

Consecrated Religious Life Today (Sandra Schneiders, 2014)



I. Introduction

Vatican II ‘bright hopes’ – thick black clouds of the “restoration”.

Pope Francis – ‘it is understandable if we are hesitant to get our hopes up’

‘The fact is that Religious Life is on the rocks, and recovery is most unlikely ...Religious Life as it existed when we entered is over’.

Departures, ageing, closing institutions

Could the death of what we have known be followed by a resurrection?

2. How did we get to where we find ourselves today as Religious?

A. Negative current: Loss of Place and Identity of Religious in the Church

‘The ecclesiology of Vatican II attempted to redress the massive over-emphasis on the hierarchy -- almost to the point of making the hierarchy a synonym in the minds of most people for the “Church” itself -- and the almost total centralisation of ecclesiastical power and authority in the Vatican.’

Focus on the baptised (= non-ordained, non-Religious)

All called to holiness. All called to mission, sharing life of Jesus: the Priest, Prophet, King (where does this leave Religious?)

Local Church at centre of Conciliar renewal. So Church = communion of local churches composed of laity and clergy. Individual Religious worked for the hierarchy, rather than in ministries of their Congregations (what is the place of Religious as Religious?)

Exodus of many Religious. Decline of institutional ministries.

‘The choices of Religious themselves to de-emphasise exotic dress, secret dwellings, and medieval practices helped dissipate the fascinating mysteriousness of their lives.’

B. Positive Current: The embrace by the Religious of the Conciliar Renewal

Many Religious were best placed to embrace Conciliar renewal, and were leaders in contemporary leadership training, and so helped deconstruct their own social identity as Religious.

‘A new form of Religious Life was conceived in this period immediately after the Council but it was a long way from birth and the pregnancy encountered major problems as the restoration under John Paul II gained momentum and led to the “reform of the reform.” The vast majority of Religious, however, perhaps more than any other contingent in the Church, was simply not willing to abandon what they were deeply convinced was the work of the Holy Spirit in their own lives and in the Church. There was, and still is, a minority of Congregations who gladly embraced the restoration of pre-conciliar forms of Religious Life and a few new so-called “traditional” groups were founded, not surprisingly by hierarchs whose minions they quickly became, but most Religious remained inveterate Conciliar Catholics and this resistance to the restorations dynamic could not fail to place them increasingly in tension, if not outright conflict, with the right wing of the laity and the hierarchy.’

3. Where are we?

A. Our relation to the institutional Church

Pope Francis provided 'breathing space' for us to continue our prophetic role. 'We need to fill our sails with the breath of the Spirit, check our directions, and once again put out into the deep.'

B. Our grasp of certain key theological insights

i) 'Our conviction that ministry is intrinsic to our form of Religious Life ... the expression of a prophetic vocation and role in the Church rather than an institutional or functional one ... This legitimate, Gospel-based autonomy ... is the root of a calm resistance to manipulation and intimidation or to the domestication or functionalization of our ministries.'

ii) 'Religious' denotes a way of being ... a free response to a personal and compelling kind of relationship with Jesus Christ,' – consecrated celibacy and prophetic ministry. 'We know in whom we trust.'

C. Our cultural situation

‘Whether or not we successfully negotiate the transition from the “normal” in which most of us entered Religious Life and which, in some sense, we are still trying to preserve, to the “new normal” in which we find ourselves, will probably determine whether we will be the last generation of pre-conciliar Religious, the generation which takes that form of the life to the grave, or the first generation of a new form of Religious Life that will flourish into the future.’

‘The event or experience that precipitates a “new normal” is qualitatively unlike the “bumps in the road” that we experience from day to day that cause us to momentarily lose our balance before we get our feet back under us ... We no longer live in the same world we lived in before the event or experience occurred that de-constructed our “normal” and now requires us to adjust to and find a way to flourish in a “new normal.” And the new situation is permanent. There is no turning back, not because we do not want to but because we can’t. There is no “back” to return to ... the “normal” which we are using as the imaginative model for what needs to be done, namely, Religious Life as it existed at what seemed our highpoint, is irreversibly gone and it is not coming back.’

4. A proposed alternative interpretation of our situation

A. Introduction

The old 'normal' (sanctification in the cloister & participation in the apostolic work of the Institute) is gone!

B. The determining cultural feature: demographic change

1950's: 1/3 children under 5; 20-50 majority; old = 60

2014: over 65's = under 5's

2050: over 65's double under 5's; 1/3 over 60

7 suggestions as to implications of the change in demography

1) We would begin to realize that a healthy congregational age distribution chart *should* show the majority of professed members between 60 and 80 with a small number in the 40s and 50s and a very small number in the 90 to 100+ bracket.

The person-power centre of gravity of the Congregation is not, never will be again, and should not be thought of as in the 30s and 40s as it was when we entered. But you often hear Religious saying, “Just look at the age chart. Most of the Congregation is over 70. We are dying.”

Are we still lamenting the loss of the old “normal” and wishing we had a crop of 20 or 30-somethings in the novitiate who could insure our future?

2) Our vocational recruitment would focus on emerging adults, i.e., people in their early 30s, not on adolescents. And it would focus on the kinds of people these emerging adults are, not the kind of people adolescents are or that we were in our 30s. That would affect where and how we do such recruitment and who does it. A major issue would be developing the assistance, financial and personal, that we have to offer to these candidates if entrance and perseverance is to be a real possibility. Have we even begun the analysis and planning necessary to attract the next generation of Religious?

3) Initial formation would have to be completely recast to deal with people who are already involved in first careers, adult relationships, and financial commitments but who may well be virtually un-catechised to say nothing of un-theologized and un-liturgized and without much if any significant experience of permanent relationships and/or community.

4) Ongoing formation for virtually all members would now have to include a relatively prolonged “renewal program” (6 months to a year) in their mid-60s or early 70s in which the person could evaluate and appropriate his or her 25 to 30-some years of Adulthood I (30-60) and discern her or his spiritual and ministerial direction for the next 20 to 25 years as well as begin whatever new formal or informal education their Adulthood II (55-85) life and ministry will require. That also means that we have to start creating those programs tailored to the transition from Adulthood I to Adulthood II which may mean re-allocating resources (personnel and money) from other programs now wrongly focused on people in the full flood of Adulthood I.

5) We probably need to shift the focus of our ministries from the first half of life (Catholic children and adolescents) and the extreme end of life (the sick and dying) toward the bulk of the population, Catholic or not, who are in Adulthood I and Adulthood II. And probably from supplying what these people can get elsewhere, e.g., formal education, job training, health care, etc., to what they can't get elsewhere, e.g., faith development, spiritual formation, ministerial commitment, etc. I am talking about the re-location of our ministerial concentration toward the people most in need today, namely, adults, and in terms of what they most need, namely, support in their faith life and commitment.

6) Our expectations and what we propose to new members probably needs to change to expecting that members will be ministerially active, that is, out in the field, at least into their late 70s and early 80s if not beyond. This has implications for location of ministries, housing, community constellations, health care, finances, congregational participation and the structures which facilitate it, etc. If our corporate culture prepares people to retire at 70, that is when they will begin to opt out. If it communicates the expectation that Adulthood II will be an active and vibrant period of their Religious Life they will live in terms of that expectation.

7) We probably need to change our ideas about leadership and expect that congregational leaders will normally be in their 70s -- that is adequately experienced personally and ministerially to deal with the people who actually make up the Congregation and the ministries in which the Congregation is actually involved. People in their 60s then would normally be in the support roles, e.g., vocation and formation work, committees, senates, planning groups, financial advisement, property handling, ministerial decision-making, etc. In these roles they will both have major influence on the Congregation's direction and future which they will live, and be mentored into congregational leadership so that they will be ready, in their 70s to 80s, to take over that leadership.

C. Individualizing Ministry

‘Ministry is intrinsic to our personal identity and to the identity of our Congregations. It is built into our life by our founders under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and is just as constitutive of who we are, individually and corporately, as our quest for holiness through the life of the Counsels.’

‘Our challenge is how to conceptualize, how to imagine, these diverse ministries, mostly exercised individually by one or two members of the Congregation, as integral to a truly corporate Congregational mission. The first step to this re-imagining is probably to recognize that this new configuration of ministry in the Congregation is not an aberration or exception or a concession to lack of resources for the “normal” apostolate of pre-conciliar Religious Life but part of the ministerial “new normal” that has developed since the Council.’

Need for spiritual formation of members as ministers of the Gospel. Need for mutual discernment of ministry. Need to find new ways of connecting members. Let us move definitively, creatively, imaginatively and joyously into the new norm.

Sister Carmel Sammut:

president of USIG (International Union of Superiors General) 2014

‘We live in the best of times. This is God’s time for us. It is the space where all that has gone before us culminates, and all that is in front of us starts showing its promise. Through our faith we also intimately know that it is the time of God’s incarnate Word still with us, the Spirit breathing in and through us. It is the time to make real our dreams’(Introduction, page 1).

Be midwives ‘accompanying all that is aching to live, wanting to break forth’(3.8).

Formalise the sending of our members on mission (even to aged care homes) (10.1)

Called to be ex-centric leaders.

Pope Francis (May 2013): ‘It is Christ who called you to follow him in the consecrated life and this means continually making an “exodus” from ourselves in order to centre your life on Christ and on his Gospel, on the will of God, laying aside your own plans, in order to say with Saint Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”’



Morning has broken