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A Future for Religious Life?

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In 2013 Pope Francis decreed that a Year of Consecrated Life would be celebrated from the First Sunday of Advent 2014 until the World Day of Consecrated Life, 2 February 2016. The reflections on the future of religious life that I offer here flow from various exercises, seminars, discussions, and so forth associated with the celebration of that Year. They are offered without any claim to expertise in the area. Whatever competence I have is confined to the New Testament – though I have been involved in formation for most of my life since ordination (1970). I write simply out of my own experience, reflection, and information picked up from casual reading over the years.

HISTORY: ‘PLATEAUS’ AND TRANSFORMATIONS

First of all, if we take a long-range historical view, one thing seems clear: religious life has always been evolving and changing in the history of the church. It has been doing so, however, not in a continuous way but in fits and starts. By this I mean that it seems to hold much the same pattern in a ‘plateaued’ kind of way for a few centuries and then undergo a radical transformation. Clearly, it is our present lot to be living religious life during one of these epochal moments of transition.

For example, the novitiate that my contemporaries and I experienced when we entered as 17-18 year olds in 1957 was very little different from that which the oldest members of the community had experienced in the early 1900s. And what they experienced was probably very little different from what their own elders had gone through in the middle of the century before. Yet the novitiate experience that novices began to have in the 70s and 80s was and remains worlds apart from what we and our ‘ancestors’ experienced in those times past. When novices of today complain about being deprived of their smart phones, etc., we elders have to refrain from wearying them with comparisons with the ‘desert’ we experienced in times long ago – when even a snatched glimpse of

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a scrap of newspaper was out of line. In pointing this out, I do not mean to suggest that novices today have it any easier. Many of the experiences they are required to go through are very challenging – and certainly far more appropriate as preparation for pastoral ministry today. And of course, to enter religious life today is vastly more ‘counter-cultural’ than it was decades ago when, within a fairly confined Catholic culture, it was a widely respected and valued choice to make.

Going further back historically, we know that in the Mediaeval period the religious life in a monastic cast that had prevailed in Europe from the time of Benedict onward was joined by the arrival on the scene of the mendicant Orders. These, especially the Franciscans and Dominicans, went out beyond monastery walls to preach among the faithful. While they experienced a rapid expansion in the high Middle Ages, by the late 14th and 15th century, members of these Orders, along with vast numbers of the clergy in general, had been ravaged by the Black Death and other ills of the time. With some notable exceptions, religious life was not in good shape in the decades leading up to the Reformation in the early 16th century – a century that was to see radical change and renewal in the church life as a whole. Rejection of religious life and the whole notion of a state of ‘perfection’ not shared by the body of the faithful was a key plank in the Reformers’ critique of the Catholicism of the time. However, the renewal of religious life that soon took place was not simply a response to the Reformation. To some extent it preceded and certainly stood in parallel to that thirst for direct experience of God that characterised the Reform. We see this in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, which gave rise to the most typical example of the new form of religious life of the time: the Society of Jesus. There were other examples, of course, such as the Theatines and the reformed versions of older orders such as the Capuchins and Discalced Carmelites.

Religious life under these new forms contributed notably to the success of the reformation within Catholicism (I avoid the phrase ‘Counter Reformation’). One clear reason for this was that, alongside renewed apostolic impulse of a more directly pastoral nature, religious, especially the Jesuits, took on the new role of educating youth destined for leadership in church and society. At the same time missionaries of various orders accompanied the colonial expansion of European powers to plant the Catholic faith in new regions of the globe, notably in the Americas and Asia.

UPHEAVAL

Religious life in these more directly apostolic forms waxed and waned, both numerically and in fervour, up till the late 18th

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century. (It is interesting that, aside from instances of martyrdom, that century provided very few candidates destined for eventual canonisation compared to the 'golden age' of sanctity from the mid-16th to the mid-17th century.) Then came what can only be described as a decimation at the time of the French Revolution (1789) and the ensuing Napoleonic wars across Europe. The Jesuits had been suppressed just prior to these events – largely as a result of pressure applied to the papacy by secular leaders motivated by the critical thinking of the Enlightenment. Orders such as the Minims, of whom we hear nothing today but which once counted several thousands of members, were virtually wiped out; monasteries were dissolved and secularised on a large scale. In other words, the forms of religious life that had prevailed since the mid-16th century virtually ceased to exist. After two centuries or more of 'plateau', religious life was undergoing one of its periodic moments of upheaval and transformation.

In the 19th century, rather than coming to terms with the lasting effects of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the Catholic Church opted by and large for Restoration. While this was the case as regards the more outward expressions of Church life, there came in time a fresh spiritual impulse. The Church rebounded or perhaps took refuge from the wounds inflicted by revolutionary and free-thinking currents with a host of new devotions: to the Sacred Heart, to the Eucharist, to the Immaculate Conception, and indeed to the Papacy itself, the latter compensating to some degree for the loss of the pope's secular dominions (Papal States). A host of new religious congregations – not 'orders' in the strictly canonical sense – sprang up around these devotions.

If the devotions provided the heart of these new congregations, they were mostly founded to address particular religious and social needs thrown up especially by industrialisation, the rapid growth of cities, and migration, whether from the countryside to the city or across the seas to new lands. The surviving older orders, as well as new congregations founded specifically for the purpose, sent thousands of members overseas as missionaries to the world as yet unknowing of Christ. Still more served the Church and wider society in the fields of health and education, targeting in particular the poor and marginalised.

While the contemplative and monastic mode of religious life also flourished (one thinks especially of St. Thérèse of Lisieux and later Thomas Merton), it was the more apostolic form addressing social, educative and pastoral needs that characterised this period. Apostolic congregations experienced exponential growth in numbers – right up to and including the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In the 1950s theologates and training

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houses of a dozen or so clerical congregations sprang up in the outer Eastern suburbs of Melbourne, all equipped with young faculty returning from overseas studies with doctorates in the main areas of philosophy and theology. Yearly intakes of novices to female congregations regularly numbered in the fifties. A newly constructed, though unfinished, diocesan seminary at Glen Waverly presided over all from a commanding height.

THE ERA OF VATICAN II: PEAK AND DECLINE

Then it all started to unravel. Vatican II gave us, perhaps for the first time in history, a fine theological rationale for religious life. It situated religious within the vocation to holiness enjoined upon all the faithful, insisting that the religious state of life was not an intermediate one between clergy and laity (*Lumen Gentium* §§43-47). It devoted a separate decree to religious life. This decree, *Perfectae Caritatis*, became a charter in the decade that followed for the retrieval of the original charism of religious congregations and their renewal according to that charism and other impulses fostered by the Council. Most religious, but especially the Sisters, embraced the task of this renewal with enthusiasm and a sense of newfound freedom in the Spirit.

What we had not really noticed, however, was that even before these promising developments numbers had already begun to drop off. In the late sixties departures from the priesthood and religious life became something of an avalanche, while numbers and perseverance levels of new entrants drastically declined.

The surprise accompanying this phenomenon just when religious life had been given a splendid new charter for renewal by the Council was matched on a larger scale by what happening in the Church as a whole. The renewed liturgy, now in the vernacular and with vast Scriptural enrichment; the rediscovery of the Spirit; ecumenism; freedom from outdated and oppressive structures in so many areas; collaboration in theological education: all this and much more seemed to promise a golden age for Catholicism. Instead, what we got was division, loss of devotion, winding back of much of the reform, and, most notably, rapidly declining and ageing congregations.

Of course, in the sixties Western society itself was undergoing massive social change: feminism, the sexual revolution, the pill, hippies, the drug scene, Vietnam war, etc. With more and more people having access to tertiary education and the critical thinking that it fosters, institutions of every kind came under challenge as never before. All this could not fail to impact heavily upon the Church. I remember an Anglican bishop being quoted at the time saying that when the world catches a cold, the Church catches

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pneumonia. Perhaps we could add, ‘And religious life catches double pneumonia’.

Now, of course, I’m very much aware that I’ve been talking from the perspective of Western society (Europe, North America, Australia–New Zealand). The churches of South Asia, East Asia, and Africa are undergoing a boom period with respect to vocations. Vietnam in particular stands out, with seminaries and novitiates and indeed candidate houses bursting at the seams. During several visits I’ve made to that country over the last decades I couldn’t help observing that the clerical religious congregations are doing now exactly what we were doing in the fifties and sixties of the last century: building, separate from each other, large formation houses and seminaries, which, no sooner finished, already struggle to contain the numbers requiring accommodation. I wonder how long the boom will last. Will it continue when, as a result of the decline of infant mortality, rising levels of education (especially of women), urbanisation, and the availability of contraception, family sizes decline from eight or nine to two or three – a development already under way, not only in Vietnam but across Asia generally? In other words, will religious congregations in these countries eventually find themselves with large empty properties on their hands, as we in the West have experienced for many years?

Of course, the Church in countries like Australia, is benefiting from vocational vitality among the more recently arrived immigrant communities. Without that vitality the numbers in our seminaries and the ranks of our more recently ordained clergy would be thin indeed. I’m not sure, however, that, when in due course a full dose of Australian secularism seeps into immigrant families, we won’t see that source of replenishment peak and join the more general decline.

Aside from these social considerations, another factor – more theological in nature – has to be the emphasis of Vatican II, especially in the dogmatic constitution ‘On the Church’ (*Lumen Gentium*), upon the universal call to holiness (§§ 39-42). Every baptized person is a member of a priestly people called to live out that dignity and vocation to the highest level of holiness, and indeed heroism. While the ministerial priesthood retains its defined role, there is a new stress upon the variety of gifts in the Church, a recognition that the personal and professional lives of laypeople can be understood as a genuine exercise of the gifts of the Spirit, for the service of the Church and the world.

On the more apostolic side, the social needs of the Church and wider society – especially in education and health care – are now largely being addressed or outsourced, for better or worse, to government agencies. Leadership in institutions previously

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conducted by religious has increasingly passed to qualified lay professionals, albeit with continuing efforts to preserve the spirit and charism of the founding congregations. Only in ministry to the more marginalised in society, especially refugees and women at risk, are religious still involved in considerable, though ageing numbers. With the surrender of institutions and the consequent withdrawal from apostolic endeavour on a corporate as distinct from an individual sense it is actually difficult for religious congregations to state clearly what exactly they 'do'. They can point to the excellent work being done by individual members. But what it all adds up to in an apostolic community sense is hard to define – let alone present attractively to young enquirers.

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So, is there a future for religious life? Or, perhaps, to put the question somewhat less radically and aggressively, 'What shape might religious life take in the future?'

The history – and indeed the teaching – of the Church would suggest that there is a future for religious life. But this future may arrive via a process of considerable diminution, such as appears to be under way at present. Many congregations, even numerically strong ones, may go the way of the Minims. Religious life may re-emerge in new patterns, though doubtless in some continuity with what has gone before. One new pattern would seem to be emerging in the new ecclesiastical communities that have sprung up since the middle of the last century such as the Focolare, Schoenstatt, San Egidio, Neo-Catechumenate, and, in Australia, the Missionaries of God's Love. In many of these, as in the latter case, a fresh form of vowed religious life has grown up within what are basically associations of committed lay people, married and single. The religious and lay members in these communities seem bound together in a relationship far closer than that existing between traditional religious orders and their lay associates ('third orders', etc.).

I must confess not to respond very positively to talk of 'refounding' religious life or specific congregations. We can't do that. 'Refounding', like the original 'founding' must be the creative action of God. History surely shows that the founding of religious congregations is traceable to a decisive experience of God's grace on the part of the founder or foundress. All goes back to this original vital impulse, which human beings cannot force or repeat but must simply await from the hand of God.

A PROPHETIC THREAD

I have traced the changing patterns that religious life periodically

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went through across the history of the Church. Is there some essential thread to be discerned running through it all?

My involvement with Scripture tells me that any such essential thread must go back to the prophetic tradition of Israel. At the risk of generalisation in an area (Old Testament) where I am less wise, I would say that Israelite society rested on the three institutions of prophet, priest, and king. The priests (associated with the all-important Temple) and the king called the shots. The prophetic strain is more nebulous. There were prophetic bands associated with various shrines and areas (1 Sam 10:10-12; 1 Kgs 18:4; etc.). But the prophets we know from the Bible tended to be not the 'professionals' but individuals raised up directly by God, prophets 'called' by God for a distinct purpose and mission, usually costly and dangerous (Isa 6:1-10; Jer 1:4-10; Ezek 2:1-8; Amos 7:14-15).

Prophetic calling of this kind was dangerous because it almost always involved a severe critique of the way power was being exercised in society by ruling castes: the priestly, royal, and 'officially' prophetic. The career of the prophet Jeremiah is the classic example.

The prophetic critique targetted two abuses of power in particular: 1. introduction or tolerance of any cult smacking of idolatry (Hos 2:7-15; Jer 10:1-9; Isa 40:18-20; 44:9-20; etc.); 2. Neglect or oppression of the vulnerable in society, especially the triad: 'the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the land' (Deut 10:18; 24:19; Ps 94:6; 146:9; Jer 7:6; 22:3; Zech 7:10.). The former put in question Israel's allegiance to the relationship with yhwh alone, the latter contravened explicit prescriptions in the Torah to care for the vulnerable in society, indicated as particularly the object of divine concern. Speaking in God's name, in the face of such abuses, the prophet recalled those in power to return to and respect the covenant obligations.

JESUS: THE COMMUNITY OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus stood within this prophetic tradition, while transcending it in obvious ways. The centre of his proclamation was the 'good news' ('Gospel') of the Rule ('Kingdom') of God (Mark 1:14-15). This was a summons to conversion of heart ('repent') in view of a renewed and far more intimate relationship that God was now offering to Israel (and ultimately all human beings). Jesus' preaching was not directed against idolatry as such, but, especially in his parables, he did point out the obstacles to this new allegiance created by attachment to wealth, family, and other concerns destructive of relationship with God in a way akin to idolatry (Luke 16:13). Likewise, in teaching and action Jesus constantly drew attention to

the exclusion of the marginalised and, especially in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-23), pointed to their privileged position in the sight of God.

The Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed was ‘eschatological’ in the sense that its full realization in Israel and the world was something still outstanding. The prevailing counter rule of Satan over human lives (the demonic) had yet to be displaced. So he taught his disciples to pray to the Father, ‘Your kingdom *come*’ and ‘Deliver us from evil’ (Matt 6:10, 13; Luke 11:2-4). What was available here and now was the *relationship* with God characteristic of the Kingdom. So many of the parables address this ‘already/not yet’ aspect of the Kingdom: ‘already’ in relationship; ‘not yet’ in transformation of the world. Disciples have to live out the relationship with God characteristic of the Kingdom and the values of the Kingdom stemming from that relationship in a world as yet untransformed or fully won for God. The Beatitudes and indeed the entire Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7; see also Luke 6:20-49) offer one long exposition of how life is to be led in the community of the Kingdom. The setting for the Sermon is an address to the disciples in plain view and hearing of the wider mass of afflicted people gathered below (Matt 4:23-5:2; see Luke 6:17-19). Only by living out the costly values spelt out by Jesus in the Sermon can the disciples, extending the healing and liberating ministry of Jesus, be something for the afflicted mass of the world.

Jesus, as we know, paid the ultimate price for embodying in his person, his prophetic teaching and action, the values of the Kingdom he proclaimed. His disciples saw his resurrection as divine vindication of those values and a pledge that their ultimate implementation in the world would soon be realized when he returned in glory to complete his messianic task. The eschatological hope of the early community of believers was in this sense very keen. As the years passed, however, and the message of the Gospel spread beyond Israel into the wider Greco-Roman world, the intensity of that expectation began to wane. A degree of ‘adjustment’ to living in the world and various aspects of its social set up came about, as witnessed by the later letters of the Pauline corpus (Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 6:1-9; 1-2 Timothy; Titus) and details in the Gospels that reflect the time and conditions of the early church rather than situation of Jesus. Had all his early disciples literally followed his injunction to ‘leave houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, children and fields for the sake of the Gospel’ (see Mark 10:29-30) or Paul’s recommendation that, in view of the coming distress (the end of the present world) it was better not to marry (see 1 Cor 7:25-40), Christianity would hardly have lasted beyond the first generation. Adjustments had to be made – seen perhaps

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most evidently in the adoption of the Greco-Roman household codes regulating domestic relationships (Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Peter 2:11–4:7; etc.).

My understanding is that religious life in its earliest form – that of the desert fathers – emerged around the same time as Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire in the fourth century C.E. Whereas up till then it had been more costly to be a Christian than not to be one, now it was more costly *not* to be a Christian (e.g., a Jew or a continuing pagan) rather than to be one. With persecution and indeed martyrdom no longer on offer, dedicated Christians were inspired to look for new contexts in which to live out the heroism they rightly saw to be central to the Gospel. They found it in the desert.

A TWO-TRACK PATH

Over the centuries, however, with the growth of the monastic life – no longer solely in the desert but also in more settled areas – there arose in the Catholic tradition something of a two-track path to salvation: the way of the ordinary faithful, who kept the basic commandments, and that of religious, who lived by ‘the evangelical counsels’. In this way to some extent Catholicism was able to be a religion for all members of society without losing its aspiration to live by the high ideals of the Kingdom embodied in the Sermon on the Mount and other teachings of Jesus. The challenge held out by Jesus to the Rich (young) Man (Mark 10:17-31; Matt 19:16-30; Luke 18:18-30) became emblematic of the call to a religious vocation, rather than something addressed – as in the original gospel context – to all disciples generally.

As I have already noted, the Reformers sharply challenged this ‘two-track’ path to salvation. And five centuries later, the Catholic Church implicitly took cognizance of their critique with Vatican II’s insistence upon the universal call to holiness. Where, then, does this leave religious life?

WITNESS TO THE VALUES OF THE KINGDOM

In this connection we cannot avoid speaking of eschatology, that is, of the ‘already/not yet’ character of the Kingdom. While the majority of the members of the Church have to live in the world and deal with the world, recognizing its goodness as well as its snares and temptations, the essential role of religious is to preserve and witness more intentionally to those values of the ‘dawning but not yet arrived’ Kingdom incumbent upon all: to ‘wait upon the Lord’ in contemplation, to eschew attachment to wealth and possessions, to live out in community the fraternity across difference of the earliest believing community (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-37).

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How this all finds expression in the traditional threefold vows – poverty, chastity, and obedience – I'm not too sure. Perhaps the traditional nomenclature has outlived its usefulness. But the vows are too large a subject to enter upon here.

VOCATION

A final word about 'vocation'. As we have noted again and again, the sense of being a 'called' people is central to the inheritance Christianity received from its Jewish origins. And in our time Vatican II has 'retrieved' the universal scope of this privilege. All the baptized 'have a vocation'. The calling is the work of God but is directed to a human situation that enters centrally into the process. While I would not deny that God calls people specifically to religious life within the wider sense of Christian vocation, there is doubtless a human element involved in the choice that reflects not only personal conditions and circumstances but societal ones as well.

This may explain why certain times and situations – the forties and fifties of the last century for the Western Church; the present time for Asia and Africa – are more favourable to the fostering of vocations than others. There is no doubt that, save in regard to the more recently arrived ethnic communities and with a 'Francis-effect' discernible in some places, the Churches of the West face an uphill battle to attract candidates at this time. Perhaps we need to become more overtly contemplative – waiting upon the coming of the Lord – more eager in apostolic terms to discern precisely where we ought contribute, alongside and together with lay partners in a shared but distinct commitment.

The Year of the Consecrated Life has been and gone. To what extent it sparked a revival of religious life remains a question. Honesty and realism appear to be refreshing hallmarks of Pope Francis' pontificate so far. We may hope that the frankness and openness that he promotes will also prevail as religious continue to confront the challenges and questions facing their way of life today, not least, in many areas, its patent numerical decline.