is internally structured and dynamic, that is in creative interchange with its ever-changing environment, rather than an immutable and lifeless construction fixed in a setting to whose vicissitudes it is basically immune.

Religious Life as a lifeform is not, in the first place, an organization. It is not a club, a business, a political party or civic project, an institution or benevolent association, a task force, a committee, a tribe or an army. It is not a family, either primary or secondary. Nor is it simply a loose network whose members interact for mutual benefit or in common projects on an “as needed” basis. Perhaps the closest analog is marriage; a shared life in which the partners, through their loving, egalitarian, faithful, and permanent union gradually become who they are together and out of that identity-in-union give life in unique ways. But while this analogy captures many features of Religious Life there are obvious important differences, so it cannot be used as an adequate, much less an exclusive, model. The important point, however, is that Religious Life is a life, not a thing. And it is a particular kind of life. Its identity is not artificial; its unity is not external or mechanical; its motivation is not instrumental. “A Religious” is something one is, not something
one does. And “Religious Life” is the organic shared lifeform of such persons.

Among the important implications of the fact that Religious Life is a lifeform in the Church is that it is recognizable and therefore public. However, its public character does not arise from any ecclesiastical office, assigned role, or official function in the Church. Religious as public persons in the Church are not clerics, quasi-clerics, or substitute clerics, much less part of the hierarchy. They are not agents of the Church as institution.

Furthermore, within their freely chosen lifeform, which no one in the Church is obliged to undertake, and which has no official role or function in the hierarchical structure of the Church, they have the right to self-definition in regard to their life (within the framework of the Gospel and Church law) and to legitimate autonomy in the internal life and governance of their communities.

The lifelong commitment they make by Religious Profession is not a regulation or requirement set up by law. It is intrinsic to the character of Religious Life as a lifeform rather than some kind of organization or association which one joins and leaves at will. This dimension of Religious Profession was treated in detail in volume 2, part 1.

2. Religious Life is a Christian lifeform

Describing Religious Life as Christian is not a mere formality. Its Christian and Catholic character has been assumed throughout this work. However, it may be the most problematic term in this description and this is the place to acknowledge the problems, describe and analyze them, and attempt to justify “Christian” and “Catholic” as defining characteristics of the life. Describing the lifeform as Christian grounds several important distinctions as well as establishing certain connections. It implies specific features and commitments and qualifies certain assumptions that have been taken for granted by Religious and Church authorities for centuries. It also raises some extremely important theological issues that are problematic for communities as well as for individual Religious today in a way that would have been unimaginable even fifty years ago.
As has been said before, most literate religions throughout history have given rise to some form of contemplative or ascetic virtuosity lived in eremitical or cenobitical monastic life. Ministerial Religious Life, however, is a Christian *novum* precisely because of its intrinsically ministerial character, which implies that it is non-monastic.

It is also important to realize that Christian Religious Life is not unique to Catholicism. The life arose in Eastern Christianity where it exists to this day both in rites united with Rome (Eastern Catholics) and others not in union with Rome. Religious Life, in various forms, is also important in the Orthodox tradition, which definitively distinguished itself from the Latin or Roman Church in the eleventh century. It has been reborn in a number of churches of the Reformation despite Luther’s strong polemic against it and it was never fully extinguished in Anglicanism where it remains important today. So the ministerial Religious Life treated in this trilogy is neither synonymous with “monasticism” nor strictly identical with Christian Religious Life. Calling it a Christian lifeform recognizes its connection with all other forms of Christian Religious Life while distinguishing it from non-Christian monasticism.

More important, perhaps, “Christian” correctly puts the emphasis on what is most foundational to the faith commitment of the lifeform we are discussing. Its Catholic character is, of course, important, but Catholicism is a particular way of being Christian, not vice versa. When the Council declared that “the final norm of the religious life is the following of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel” and therefore that the Gospel (not the pope, the hierarchy, Canon Law, the Constitutions or traditions, or the opinion or regulations of the clergy or local bishop) “must be taken by all institutes as the supreme rule” (*P.C. 2*) of their life, it was making precisely this point. Religious are not super-Catholics, nor a special kind of Catholic, nor bound to be Catholic in a way different from that of other members of the People of God. They share with other Catholics their Christian identity that Catholics in general share with other Christians.

In preconciliar times Religious Life had become so idiosyn-
cratic and even esoteric in its lifestyle that it sometimes seemed more like a “sect” (or even a cult) than a form of Christian life. Religious practiced a spirituality beyond and often different from that of the ordinary baptized. They even celebrated the sacraments in the privacy of their cloistered dwellings rather than with communities of “secular” Catholics, and their attitudes toward “seculars,” even members of their own families, suggested that their non-Religious fellow believers were a danger to their vocation if not to their faith. Such practices as daily Mass, weekly confession, and a vast array of devotional observances were regarded as just as obligatory (and sometimes in practice more obligatory) than fundamental Christian virtues. Perhaps most serious was the virtual suspension of personal conscience in deference to ecclesiastical authority, to which Religious considered themselves bound in a special, even absolute, way. This expanded authority was often inserted into the internal life of communities in highly questionable ways.

Postconciliar Religious, like other well-educated Catholics, have learned to make appropriate distinctions between faith and human traditions, divine and ecclesiastical authority, God’s law and ecclesiastical law or regulations, Church office itself and fallible officeholders, genuine teaching of faith and morals and arrogant or ignorant abuse of power, and so on. Religious have also learned that there is a hierarchy of religious truths, some of which belong to the very core of Christian faith expressed in the Creed while others range from solidly probable theological and moral positions to the idiosyncratic interpretations of ecclesiastical extremists, some of whom, unfortunately, are highly placed in the Church’s official structure. In other words, not everything associated with Catholicism, even when propounded by Church officials, is necessarily Christian or obligatory, and Religious, like other Catholics, have a right to make such distinctions and act accordingly.

However, the other side of this coin is that explicit Christian faith is the nonnegotiable foundation of Catholic Religious Life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is its supreme rule. A Catholic Religious cannot be, authentically, “spiritual but not religious” and the religious commitment in question is Christianity, not a
vague personal religiosity or a self-constructed synthesis of beliefs, practices, texts, and teachings from a variety of traditions. In terms of the faith which grounds their life-commitment, Catholic Religious cannot be simply feminists, ecologists, undeclared spiritual “seekers,” peace and justice activists, poets, artists, nature mystics, or agnostics. This is not because there is some law against these options but because a non-Christian Catholic Religious is as much an existential contradiction as a sacramentally married polygamist or a monotheistic atheist. And Christian faith is not a vague, general, or nondescript commitment to positive values that is basically interchangeable with any and all constructive life stances. Christianity is a specific and particular religious commitment. It is a scriptural, sacramental, doctrinal, communitarian, morally committed faith that one either freely accepts and practices or does not.

If this work had been written fifty years ago the Catholic Christian character of the life would have been so self-evident to its members as well as its observers that talking about it at all would have been equivalent to discussing the wetness of water. The basically cloistered and ghettoized preconciliar form of Religious Life and its sociological character as a total institution kept the Life and its members sufficiently out of contact with the surrounding culture, either religious or secular, so that no real challenge to the monolithically Catholic character of the life could have been imagined. In the theologically anti-modernist, ecclesiologically ultramontane, and socioculturally self-enclosed context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Catholicism, Religious were virtually hermetically sealed off from anything that would or could have challenged the doctrinal and practical uniformity of their life and faith.

This situation changed radically as the modern age began to give way to the postmodern sometime in the mid-twentieth century. Theologically, the lead-up to Vatican II, and scientifically, the opening of the “Space Age” and the explosion of the natural sciences that began symbolically with the launching of the Russian spacecraft Sputnik in 1957, marked the beginning of the end of the Church’s four centuries of isolation
from “the world” which we discussed at length in chapter 1 of this volume.

Two major pressures—no doubt not the only ones—resulting from the conciliar reengagement of the Church, and therefore Religious Life, with the world have created significant challenges for many contemporary Religious concerning their Catholic identity. The first was the emergence of a new cosmic context for human existence, sometimes called “the universe story,” with its scientific, ecological, theological, and spiritual implications. The second was the originally ecumenical but increasingly interreligious contacts between Catholics and the people and beliefs of other religious traditions.

Although these issues have not surfaced on the formal agendas of most Congregations, these two radical expansions of the traditional Catholic Christian theological framework of Religious Life are having major and often highly disruptive influence in communities. My purpose here is to raise this issue to the surface in hopes of stimulating open discussion. Religious Life cannot survive a basic subversion of common faith, whether it is subverted by silence or by open disagreement. Discussion of these issues and the development of a way of dealing with them is crucial.

All religion—whether the nature religions of primal peoples, the mystical religions of the East, or the historical religions of the West—is cosmically situated. Underlying and structuring belief in transcendence or the Transcendent, whether personal or otherwise, is a fundamental understanding of the world in which the believer or practitioner lives. Whether this world is believed to be pervasively inhabited and controlled by spirits or powers that transcend the human, to be an illusory and opaque veil between the individual human and true reality, or to be the creature of a benevolent creator who is manifested historically, symbolically, or otherwise in and through the world itself, the imaginative world-construction underlies and structures the human relation to ultimate reality. Consequently, when the operative world-construction is seriously impacted, for example, by natural catastrophe, encounter with ideas or practices which call the validity of the tradition into
question, or scientific or philosophical discoveries that seem incompatible with what has heretofore been “known,” religious belief is affected. Sometimes the effect is such that it destroys the religious tradition, as seems to have been the case of the major pagan religions in the Greco-Roman world under the impact of Christianity and rational philosophy. But this is not the only possible result.

Christianity, even in its modern period, has undergone, and so far survived, several major changes in “worldview” that the Church strenuously resisted at the time precisely because of the massive implications for faith of the new understanding of reality. The Galileo saga is one of the most illustrative because Galileo’s theories were suspect precisely because of what they implied regarding the “world.” Following Copernicus (1473–1543), Galileo (1564–1642) defended the thesis that planet Earth was not the stable center of the universe but that the sun was the center and Earth (as well as other planets) moved in orbit around it. Significantly, the written formulation of this theory for which Galileo was brought before the Inquisition in 1632 was *Dialogs on the Two Chief World Systems* (emphasis added). In other words, Galileo realized that he was challenging the reigning worldview. Although Galileo was forced to recant his theory it has, of course, proven true and Galileo is recognized as a, if not the, central figure of the Scientific Revolution. Whatever was involved scientifically in Galileo’s theory, the Church’s objection to it was not fundamentally a concern about its science but about the implications of the theory for the truth of the Bible and what was believed to be biblical revelation about the world. In other words, Galileo’s theory seemed to undermine the world-construction in which the Christian religion operated and on which, according to its leaders, that religion therefore depended.

The struggle of the Christian churches with the naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882), who formulated, published, and defended the theory of the origin of species by natural selection (evolution), is structurally similar. Darwin’s thesis appeared to imply that human beings were perhaps not specially created by God as Genesis seems to say they were, and
that humans may not all be descended from one original pair, Adam and Eve. The struggle over Darwin’s theory continues to play itself out in contemporary classrooms, churches, and courtrooms. Even though the Index of Forbidden Books (to which Darwin’s writings were consigned by the Catholic Church) no longer exists, the battle between “evolutionists” and “creationists” and between the hypotheses of “evolution” and “intelligent design” continues to pit believers against each other, depending on whether they think the implications of this scientific theory are compatible or not with the world-construction within which their faith can make sense.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), a Jesuit scientist whose major life work as a paleontologist consisted in his effort to integrate natural science, specifically evolutionary biology, with Christian theology, launched a movement that has been swelling ever since and is perhaps cresting in our time. Chardin, who finally had a significant influence on the thinking of the Fathers of Vatican II, proposed a cosmic theory according to which evolution, including that of humans, was directed toward the earth’s culmination as the fullness of Creation achieved in love, which is ultimately the love of Christ. Somewhat younger than Chardin, Thomas Berry (1914–2009), a Catholic priest who called himself a “geologian” (rather than theologian), developed his theory of the “Universe Story” which, with the help of Brian Swimme, a mathematical cosmologist, has achieved a powerful grip on the religious imagination of our time. They have persuasively presented the challenge of contemporary humanity, “the Great Work” as they call it, as the human service of the earth in the context of the expanding universe. In the same line James Lovelock (1919–), a renowned life sciences and geophysicist, elaborated his “Gaia hypothesis” which proposes that the earth is a living system made up of smaller systems which “she” integrates into herself for her own well-being. Humanity is one of these systems, an extremely powerful one, with the capacity to foster or undermine, perhaps even destroy, Gaia’s ultimate project.

These theologians and scientists are at the theoretical cutting edge of a developing worldwide revolution of conscious-
ness. The reality-threatening anthropocentrism that has run amok in the aftermath of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment must be reversed before the destructive trajectory humans have launched destroys the earth or makes it uninhabitable for future human beings and other creatures. These scientists are in league with public intellectuals, ecologists, writers and artists, theologians and philosophers, scientists, politicians and activists—some of whom are Christian but many of whom are not and many of whom lay primary blame for the fragile state of the cosmos on biblical religion—who are urgently pressuring humanity to see the earth (the cosmos) in the context of the story of the universe within which humanity is a fleeting moment in a history that is billions of years old. This "new science" is a quantum leap beyond the incremental progress of one scientific theory building on another that characterized the so-called Scientific Revolution. The new science is challenging the entire human race to reverse our perspective, to see ourselves as dependent upon and responsible for our world rather than as god-like masters enthroned at the pinnacle of reality, for whom nonhuman creation exists, and which we have the right to subordinate, use, abuse, and dispose of solely in terms of its utility for us.

People who recognize the truth in this new perspective on reality, and among whom women Religious are prominent, often have a difficult time integrating this new universe consciousness with Christian faith and theology which centers God's creative plan for the world (if not the whole universe) on the salvation of humanity through the Incarnation of God in a first-century Jewish human being, Jesus of Nazareth. Some are convinced that just as humanity must cede its place at the center of reality, so must Christianity, including Jesus, Scripture, Church, sacraments and even God be "retired" in favor of a new cosmic commitment to Gaia as the ultimate principle of being and understanding. The whole Christian "thing" can suddenly seem too small, too provincial, too historically young and institutionally old, too self-centered and self-serving to be worth bothering about as they turn their attention to the preservation of the natural universe and the fostering of right
relationships among all species, among which there is nothing special about humans except that we are more destructive than any other species. For some people there is no choice but to replace "Gloria in excelsis Deo" with the song of the universe, "Everything is connected."

In short, we are in the midst of a major change in worldview as reality construction. Just as the contemporaries of Galileo and Darwin were being challenged to integrate into their Christian worldview new theories which relativized the notion of planet Earth as the center of the universe and humanity as the unique species qualitatively separate in origin and nature from all the rest of the biological world, so we are being challenged to reconceive our place in Creation and cosmos.

Some people now, like the guardians of the faith in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, are digging in against the new science, denying its truth and its consequences, convinced that if they refuse to believe in something it will disappear. They refuse to accept that they are responsible for the earth rather than nature existing to fulfill their every desire; that they are actually involved in deciding what will be available, if anything, for future generations; that the cosmos itself depends on their restraint and active care. They simply deny the fact of global warming, its already deleterious effects and its disastrous potential; they consider reducing waste and recycling as optional "fads" for which they have no time and certainly no obligations. Urban farmers are, in their opinion, romantics with too much time on their hands. And it is certainly counterproductive in their minds to regulate production or consumption today in view of some mythological future threat.

Other people, however, have been so fascinated with what seems like a "fresh start" in relation to a Church grown old in corruption, grizzled with patriarchy, and paralyzed by lack of imagination, that they are more than willing to turn in their baptismal certificates as children of God in exchange for citizenship papers in the earth community. There is among these enthusiasts much back-to-nature romanticism, irresponsible and even disrespectful religious eclecticism, and glib theory-spinning that is scientifically and theologically fuzzy at best and
incoherent at worst. Ecstatic primitivism often stands in for liturgy while the martial arts become sacraments. Any elevating text can function as Scripture and deities of nature religions or heroes of political movements can stand in for the living God, Jesus, and the saints of Christian tradition. The Holy Spirit is simply the life force of plants and animals. Any invocation of the Trinity as divine or Jesus as God made human is embarrassingly old-fashioned, exclusivist, or provincial and easily replaced by worship of the four directions and invocation of the spirits of animals and ancestors.

Although I know of no surveys or studies of Religious on this subject, my fairly wide contacts suggest to me that there are relatively few Religious at the far end of the resistance scale. In fact, some publications have opined, on the basis of considerable evidence, that Religious, especially women, are in the vanguard of propagation of the universe story, serious study of the new cosmology, ecological and environmental activism, and the attempt to promote a sense of interconnectedness and responsibility for the earth and all creatures among those to whom they minister.

I also strongly suspect that the number of those at the other extreme—those who have rejected revealed religion in general and Catholic Christianity in particular in favor of some form of nature worship, agnosticism, or unbelief—is quite small. However, these enthusiasts have influence out of proportion to their numbers, at least in the public forum, because they present themselves as the visionaries of the future, the champions of change, development, and new thinking. Few of their fellow Religious, no matter how deeply Christian, want to even appear to contest such “progressive thinking” lest they be assimilated to the restorationist guardians of orthodoxy whose fossilized version of “Catholic truth” is so problematic, especially for women Religious.

Attention to earlier crises in Christianity, like those associated with Galileo, Darwin, and de Chardin when a shift in imaginative world-constructions has seemed to subvert the very foundations of faith can perhaps be instructive for our present situation. Let me suggest a few points for reflection and discussion.
First, any attempt to forbid the study of new ideas, to simply deny what the physical or human sciences are discovering, or to establish human knowledge by fiat is worse than pointless. Silencing Galileo did not make the earth stand still and condemning Darwin did not establish that a single couple was the ultimate parent of all humans. The only way to deal with new theories is to engage them, which begins by trying to understand them. And if the matter is really important and transformative it will not be able to be understood by the reading of a couple popular articles or watching an uplifting video. Study, discussion, and time will be required before one is in a position to make serious decisions about the implications of new knowledge for major intellectual and religious convictions. Herd-mentality enthusiasm is hardly a valid or rational position. And while one studies and explores, one can accept many implications of a new scientific position such as the importance of ecological responsibility, even before being in a position to make decisions about its implications for the nature of God, the divinity of Christ, or the reality of salvation.

Second, there seems to be a direct relation between intellectual rigidity and literalism (even fundamentalism) on the one hand and the tendency to “replace” traditions as a whole, especially ancient religious ones, with “new” orthodoxies, simplistically swallowed whole. More subtle minds whose Christian theology is deep, nuanced, and complex will approach new knowledge, whether scientific or religious, with the same subtlety and nuance. The fact that the compatibility of a new idea or theory with what is already known is not immediately obvious does not require a black or white decision that for the new to be true the known must be false. Unlike paradigm shifts in the physical sciences in which a new theory, if true, simply replaces its predecessor, developments in the humanities are more dialectical. New knowledge modifies previous knowledge which in turn has implications for the new knowledge until a synthesis emerges which seems to take better account of experience and data. And no theory is final in the sense that further new data cannot modify it.

Careful reflection should make it clear that what we know by revelation cannot, in the nature of the case, be proved or falsi-
fied by what can be known scientifically. Science modifies our limited frames of reference, our categories for understanding revelation, not the revelation itself or that which is revealed, such as the nature of God, the inspiration of Scripture, or the efficacy of the sacraments. It is not always immediately clear how to integrate new data into a previous synthesis, and it certainly does not take place by hearing a lecture or seeing a film. People who are, whether they know it or not, literalists (or fundamentalists) about their Christian faith can only replace it with something new which seems incompatible or reject the new in stubborn protection of frameworks they need to feel safe. Theologically sophisticated believers can see other ways to deal with new data, well aware that such engagement will not be swift or total or self-evidently and unarguably “true.”

Third, Christian faith, while it always operates within some worldview and is therefore affected by changes in worldviews, is not a theory about God, the world, or humanity. It is a relational universe in which the believer actually experiences God, Jesus, community, revelation, personal spiritual development through prayer, sacramental participation, aesthetic-spiritual engagement with Christian Scripture as a revelatory text, and ongoing conversion. An experienced Christian believer already lives in a sacramental universe and even if that universe expands dramatically it does not necessarily cease to exist or cease to mediate the One it has made present in previous experience. Such a person may not see immediately how certain new data about the evolving universe can be integrated with the relationships that constitute her Christian faith universe but she or he has at least as much reason to maintain those relationships as to openly engage new data that requires integration.

The second pressure on the Christian faith of Religious (as well as other Catholics) arises from the openness to “the other” that the Council legitimated and encouraged. Part of the turn toward the previously rejected world outside the institutional Church was a tentative but sincere outreach not only to Protestant “sister churches” from whom the Catholic Church had become alienated in the aftermath of the Reformation, but also to Orthodox, to Jews and Muslims, to religions outside the
monotheistic "family," and even to "nonbelievers." In other words, the embrace of the other was not simply ecumenical (already a huge step beyond the absolute rejection of preconciliar times) but interreligious and even extra-religious.

Catholics had very little preparation for relating to people they had grown up regarding as heretics, schismatics, and even reprobates whose salvation depended on conversion to or reunion with Catholicism, to say nothing of "perfidious" Jews, Muslim "barbarians," Hindu and Buddhist "pagans," agnostics and atheists. Once they began to mingle with these previously "off-limits" people, especially since many Catholics already had considerable experience of such non-Catholics through mixed marriages in their families, their children’s friends in public schools, and so on, Catholics came to respect and even admire the human and religious quality of these new conversation partners. Some people who had been regarded as reprobate and even virtually demonized were clearly people of sterling integrity, sometimes-heroic goodness, fidelity, generosity, and kindness. How was it possible to continue to hold that Christianity was the only true religion and Catholicism the only true Church when whatever religion was supposed to profess clearly existed in those who were neither Christian nor Catholic?

As Religious interacted in greater depth with these "outsiders" they could not avoid the conclusion that these people were not good in spite of their "false religions" but precisely because of what they believed and practiced. The incompatibility of this obvious truth with what Catholics had been taught and what, in occasional postconciliar documents like "Dominus Jesus" was— with some softening but not real change—reiterated, led to a sense among some Catholics that "all religions are essentially the same" and none, including one’s own, is necessarily superior. For those (among whom most Religious would probably be numbered) sufficiently sophisticated to realize that there is more to religion than personal morality, that all religions are certainly not the same or interchangeable, and that the category of "superiority" is more problematic than illuminating, it nevertheless could seem to be the case that any religion (or
even no religion) could be salvific for a sincere believer or practitioner.

Once again, Religious who had spent decades in the hermetically sealed total institution of preconciliar convent life were ill prepared to handle the suddenly expanded pluralistic religious world in which they found themselves. Again, the dualism characteristic of Western rationality has not served them well. If what Buddhists, Unitarians, Muslims, Quakers, or Jews believed was true (and it must be if it made people in those faiths good), then what Catholics believed that was different must be false. Or perhaps none of these faiths, including Christianity, were actually true but simply a variety of ways of thinking about ultimate reality and there was no reason except tradition or habit to prefer one’s own. A richer experience could be had by experiencing a variety of practices and entertaining a variety of faith positions, or none. How could one continue to believe that one’s faith had real content, was true in some ultimate sense, when obviously a huge proportion of the human race was getting along quite well without it?

Let me, once again, make some suggestions that might stimulate fruitful discussion. First, faith is not like political party allegiance, something one holds as long as it works but can abandon if something more cogent or effective comes along. Faith is more like friendship, or love. One does not trade one’s friends in for “better” options. Furthermore, comparing relationships makes little sense. They are not based on a comparative evaluation of pluses and minuses. Love is a response of the whole self to the whole of the other. No comparisons among relationships are really possible or desirable.

Second, religious faiths are “wholes,” experiential universes, not collections of separable elements. Only someone who believes in the triune God, for example, can make believing sense of the Incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus, and only on the basis of a christologically based faith does the Church as Body of Christ make sense. The sacraments are not “rituals” which can be interchanged with rituals of other religions but encounters with Christ in his paschal mystery, which itself is meaningless unless Jesus is who Christians believe him to be.
What is true for Christianity is true for other religions. The fact that there are analogous contacts between religions (e.g., that most religions revere certain texts as sacred) does not make those aspects of each religion “detachable” from their faith matrix and interchangeable. The Christian Bible and the Muslim Koran are analogous in that both are sacred texts, but in fact the Koran is for Islam what Jesus (not the Bible) is for Christians.

In short, there are profound questions raised by the pluralism of religions. The theology of religions is a specialization that is immensely complex and subtle. The preconciliar approach that simply declared the Catholic faith true and all others false is simplistic in the extreme, and in any case, not even possible for people who have actually experienced the beauty and truth in traditions other than their own. Once the child ventures beyond his or her own backyard, there is no way to pretend that all people are the same color, speak the same language, accept the same customs and so on. Catholics, including Religious, left the ghetto half a century ago and religious pluralism is irrevocably part of their consciousness.

Both the encounter with the “universe story” and the encounter with other religions are part of a process that cannot be reversed; namely, a widening and diversification of the frame of reference within which we know and deal with ultimate reality. When the frame of reference within which we deal with any reality changes we are challenged to re-see, to see differently, to reevaluate and appropriate anew, everything within that frame of reference. When a family that was previously only the couple has a child everything changes; it is not just a matter of adding furniture or rearranging the schedule. Values, preferences, behaviors, ways of handling money or time or energy, social life, priorities, especially relationships, including that of the parents to each other, change and all the changes are themselves interrelated.

Catholics, including Religious, live in a different faith world than they did in the 1950s, and it is not at all clear exactly how everything that is part of that new world is related to everything else. It is not even clear what some things, new and old, mean.
Simply jettisoning the faith synthesis that has shaped and resourced one’s relationship with God, with self, with fellow-Christians, with the world over a lifetime because new thinking, resynthesizing, reexamination of even fundamental concepts and constructs, reevaluations of commitments and relationships and much more have become necessary in light of the changed frame of reference, makes as much sense as getting a divorce and putting the new baby up for adoption when one realizes things are not and can never be the same as they were before the child was born. This realization does not invalidate the experience of the relationship before the new arrival. But it might well change one’s evaluation or understanding of some of that previous experience.

Somehow, it seems to me, Religious need to find a way to discuss, at deep levels of trust and sharing, how their faith life has changed over the past several decades. Who is God for each of us? Who is Jesus? What is Church? What type of prayer is most meaningful? Where, when, and how do we experience the Spirit in ourselves, our Church, our world? What is most distressing for us? What kind of liturgy is meaningful? What is the relationship between personal faith and ministry? What spiritual disciplines help us stay on course? Conversation at such depth can only happen if there is a serious mutual commitment to listen to each other, to genuinely entertain the possibility of what the other is saying without attempting to “correct” or “convert” and without feeling oneself judged by what the other is saying. If we need to defend our own current position or prove the position of the other deficient, even if we do not express this, the conversations will become stalemates. People develop at different rates. Different aspects of faith are centrally important to different people. We did not have to contend with this kind of diversity in the past; it may well have existed but it was submerged in a uniform practice and language so we did not know and did not need to know what others thought. Now we do.

At risk of serious objection, I would suggest that there is a real need at this stage in the development of ministerial Religious Life to fearlessly and confidently affirm our Christian,
even Catholic, faith in language, ritual, iconography, and practice. Unless we start from who we are and where we have been together it is hard to see how we can move to new places we can really share. Even when we pray together “through Christ our Lord” there will be diversity in what that means to different people. But there will also be something in common on the basis of which we can talk about the differences.

Within this shared context of genuinely Christian faith many commitments that are not specifically Christian or religious, such as that to feminism, ecological sustainability, peace and justice, and human development, are not only compatible with Christian faith and practice but can be powerfully motivated and sustained by it. And reciprocally, Christian faith can be enriched and deepened by such commitments and by dialogical engagement with and even influence by other faith traditions. Contemporary science and philosophy raise challenging questions for traditional Christian images of God and can nuance, expand, and deepen understandings of various aspects of Christian faith. There are many inspiring sacred texts deriving from non-Christian traditions that can offer spiritual nourishment also to Christians, including Religious. But Catholic Religious Life is not a benevolent association of people practicing a variety of private religions (or none) who simply agree not to tread on each other’s beliefs while working together for a better world.

On the contrary, Christian Religious Life is a vibrant, integrated, coherent religious and spiritual lifeform in which the members draw personal sustenance and strength for ministry from shared faith in the triune creator God revealed in Jesus Christ and poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. They celebrate and nourish this common life in the Spirit in many ways, but most importantly through Eucharistic celebration illuminated by the only text Christians hold as canonical, that is, not only as true (which many other texts are) but also as ultimately normative of their faith: the Christian Scriptures. The morality to which they hold themselves and one another accountable is not a vague inoffensiveness, a private code of conduct, or even a robust commitment to virtue, but the imita-
tion and following of Jesus Christ. Christians believe that when Jesus told his followers to “do this [i.e., Eucharist] in memory of me” and to “love another as I have loved you” (i.e., unto the laying down of one’s life), he was not exhorting them to generic virtue in the religion of their choice but to a specific commitment centered on his Person and participating in his salvific work through sharing in his paschal mystery.

Finally, we have to recognize the serious problem raised for Religious by the contemporary ecclesiastical situation that makes sacramental practice for women in general and women Religious in particular often unavailable, and when available, alienating and oppressive. The Eucharist, sacrament of unity, is often for women much more a participation in the suffering and death than in the Resurrection of Jesus. It is naïve to pretend that this experience is not frustrating, contradictory, and even infuriating, especially when Religious try to celebrate together in ways that all can appreciate. Acknowledging this reality among ourselves is not a solution to the problems but can perhaps help us to share our suffering rather than increase each other’s by blaming ourselves or one another for problems we did not create. And, slowly, we are finding creative ways to deal with these problems, which, though not ideal, at least are less compromising than blind submission to abusive power operating under the label of “ministry.” No matter how difficult participation in the public worship life of the Church is at the present time, however, I am suggesting that definitive alienation from the believing community and abandonment of sacramental life is not a viable option for a Catholic Religious.

An important implication of the fundamentally Christian character of Religious Life is that while it is specifically and integrally Catholic, it is so in an inclusive Christian rather than exclusively denominational way. The Catholicism of Religious does not turn them inward in an ecclesiastical exclusivism that precludes engagement with anything that is not explicitly and officially Catholic. Religious are not “official” representatives of the institution who must avoid anything not publicly and officially “on the books.”

Religious have been leaders in the raising of feminist con-
sciousness, in ecumenical sharing, in engagement in interreligious dialogue and even well-considered interreligious practice, in ecology and environmentalism, in engagement with the new science and its cosmological expansion of consciousness, in the use in their ministries of healing of techniques and the integration of forms of spiritual practice that do not derive from explicitly Catholic sources. One of the great gifts of Religious Life to the Church is its combination of intensive faith and practice of Catholic spirituality with openness to spiritual resources and non-Christian dialogue partners that the official Church often hesitates to engage. Their Profession does not commit Religious to proselytize. They are committed to offer, as attractively as possible, the Gospel to any and all whom they encounter. “Attractively” will sometimes mean explicitly, and even in Catholic formulation. At other times it will mean indirectly, at least until their interlocutors indicate a desire to go further.

3. Religious Life is a mystical-prophetic lifeform

The description of Religious Life as a mystical-prophetic lifeform points to several important features of the life, particularly those which have been appropriated most deeply in the process of conciliar renewal. Religious Life, as has been said in various contexts throughout this work, is modeled on the life of Jesus. All Christian spirituality consists in the imitation and following of Christ, as we discussed in some detail in chapter 4, sections 6 and 7 of this volume. But different states of life raise to visibility in a particular way different aspects of the life of Jesus.

I have suggested, and want to reemphasize here, that it is the prophetic character of Jesus’ life rooted in his mystical union with God, the life into which he initiated a small band of itinerant disciples who left all to follow him during his earthly ministry, that provides the particular and distinguishing model for Religious Life. This mystical-prophetic character of the life was muted, perhaps even obscured, during the period of virtually total ecclesiastical institutionalization of apostolic Religious Life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Only since the beginning of the renewal, especially in the American
Church, has there been a major reassertion of the prophetic character of the life that was much clearer at the origins of this form of the life in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and then in North America.

At the heart of Jesus’ prophetic life is the mystical reality of deeply experienced personal union with God. Especially in the Gospel of John Jesus speaks of being so completely united with the One who sent him that those who see him truly see God (see John 14:9). The term “mystical” in this formulation has nothing to do with esotericism or paranormal phenomena. Rather, it points to the experiential character of the deeply contemplative and unitive core of Jesus’ life, which is also central to the life of Religious. Jesus cultivated this mystical dimension of his life through participation in the prayer life of his Jewish tradition, in frequent and prolonged solitary prayer, and in constant discerning and courageous obedience to the will of God in his life and death. It is this same spirituality, nourished by the liturgical life of the Christian tradition, by a life of personal contemplative prayer, and by discerning and faithful obedience that grounds and finds expression in the life and ministry of Religious.

Emphasizing the mystical character of the life calls attention to the fact that the spirituality at the heart of this life is experiential rather than purely theoretical, moral, or even primarily ascetical. Again, during the long century when apostolic Religious Life was highly institutionalized, contemplative prayer was seldom emphasized and often even discouraged as “singular,” incompatible with the heavy monastic schedule of common vocal prayers and spiritual exercises, and a distraction from the time-consuming demands of maintaining institutional ministries.

Jesus’ mystical life consisted in his intense unitive experience of God, but it came to expression in his prophetic mission in which he was engaged from the moment of his public emergence as an adult until his last breath on the cross. He carried out that mission in a multiform ministry of proclamation, teaching, healing, consoling, challenging, and confronting evil wherever it manifested itself, in or outside Judaism, in high
places as well as among the ordinary people. This is precisely the ministerial ideal Jesus proposed to the itinerant band of disciples whom he apprenticed to himself during his public life and commissioned to carry on his own ministry after his departure (see Matt 10:8).

Personal mysticism and prophetic public ministry are two "faces" of a single lifeform. Mysticism has never been easy for institutional religion to handle precisely because it is the foundation of prophecy. This was true of Jesus and it has been true of the Church throughout the ages. The Church may canonize mystics after their deaths but it is far more likely to persecute and even execute them during their lives. One of the first things his contemporaries said of Jesus was that he taught and acted from a source of authority that the institution, its tradition and its laws and its officials, did not control (see Matt 7:29; 9:6, 8; 21:23–24, 27; and par. in Mark and Luke). In this he was following in the footsteps of the Old Testament prophets who were equally unsettling to kings and priests and for the same reason. The source of prophetic speaking and acting is the direct relation of the prophet to God, that is, the mystical or contemplative union that is not mediated by institutional personnel or processes and, finally, cannot be controlled by them. Joan of Arc is a singularly clear example of this tension between God's "voice" (in her case claimed literally) and the "voice" of ecclesiastical authority claiming to speak "for God."

This is the essence of the tension between the charismatic and the institutional. Both are necessary dimensions of religion as it functions in history. But they will never be comfortable companions. The prophet will always find the institutional constraining if not oppressive, overly self-seeking and too little concerned with the People of God, and the officials in charge will always find the charismatic uncontrollable and dangerous, "stirring up the people" who should be obeying official authority. In one sense, the Old Testament makes it clear that Jesus could hardly have ended up any differently than he did. And Religious Life, imitating and following Jesus precisely in his mystical-prophetic vocation within an institutional Church, can expect to share his fate in one way or another.
In the Old Testament, the opposite of the true prophet was the band or school of court prophets. These were groups of religious figures who, from the relative anonymity of the collective, were willing to tell the king what he wanted to hear and thus lend religious legitimacy to his projects, even when they were contrary to God's will, in exchange for their own safety and status in the religio-political system. They were religious functionaries who knew who was paying their salaries and convinced themselves that God's will must be reflected in the will of God's anointed representative, the king or priest. True prophets like Jeremiah and Amos would not play institutional ball and suffered the fate that Jesus would suffer.

The two features of the true prophets of Israel, reflected in Jesus, and which distinguished them from the bands of court prophets, were that they were individuals who had to stand up to power unbuffered by anonymity and unprotected by "group think," and when they challenged institutional authority they refused to succumb to official power. The measuring rod of their message was not what would keep them safe or in the good graces of those in power but what "God said." The prophets never claimed to speak in their own name. Their oracles began, literally or by implication, with "Thus says the Lord."

One of the most salient features of the renewal of Religious Life has been the reemergence, after a very long period of hyper-institutionalization and over-identification with the hierarchical-clerical element in the Church, of the charismatic, prophetic dimension of their vocation. To some extent this correlates with the individualization of ministries that has characterized the renewal and that has emphasized the corporate rather than collective nature of the mystical-prophetic lifeform, and it certainly owes much to the deepening of the contemplative spirituality of Religious and their much sounder theological formation. Conflicts between individual Religious and Church officials, often embroiling their Congregations in the struggle, have multiplied and intensified in recent years. This experience has been profoundly troubling, even traumatic, for Religious and the tragedies, personal and corporate, have been agonizing. But, in my opinion, the courage and perseverance of Reli-
gious in the face of ecclesiastical persecution and even violence is bearing fruit in a deepened sense of corporate solidarity, peace, steadfastness, willingness to lay down their lives in many ways for those to whom they are sent, and even to pay the price that Jesus paid for speaking truth to power.

Two other important implications, besides those implicit in what has been said above, can be mentioned. They have been discussed at some length in various places in this trilogy so I merely recall them here for the sake of completeness. The essentially charismatic rather than institutional source of Religious Life makes it fundamentally egalitarian rather than hierarchical. Religious are not part of the chain of command of the institution. They are neither superior to others in the Church nor subject, in their life and vocation, to Church officials. They are neither agents of the official Church nor a work force for ecclesiastical projects.

Furthermore, within their own Congregations there is a fundamental equality among the members in a completely voluntary community. All leadership, although important and respected, is provisional and exists for the sake of service. No one holds ontologically based power over the others and the only real “superiority” and “power” is service (see Matt 23:11). Religious have an important role in witnessing in the Church to the possibility of a truly egalitarian Church like that of Jesus’ first disciples in which even Jesus, “teacher and lord” that he was (see John 13:13), washed his disciples’ feet, not in a pantomime of ecclesiastical pomp but as a servant giving them an example of how friendship strips away even a “legitimate” claim to dominance.

One other implication that has emerged with clarity from the renewal and reappropriation of their mystical-prophetic vocation is that ministerial Religious are committed to a ministry that is itinerant and free. Distinguishing ministerial Religious Life from monastic life has allowed the former to replace the “total institution” model of community with the freedom to be among those they serve, as Jesus was. Without a “home of their own,” special clothes or honorific titles, a uniform prayer life, institutional apostolates requiring all to do the same work
in collective settings, or controllable forms of income, ministerial Religious can follow more closely the One who had nowhere to lay his head. They follow the One who allowed himself to be pursued even into his brief respite for rest and prayer; who sometimes had not even time to eat but went wherever God led him, even if that meant to the outlaws and the sinners and the foreigners and the reprobates whose uncleanness prohibited their presence in sacred space or participation in sacred ritual; who shared table fellowship with the poor and the outcasts and the rich and the powerful, and charged no one for the Word of God.

4. Religious Life is a gift of the Spirit to the Church for the sake of the world

This brings us to the other central affirmation in the description of Religious Life that I have proposed. We have had occasion to say a good deal throughout this work about the pneumatological origin of Religious life which was reemphasized by Vatican II. Religious Life is neither a human invention nor an office in the Church’s structure but a charism given to the Church as the Body of Christ for the sake of the world.

As we saw at length in volume 1, chapters 9 and 10, charism characterizes Religious Life on various levels: in the individual, in the foundation and deep narrative of the particular Congregation, in various types of Religious Life that have arisen throughout history, and in the lifeform itself. At all levels the charisms pertaining to Religious Life are gifts of the Spirit to the Church, enriching its life and ministry, but the Council was referring particularly to the last when it spoke of Religious Life itself as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church.\(^5\)

Individual Religious in a community will die. Congregations, for various reasons, can and do go out of existence. Even forms of the life diminish almost to the vanishing point. But Religious Life itself, which arose in the first decades of the Church’s history, has never been totally absent from the Church’s life.

This persistence of Religious Life in the Church, which I suggest is not simply an interesting historical phenomenon but an aspect of the Spirit’s care for the People of God as the Body of
Christ, should be a source of strength and clarity of purpose for Religious and their communities in times of trial, persecution, scarcity of material resources, dearth of personnel, or decline of apostolic influence. The Church needs Religious Life, but not necessarily any particular Congregation. Therefore, the efforts of Religious to ensure the future of their Congregations should be vigorous and creative because we do not know what is or will be needed in the Church, but not frenzied or desperate. The first order of business for any Congregation is not self-perpetuation but fidelity of the Congregation to its charismatic vocation.

A charism is a grace that is bestowed by the Spirit not primarily for the sake of the individual or group receiving it but precisely for the building up of the Church in itself and in mission. Therefore, the charism of Religious Life does not exist primarily for its own sake nor is the life that embodies it an independent enterprise that can be situated anywhere. Religious Life exists for the sake of the Church in mission to the world.

Religious Life and its public witness may be more necessary in the Church today than it was in the new world in the 1800s when the Church’s need to protect the faith of waves of immigrants occasioned the enormous increase in numbers of Congregations and candidates. Religious today are carrying a particular (though certainly not exclusive) responsibility for the preservation of the conciliar renewal that is being threatened by a backlash of restorationism, the lack of an adequately catechized and ecclesiastically inculturated younger generation of Catholics, massive moral scandal and loss of credibility of Church leadership from top to bottom, and a riptide of attrition in membership, all exacerbated by increasing financial strain and decrease in numbers of clergy relative to numbers of members.

The prophetic vocation, whether that of Moses in relation to Israel, Jesus in relation to Judaism, or Religious in relation to the Church, is a vocation within and in service to the community so that the community can fulfill its vocation to be “a light to the nations.” This means that Religious Life is intrinsically an ecclesial vocation. I have insisted that it is not a particularly
ecclesiastical, that is, hierarchical and institutional, vocation. It is not concerned especially with Church order, providing ecclesiastical services, running the institutions and operations of the corporation. But ecclesiality—to borrow an evocative term and concept from Orthodoxy—is not merely an accident of history (that Religious Life happened to arise in the Christian Church) nor is its ecclesial identity purely sociological or cultural (that it was “born Catholic” but has outgrown, or could depart from, its family of origin without substantial loss). Ecclesiality is a constitutive feature of Catholic Religious Life. This is a very challenging statement in the current historical context.

The paradigmatic temptation of the prophet is to abandon the chosen community that refuses to listen. As the story of the desert journey in Exodus makes abundantly clear, Moses was often driven to the point of wanting to give the “stiff-necked” Hebrew people back to the God who had brought them out of Egypt. Jeremiah wanted to flee into the desert and build himself a hermitage where he could weep for the people of Judah whom he could not convert (see Jer 9:1–2). Jesus wondered “why should I even speak to this adulterous generation” (see John 8:25) and wept over the city of Jerusalem that, even as Jesus’ ministry moved to its close, still “did not know the time of its visitation” (see Luke 19:41–44 and elsewhere).

Anyone living Religious Life in the Church today has heard from companions or herself voiced this characteristic temptation of the prophet: “Why should we continue to relate to an institution which neither appreciates nor supports Religious Life? Why not sever the canonical bond—some have suggested, the way an abused spouse severs the marriage bond—which gives the hierarchy power to undermine our life and mission, and get on with the work of preaching the Gospel within and beyond the Church?”

This question expresses the agonizing paradox of the deeply ecclesial identity of Religious Life within the Church as People of God and the dilemma of its prophetic vocation to speak truth to power and minister to the victims of the abuse of that power within the often self-serving Church as institution. Dealing honestly with this conundrum is a real and urgent chal-
lenge for many Religious as well as for anyone thinking of entering Religious Life today. I would suggest that the answer to the “why” Religious should stay is clear enough: “for the sake of the world that God so loves.” The answer to the question of “how” to stay without being personally crushed, spiritually compromised, or so ministerially undermined as to be useless is not at all clear and has to be rearticulated in every situation of tension, conflict, or abuse as it arises.

I want to offer several considerations which, while they neither prove the validity of the claim that Religious Life can only be authentic, faithful to its prophetic vocation and identity, as an ecclesial reality (which is a matter of faith, not logic), nor solve or resolve the ongoing tensions between Religious Life and ecclesiastical power structures, might supply some motivation for continuing in the struggle.

First, only in the Church can Religious Life witness to and participate in the paschal character of salvation, which cannot be reduced to any human enterprise no matter how highly motivated. Religious commit themselves, to the exclusion of any other primary life commitment, and for the whole of their one and only life, to the project Jesus committed to his Church, the transformation of this world into the Reign of God. In the nature of the case, this project is infinitely larger than any political, sociological, or humanitarian endeavor and exceeds the lifetime of any individual or any human efforts no matter how strenuous. The structure of this mission is “paschal,” including suffering and death, which is the only path to the Resurrection life Jesus offers. By committing their whole lives to this humanly unachievable project, whose final success they will never see, Religious witness to the real nature and meaning of Jesus’ saving work and the validity of complete and selfless faith commitment to it. This witness of Religious Life, in and through its members’ personal perseverance, by its totality, its renunciation of personal success, its active faith in a victory unseen, helps sustain the efforts of others and of the Church as a whole. This witness can only be given in and as an ecclesial reality.

Second, because Religious Life is a visible and public lifeform within the Church, which is not, however, an office in the hier-
archical Church, it can operate more easily at, and even across, ecclesiastical boundaries. Religious involved in ecumenical and especially in interreligious dialogue are not private, anonymous, or purely personal agents promoting tolerance, mutual understanding, and even a sharing of spiritual gifts. Religious operate specifically and publicly as the Body of Christ reaching out to the “others” whom God loves just as God loves us.

Once again, the example of Jesus—who was profoundly Jewish but not a member of the Jewish hierarchy and who held no office among his people—is instructive. Jesus originally so strongly appropriated his Jewish religious particularity that he understood himself as sent “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24) and he remained clear, even in dialogue with those estranged from Judaism, that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). But in his ministry he discovered that, while the prophet arises from the Chosen People, ministers to and among them, and witnesses to the Word of God entrusted to that community, his mission is not necessarily limited to that community. Jesus encountered faith outside the community of Israel that exceeded any he had encountered within it and he responded to that faith with the same offer of eternal life he had extended to his fellow Jews (see Matt 8:10; 15:28; Luke 7:9; John 4:53). The Gospel does not tell us how Jesus resolved this paradox theologically. Perhaps he never did. Each time it happened, he was “amazed.” But he went where God led him, recognizing the truth even when and where it was not supposed to exist.

Religious, though called primarily in and for the Church, have increasingly discovered, as Jesus did, that they are often called to move beyond the ecclesiastical frontiers into dialogue with and service to people outside the official Church, even outside Christianity. Sometimes their welcome by and among “outsiders” is more sincere than their reception among their own. And ecclesiastical authority is not always approving of the extra-institutional and interreligious activities of Religious whom they often tend to regard as an in-house work force. This, also, was Jesus’ experience: that the prophet is not without honor except among his own people (see John 4:44; Mark 6:4; Matt 13:57).
A third and extremely important reason why Religious Life, in my judgment, needs to remain an ecclesial reality, not only despite but especially because of the tension between Religious and the ecclesiastical institution, has become much clearer to me in the course of working on this study. Religious Life as a lifeform, especially as it is lived by nonclerical Religious, is a concrete, visible realization in the contemporary Church of a communitarian ecclesiology that is older and more biblically substantiated than the monarchical ecclesiology that has been characteristic of the Church since the Middle Ages and remains dominant in the Church as institution today. Unless this communitarian ecclesiology survives as a minority position and becomes the normative self-understanding of the Church, there may be no Church worth struggling over in the not too distant future. It may have become a ghetto of ideologues rather than an inclusive community of equal disciples, the people of God on its pilgrim way through time to which belong the Catholic faithful, “others who believe in Christ, and finally all mankind, called by God’s grace to salvation” *(LG II:13)*.

Vatican II, in chapter II of *Lumen Gentium*, the dogmatic constitution on the Church, entitled “The People of God,” attempted to reemphasize this communitarian ecclesiology to which the New Testament clearly attests and which continued to function vigorously through the first millennium and right up until the medieval period in the West and to this day in the Eastern Church. In the struggle of the Great Schism (1378–1415), with its factions and anti-popes that raised sharply the question of the collegial and mutually authoritative relationship between Council and pope, this communitarian ecclesiology, later pejoratively labeled “conciliarism,” was condemned and rejected in favor of a rigidly and exclusively monarchical ecclesiology. The pope claimed absolute and unilateral power in the hierarchy and direct personal jurisdiction over every individual member of the Church and rejected accountability to anyone on earth.

The epitome of this almost exclusively hierarchical understanding of the Church as institution, begun in the confusion of the fifteenth century and furthered at the Council of Trent
in the sixteenth, was the crowning of absolute papal primacy by
the definition of papal infallibility at Vatican I in the nineteenth
century. Unfortunately, this ultramontane, exclusively hierar-
chical understanding of the Church was reaffirmed in chapter
III of *Lumen Gentium* even though in its extreme form it is, at
least in the mind of many well-balanced ecclesiologists, in seri-
ous tension with the collegial ecclesiology expressed in chapter
II of the same document. Although the official position of the
Vatican and the last two popes has been that there is really no
tension, much less contradiction, between the two ecclesiolo-
gies in *Lumen Gentium*, the experience “on the ground” is that,
in fact, it is difficult to reconcile the two even rhetorically much
less practically, and compromise is clumsy and inadequate at
best and nonexistent at worst.

A striking postconciliar development, especially in the
renewal of women’s Religious Life, has been a reappropriation
in their own Congregations of the communitarian ecclesiology
that was characteristic of Religious Life from its earliest cenob-itic realizations in the sixth century, which was muted but
never fully suppressed among Religious. The foundation of this
essentially nonhierarchical ecclesiology is an understanding
(discussed above in relation to the mystical character of the life)
of the community as a voluntary society of intrinsically equal
members. I explored this unique constitution of the nonclerical
Religious community in chapter 7 where I argued that the
monarchical model of authority and obedience was never really
verified in principle in such Religious Congregations despite
the continuous efforts of ecclesiastical authority, down to our
own day, to “monarchize” these communities in practice.

Intrinsic to this communitarian ecclesiology are the principles
of collegiality, subsidiarity, and co-responsibility that Religious
Congregations have written into their renewed Constitutions.
Despite dire warnings from the Vatican that only chaos could
result from such developments, most renewed Religious Congre-
gations have successfully stabilized their community lives
based on these principles. This development has been
strengthened, as the renewal has progressed in nonclerical
Congregations, by the realization that many founders, espe-
cially those who predated the total triumph of papal absolutism in the nineteenth century and were not members of clerical male Orders who stamped a hierarchical pattern on the women’s communities they influenced, actually originally understood their communities in much more communitarian than monarchical terms.

In other words, deepened exposure of Religious to the vision of Church and community in Scripture and the documents of Vatican II supported the wide and deep experimentation with new forms of relationship and government within communities. This experimentation, never without its challenges from within and without, affirmed the intuitions of Religious that the model of Religious community life they were developing (or recovering) was faithful to the founding insights of their Congregations, more authentically rooted in the conciliar renewal, more faithful to the New Testament, more psychologically healthy, and more ministerially effective.

As I mentioned above and have developed at some length elsewhere, the postconciliar virulence of hierarchical persecution of women’s Congregations derives, at least in part, from the fact that women Religious have been the primary “carriers” of the vision and spirit of Vatican II, particularly its ecclesiology. Nonclerical Religious Congregations are an organized and thus visible embodiment in the very heart of the contemporary Church of the understanding of the Church as the People of God, a voluntary community of fundamentally equal disciples who are called to be the Body of Christ in this world and thus to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ to all nations. Religious Life is no longer, in its own self-understanding, a “state of perfection” deriving a claim to elite status in the Church from its mirror reflection of and unquestioning submission to the hierarchy. Rather, it is part of the Church as Pilgrim People making its way faithfully but fallibly toward the eschatological New Jerusalem which it neither claims to be, nor recognizes the Vatican to be.

In my view, this intra-ecclesial vocation of witness to an “alternate ecclesial world” is as important today as the extra-ecclesiastical witness of Religious Life as “alternate reality con-
struction” of the Reign of God in the “field” of this world. For Religious to abandon their ecclesiastical location, identity, and vocation in the face of ecclesiastical misunderstanding and even persecution would be not only infidelity to a corporate mission but also a tragic loss for the Church. This realization and, I hope, the courage to face the opposition that fidelity to the Council’s much expanded vision of Church requires do not obviate the suffering this entails for Religious. Publicly acknowledging that suffering can be a healthy refusal to be complicit in their own oppression or to see themselves as helpless victims. Actual participation in the suffering of Christ the prophet is at least as important to the life of the Church as ritual enactment of Christ’s role as priest.

Practically speaking, it seems to me that Religious, for at least two reasons, are in a better position today to handle this suffering resolutely and creatively than they were in the first decades of the renewal, when some of the most egregious violations of Congregations and individual Religious occurred. Religious no longer need to see themselves caught in no-win dilemmas between integrity and abusive power. New insights can give them a “place to stand” when submission to the demands of authority unjustly or dysfunctionally exercised as coercive power is presented as the only option.

The first insight is the increasing realization, just discussed, that the communitarian ecclesiology that is predominant in Religious Congregations today is biblically based and theologically legitimate. Even when power is invoked and exercised in unjust and violent ways by ecclesiastical officials, Religious know that they have a right, based in Scripture and the teaching of the Council, to live out of that communitarian ecclesiology within their own Congregations and in relation to other elements in the Church. That conviction can ground a confident adherence to principle and even appropriate resistance in the face of abuse when that is necessary. Like Jesus before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate, being unjustly treated need not lead to the acceptance of guilt or internal submission.

The second insight is that this communitarian ecclesiology is the theoretical and practical framework for an alternate under-
standing of obedience, discussed at considerable length in chapters 8 to 10 of this volume. The fundamental principles of this theology of obedience are the basic equality of all the baptized and the absolute primacy of conscience. These principles ground a much wider and more nuanced range of options than the "either (do/believe as you are commanded) or (leave or be dismissed)" theology of obedience that is still functional in the monarchical system. Religious, both individually and as Congregations, have gradually built up a reservoir of options in the face of illegitimate, coercive, or abusive exercises of ecclesiastical power whether based on ignorance or on more morally suspect motives.

**Important implications** flow from this reflection on Religious Life as charismatic gift of the Spirit to the Church for the sake of the world. First, its ecclesial identity and location flow from its prophetic character, which Religious live in imitation of Jesus, prophet among his own people, who paid the ultimate price for calling Israel to its vocation as "light to the nations." The ministry of Religious through the Church to the world God so loved is grounded in their identity as members of his Body and it is this identity which gives meaning and efficacy to all they do to mediate eternal life in all its fullness to those to whom they are sent.

Second, the institutional Church itself needs—even when its officials reject it—the prophetic presence and witness of Religious to the nature of the Church's divine mission and to an alternate communitarian ecclesiology. It also needs the ministry on the margins that Religious as public persons who are not institutional agents can exercise.

Third, the most glorious periods in the history of Religious Life have not been those in which Religious have been the darlings of the hierarchy. Unqualified approval by those who wield power too often comes at the price of a conspiracy of silence or cowardly complicity in institutional corruption. Such complicity leads to domestication and cooptation, to the transformation of God's messengers into "court prophets." One of the things that may have changed permanently, and for the better,
among Religious in the past fifty years is that, as a lifeform, they no longer suffer from a paralyzing need for ecclesiastical approval.

Fourth, the same conviction that enabled Jesus to remain faithful to his prophetic vocation unto death is basic to the ecclesial fidelity of Religious who have chosen to stay. They believe that the Church, like themselves imperfect in so many ways, is called to be a “light to the nations.” Living that conviction will lead to their participation, in large ways or small, in Jesus’ destiny, which included not only his execution but also his ultimate vindication by the God to whom he was faithful.

Fifth, in situations of conflict and struggle, it is well to remember that Religious do not believe in the Church; they believe in the Church. The Church as People of God and Body of Christ is the context of their faith and their fidelity in ministry, but Jesus, not the Church as institution, is the object of their faith.

5. Religious Life is constituted by perpetual Profession of the vows

The Catholic Christian, ecclesial, mystical and prophetic properties of Religious Life as a lifeform are global characteristics that have been discussed from numerous points of view and in relation to various topics throughout these three volumes. They therefore needed to be identified for themselves and discussed at some length in this conclusion. The following features—perpetuity, Profession, the vows, community, and ministry—have been considered separately and at some length in different parts of the work. Consequently, the conclusions already articulated on these subjects need only to be referred to or presumed here rather than repeated or discussed in detail. I am picking up these features here for the sake of completeness and to keep them in the forefront as readers bring their reflections to a close.

Perpetual Profession was discussed in detail in volume 2, part 1, especially chapter 3. Perpetuity is characteristic of the two forms of consecrated life in the Church, matrimony and Religious Life, precisely because these life choices are the undertaking of a lifeform, not the entrance into an organization or the
taking on of a project. The “project” undertaken by matrimonial or Religious vows is one’s whole life, which now will be lived entirely in function of the great love at its center. The Religious, by perpetual Profession, is declaring that the whole of her or his life will be devoted to the quest for God to the exclusion of all other primary life commitments, including marriage and family, career or profession, or projects of any kind.

This commitment is neither a function of some kind of foreknowledge of the challenges one could or will face nor a hubristic conviction that one will be able, by dint of determination and personal courage, to meet all challenges, come what may. It is really not about the content of the future at all. What will eventuate in one’s Religious life is unknowable when one makes Profession, as is the content of the life initiated by marriage vows. Profession is about the present. Perpetual commitment is a total self-gift in love, here and now. The totality of the gift, whether life lasts an hour or a century beyond the ceremony, is expressed in terms of all the dimensions of one’s life: time, gifts and talents, possessions, self-determination, health and longevity or lack thereof, success and failure, and whatever else will characterize that life.

Two things should be recalled about the three vows that make perpetual Profession concrete even as they embrace the vast “unsaid” of the life. These three vows—consecrated celibacy, which was treated in detail in volume 2, part 2; and evangelical poverty and prophetic obedience, which were discussed in this volume, parts 2 and 3 respectively—are not a list of particular, limited and specified “supererogatory obligations” which the Religious assumes. They are, as has been said, global metaphors referring to the three major dimensions of human life: relationships, possessions, and freedom and power. By one’s self-disposition concerning these basic coordinates of life one enters into the “alternate world” that realizes the Reign of God in the midst of historical reality. By Profession, Religious determine how they intend to live in community, in society, in the Church, in the world for the rest of their lives.

The way these basic dimensions of human life are under-
stood differs from culture to culture. How institutionalized Religious Life handles them changes as a function of changes in society and Church. But humans will always construct their lives in terms of persons, possessions, and power. And I have suggested in my treatment of the three vows that there is a characteristic way that Religious relate to these fundamental spheres of human experience which may call for very different concrete behaviors in different places and at different times. I have tried to capture, by use of the traditional names for the vows combined with a descriptive adjective for each, both the characteristic way the vows have been understood over time and the flexibility of the modes and behaviors in which that characteristic approach is embodied.

The specification of the traditional vows by descriptive adjectives was also necessary because of the intrinsic ambiguity of each of the vows if its name was left unspecified. Celibacy, the condition of being unmarried, says nothing by itself about motive, perpetuity, or the sexual behavior of the celibate. Poverty, the lack of possessions, can be voluntary or imposed against one’s will, range from simplicity to destitution, be the result of one’s own or someone else’s sinfulness, have good or bad consequences for oneself and others. Obedience, the taking into account of the will of another in one’s own life, choices, and behavior, can be free or imposed, collaborative cooperation or cowardly alienation of responsibility, a help in discernment or violent coercion, growth-producing or infantilizing, a help to development in attentiveness to the will of God or depersonalizing oppression.

By referring to celibacy as “consecrated” I tried to emphasize freedom of choice, motivation by the love of God, totality and exclusivity of the self-donation and therefore its intrinsic perpetuity as constituting a state of life, the relationship of that state of life to the quest for God, and the global moral obligations of chastity that express the commitment. I also looked at the ramifications of this free commitment in the relationships of the celibate within and outside the community. In effect, consecrated celibacy is not simply a choice regarding sexuality. It is the total self-donation in love, to the exclusion of any other
primary life commitment, to the quest for God. This is why I present it, as some others discussing Religious Life do not, as not only intrinsically perpetual but as the defining feature of Religious Life.

By referring to poverty as "evangelical," that is, Gospel poverty, I intended to emphasize that the poverty undertaken by Religious and which consists in a choice of complete self-dispossession of material goods, is not primarily a socioeconomic condition, whether simplicity or communal sharing or deprivation or destitution or anything else on the scale of material well-being. It is an imitation and following of Jesus as he appears in the Gospel and according to his own teaching on this subject. This teaching, which is a major theme of the Gospel, is concerned not with how much money or other goods one has but with the complete detachment of the heart from material goods and their possession. Such Gospel poverty is manifested in the absence of anxiety that is rooted in total trust in God. Nothing, large or small, present or absent, can be allowed to become "Mammon" in one's life, an idol that takes God's place in the heart, because what one's heart seeks betrays the true "treasure" of one's life. The state of total nonpossession is a condition of freedom that allows the person to live, act, go, be, according to God's desires. Thus, the ongoing education of desire is central to the spirituality of the Religious and involves a lifelong engagement with the dynamics of creaturehood in its gradual acceptance of divinizing dependence on a loving Creator.

"Prophetic" obedience, perhaps the most misunderstood of the vows and a source, for centuries, of serious deformation of consciences and infantilization in ministry and community, required major rethinking to remove it from the framework of blind submission to human power claiming to hold God's place in the life of Religious and place it in the framework of enlightened discernment.

A renewed theology and spirituality of obedience requires Religious to return to Jesus the prophet, in his obedience to God, as their authentic model. Obedience, then, has to be reimagined as the commitment to hear and heed all indications and intimations of the will of God, both within and outside the
community, as Jesus attended to the One who sent him. This careful listening and commitment to heeding what one hears calls for discernment which, while inclined preferentially toward legitimate authority and other privileged mediations of God's will, never becomes mindless surrender, through laziness or cowardice or ulterior motives, to anything masquerading as God's will. We thus come to understand that authority is not a sacralization of oppressive power, and obedience is not perpetual irresponsible immaturity and subjection. Rather, discernment takes place in the dialogue of authority and obedience as a shared search for the will of God. Furthermore, the will of God ceases to mean the imposition of irresistible divine power on powerless pawns, being rather God's ongoing involvement, through cooperating human subjects, in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation.

We also took time to examine the formative process by which obedience, in practice, changes and develops as the Religious progresses from initial formation through active ministerial involvement into the gradual self-abandonment to God in sickness, old age, and death. The spirituality of the Religious is thus shaped, over a lifetime, by the single-minded self-gift to God in consecrated celibacy, the education of desire for the one thing necessary by evangelical poverty, and the gradual attunement of the will to God's loving guidance in prophetic obedience.

6. Religious Life is lived in transcendent community and ministry

It may be that nothing in Religious Life has changed as noticeably and as profoundly in the process of renewal as the understanding of community and ministry. The changes in these two dimensions were intimately interrelated and, in hindsight, the reasons for this are not hard to discern. Both community understood as traditional common life, and ministry understood as highly institutionalized common and even identical apostolates, were monastic in origin and form and collectivist in realization. They required and worked well in the "total institution" but could not continue as that sociological model of the life came to an end.
The deconstruction of Religious Life as a total institution in the wake of the increasingly clear distinction of the ministerial form of Religious Life from the enclosed monastic form brought an end, in the former, to cloister and its requirements and practices, and it integrated ministerial involvement in the world into the fundamental self-understanding of Religious Congregations and their members. Postconciliar ministerial Religious Life was individualized, both in terms of community and of ministry.

For a few decades this transformation was extremely destabilizing, because Religious had no experience of anything other than common life and institutionalized apostolates and there was no articulated theological frame of reference within which to understand the new developments. It looked to many, including those involved, like the dissolution of the life itself into a terminal individualism when, in fact, it was the deconstruction of a sociological and theological frame of reference that was *de facto*, but not *de jure*, coterminous with the life prior to the renewal. So entrenched was that model that most people took the model for the substance and could not, for some time, imagine a new way of conceptualizing the situation.

Volume 2, part 3, was a detailed examination of the meaning of community in ministerial Religious Life. We began by affirming essential continuity with the traditional understanding of Christian and, therefore, Religious community as based in the theology of the Trinity. But, by calling it “transcendent” community I also intended to distinguish it from other realizations of Christian community. While this term can present problems if it implies or connotes otherworldliness, dualism, or superiority, I have not been able to find another single term better able to capture the distinctiveness of Religious community.

Unlike other types of Christian community which are rooted not only in the sharing in divine life initiated in baptism but also in natural conditions, Religious community has no “natural” or “necessary” basis. It is neither rooted in nor productive of blood relationships and it is not required either for survival in this world or for salvation. Nor is it “intentional” community in the sense of being a mutual selection of members by one
another. The fact that Religious communities are, by and large, monosexual, celibate, affectively inclusive, permanently inter-generational, totally economically interdependent on the basis of shared total dispossession of the members, and that the deepest bond that unites the members is not natural affinity but solely the love of Christ to the exclusion of any other primary life commitment, makes the Religious community unique. I have suggested that the unique bond is a particular kind of Gospel friendship that transcends any of the natural foundations for human community.

Once the basic coordinates of Religious community are established, both in terms of what it has in common with other forms of Christian community and what is distinctive about it, the question that arises immediately concerns how that unique or transcendent community is, can, or must be sociologically embodied. Prior to the renewal it seemed self-evident that Religious community was synonymous with "common life," that is, group/collective living under the same roof and to the exclusion of nonmembers. The diversification and individualization of ministries in the years immediately following the Council led to a parallel change in living situations. But even those involved in such new living situations, to say nothing of those who objected to them, considered anything other than traditional collective common life as, at best, an "exception" which might be necessary for particular reasons but should be rectified as soon as possible.

No such "rectification" has occurred and it is probably accurate to say that most ministerial Religious no longer think that such is necessary or desirable. While terminology is slow to change, the emotional freight of the language might change before it is linguistically modified. The term "living alone," once loaded with negative connotations, and which I tried to rename as "living singly" or "living individually," has not disappeared, but it no longer automatically carries the implication of isolation, alienation from the community, self-marginalization, resistance to Congregational responsibility and accountability, and so on. It has become, for most people, simply a description of a de facto living situation, which can be as life giv-
ing or problematic as any other type, including group living. Many Religious live individually because it is most conducive to handling their ministerial or educational responsibilities. They do not feel obliged to pretend that this is a temporary or abnormal arrangement that they long to “correct”; nor do they feel that they need to defend it against implied accusations. It is one lifestyle among others for ministerial Religious. And those living this lifestyle are just as likely (or unlikely) as those living in Congregational groups to be fully participative members of the community, economically responsible and accountable, celibate in practice, and prayerful.

One linguistic modification that has been slowly creeping into the usage of Religious, and that I consider quite significant, is the tendency to speak not so much of living “in community” as of “living community.” It reflects, I would suggest, that we are becoming less inclined to define community by where a Religious lives (under the same roof with other members of the Congregation) and more by attitudes and behaviors in relation to the community. One can live community intensely and faithfully no matter where one dwells. And one can dwell in the same house with five or fifty other members of the Congregation and be isolated, marginal, negative, or subversive.

The same thing seems to be happening in regard to mission and its embodiment in ministry. The term “mission” seems less and less to mean where one is “stationed” or the fact of being “assigned” to that location, and more the corporate calling, identity, and commitment of the Congregation as a whole. As Anthony Gittins has expressed it in numerous places, “Mission is not something we have, but something that has us.”

“Ministry” has largely replaced “apostolate” as a designation of one’s personal involvement in that corporate mission. It matters much less today whether one’s ministry is within an institution of one’s own Congregation, or shared with other Religious across Congregational lines, whether it is an individual or group ministry, in an officially Catholic or even religious setting or not. It matters much more whether one’s ministry is integral to the mission of the Congregation, which is defined in terms of its charism, traditions, and current priorities. It seems
to me that these changes in language reflect some deep changes in theological understanding of what it means to live Religious Life in community and ministry.

The current volume has been concerned especially with this final aspect of the description of Religious Life: that it is a life “lived in community and ministry.” We began this volume by reexamining the meaning of “world” and the conciliar re-orientation of the Church and therefore of Religious from a stance of world-rejection to one of world-involvement. In light of that renewed, and in some ways genuinely new, understanding of what the mission of Religious means today I have tried to reconceptualize and rearticulate the meaning of what I have called the “vows of community life and mission,” that is, evangelical poverty and prophetic obedience.

If consecrated celibacy is the mystical heart of Religious Life as total self-gift to God to the exclusion of any other primary life commitment, then evangelical poverty and prophetic obedience are the community-structuring dynamics that equip Religious Life for the prophetic ministry that carries Jesus’ mission into the world that God so loved as to give the only Son that all who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life.
about 9 percent, whereas the percentage of the population over fifty-five years of age is roughly 25 percent.

These statistics suggest that the vast majority of Religious today are in roughly the same age bracket as the majority of Americans. This raises questions not only about desirable age of entrance, but also about the age of people to whom ministry needs to be directed, the kinds of ministry needed, etc. A twenty-three-year-old teaching seventy third-graders with fifty more on the waiting list might have made the recruitment of large groups of people in their twenties eminently reasonable and the teacher well-qualified for her ministry. It might not make much sense today when three-fourths of the population is out of high school and people in their twenties are not generally professionally or psychologically likely to be capable of ministering to their elders.

16. Charles Taylor, in a short but profound essay, “Magisterial Authority,” in The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity, 259–69, suggests that this is as true of the pope as of others in the Church and that when hierarchs fail to recognize and observe their limits they do not increase their power or authority but undermine it.


**Conclusion**


2. Actually, the text says “Kingdom (or “reign”: βασιλεία) of the heavens.” “Heaven” is a Matthean euphemism to avoid use of the divine name. But since I avoid, when possible, patriarchal language, and the meaning is the same, I prefer to use “Reign of God.”


4. For a good overview of the persons, writings, and concerns of this period during which the conciliar reform was germinating, see Jürgen Mettepenningen, “Yves Congar and the ‘Monster’ of Nouvelle Théologie,” Horizons 37 (Spring 2010): 52–71.
5. "Dominus Jesus," the Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith "On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," undoubtedly authored by its then-prefect, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), was promulgated on August 6, 2000. Within the context of recognition that the Council had modified somewhat the kind of "outside the Church no salvation" ecclesiology and soteriology of preconciliar times, it reiterates the substance of the previous rejection of any kind of religious pluralism that would assign real salvific significance to non-Christian religions. The document was, and remains, a locus of contention for theologians of religions.

6. The treatment of Religious Life in *Lumen Gentium* VI is more adequate than that in *Perfectae Caritatis* in trying to articulate how Religious Life and its members are integrated into the Church. It tried to both elevate Religious Life as "special" in the Church without contradicting what it had already said about the role and dignity of the laity; to deny hierarchical status to Religious and assert the hierarchy's rights in regulating the life without denying that the life enjoys a genuine autonomy, and so on. In places it seems to grasp what the life should mean to and for the Church at large, but the framers of the document were divided about whether there should be a separate chapter on Religious when there were already chapters on laity and hierarchy. (In other words, was there anything distinctive to say about Religious Life?) The conservative minority at the Council probably had a disproportionate role in the synthesis. In general, the treatment of Religious Life by the Council was deficient at best and, in my judgment, more theoretical mileage and practical wisdom concerning Religious Life is gained by working with the context provided by the Council in its treatment of the Church, the relation of the Church to the World, freedom of conscience, and relations with "the others" (Christian sister-Churches and non-Christians) than by attempting to derive a coherent theology of Religious Life from *LG VI* and/or *PC*. A very good contextual presentation of the Council's treatment of Religious Life is Maryanne Confoy, *Religious Life and Priesthood: Perfectae Caritatis, Optatam Totius, Presbyterorum Ordinis, Rediscovering Vatican II*, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2008), Section III on Religious Life.

7. An excellent historical study of how the basically communitarian ecclesiology which characterized the first millennium of Church history was gradually repressed in the Church in favor of an increasingly absolutist monarchical ecclesiology until the former was almost
obliterated in the Conciliarist controversy that followed the Great Schism is provided by Francis Oakley, “History of the Return of the Repressed in Catholic Modernity: The Dilemma Posed by Constance,” *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Francis Oakley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29–56. The four centuries that followed the Protestant Reformation, from Trent to Vatican I, saw a constant effort to canonize the theory of an absolute divine right monarchy as the sole legitimate form of ecclesiastical government. The effort seemed to have been successful in the definitions of papal primacy and infallibility, but the historical and theological effort revived at Vatican II has again called for a reevaluation of the question. The tension between chapters 2 and 3 of *Lumen Gentium* show that the issue is still very much alive.


9. This is a major reason that many, if not most, Religious Congregations strongly resisted the move by John Paul II through the reinsertion in the revised Code of Canon Law (1983) [Canon 590, 2] to “monarchize” their vow of obedience by unilaterally redefining the nature of their vow as including in its object obedience to the pope as their highest superior thus making the pope, by *fiat*, the highest superior of every Religious Congregation. There is no historical or theological basis for this understanding of Religious obedience as such and it is certainly not what founders intended or Religious have understood by the their vow, even back as far as the Rule of St. Benedict in the sixth century. If the vow, by its nature, included the acceptance of the pope as the highest superior in the Congregation and of every individual Religious the Jesuits would not, indeed could not, have created a fourth vow of obedience to the pope, nor could they have limited that vow to matters of mission. The question this anomaly raises is, “What options does a person or group have, when it is forced by the threat of “ecclesiastical capital punishment” (in this case, non-approval of their Constitutions) to act contrary to what they know to be the truth?” This parallel in ecclesiology to Galileo’s dilemma in astronomy is striking, and illuminating.


11. We need only remember the suppression of the IHM Congregation of Los Angeles, the protracted struggle over the signing of the *New York Times* advertisement on abortion by “the twenty-four,” the Agnes Mary Mansour conflict, and so on.