

# Are We Fascinating? Religious Life As a Prophetic Life Form

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## Introduction

In Gerhard Lohfink's most recent book, *No Irrelevant Jesus: On Jesus and the Church Today*, the author poses a question in Chapter 21: "What distinguishes Christianity from [other] religions?"<sup>1</sup> In one aspect of this tradition, redemption takes time.<sup>2</sup> The reason why it takes time is that the message of redemption is conveyed not so much by authoritative action but by example of life. This distinguishes the Judaeo-Christian belief from other religions.

In his analysis Lohfink compares the Judaeo-Christian understanding of redemption<sup>3</sup> to that of a revolutionary stance toward redemption. Revolutionaries seek salvation/freedom by applying rapidly inflicted force. He gives the example of Communists who "openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions."<sup>4</sup> The new order is brought about by violent suppression of the free choices of those who do not accept the vision of the revolutionaries—immediately.

By contrast, Christian belief holds that salvation is a process that unfolds in history. It began small, with one person. The man Abraham was called to a new way of life, but even in his case, God had to wait on his response. In the Judaeo-Christian story salvation is a call to a relationship. It is initiated by God, who respects the freedom of those involved to choose to be part of it, or not. Thus, the Judaeo-Christian religion began with a call to a way of life that brings true freedom, while respecting the freedom of those called. It is a process that takes time.

Through the fidelity and example of Abraham a new family of God was born. This family grew in numbers and understanding of what belonging to God meant until the final and full word of salvation was uttered in Christ Jesus. From then on, all who heard and then freely uttered the words, "I believe, in a baptismal ritual entered into a community of salvation, the church.

Now, this new people of God does not exist for itself, but for the sake of all people and nations. For that reason, it must be communicated to others so that, in their way of living, others can see that justice, peace and love are possible in this life. Others drawn to this community "can accept the new social order in freedom, simply because they are fascinated by it."<sup>5</sup>

This is how God chose the world to be redeemed—slowly and through the example of those who have heard the call. Salvation comes about not by compulsion, but through fascination with a way of life in this world, which God intended all along, namely, a world living in the Reign of God. It is through the lived example of those who have been saved that intrigues others to ask, "How can I get some of that?"

## Religious Life as a Lifeform

In a recent 5-day seminar on religious life in the new millenium<sup>6</sup> Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M. offered a synthetic description of ministerial religious life. She began her lectures with the following description:

Ministerial Religious Life is a Christian, mystical-prophetic lifeform given to the Church by the Holy Spirit and is constituted by perpetual profession of consecrated celibacy, evangelical

poverty, prophetic obedience lived in transcendent community and ministry.<sup>7</sup>

This description summarized her trilogy on religious life written over the period of thirteen years.<sup>8</sup>

In her writings and in her lectures during this seminar, the term "lifeform" was used consistently to epitomize the fundamental character of religious life. "Lifeform" is not "lifestyle." The

latter is like a collection of parts that do not form a whole.

“Lifeform” is organic—all the parts live and move as one. This is not to say that the lifeform of women religious is rigid, for a lifeform adapts to the changes in its environment, but without losing its identity. The lifeform of religious life is centered and grounded around the message of Christ. It is a lifeform that has existed since the first century of the church, a gift of the Holy Spirit to the church in and to the world. It is a public way of life whose mission is to make visible the redeemed way of life, lived according to the teaching of the gospel of Christ.

What are the forces that lead the people away from the reign of God? Schneiders names these as sex, money, and power. They are the craving for sexual pleasure for itself alone, the urge to acquire things for oneself regardless of the impact on others, and the claim of power over others regardless of the loss of free choice to others.

By contrast, the alternate lifeform of consecrated religious is one that speaks of a permanent commitment to a way of life that expresses and cultivates authentic human relationships in celibacy. It shows a way of possessing things without being possessed by them in poverty. It exemplifies a use of power that serves and listens to others in order to bring about the freedom of the reign of God in obedience.

Schneiders makes clear that the religious lifeform is not a better or more perfect way of life than that of committed baptized laypersons. They, too, by their baptism and their particular vocation in the church, are called to witness in such a way that they are “fascinating” to those who have not heard the gospel. In the early centuries of the church, Tertullian summed up this way of evangelizing by noting that the Romans of his day would exclaim of Christians: “See how they love one another.”

The charism of religious life is, further, a lifeform that is constituted by living a vowed life in a community. Religious community is unique in that it transcends the usual bonds that hold people together. Religious live in community brought together not by blood or marriage or even friendship. They are united by the call of the Holy Spirit to witness to the gospel through their entire way of life: consecrated celibacy lived in community, evangelical poverty in their handing over of personal possessions for the life and ministry of the whole community, and prophetic obedience in their willingness to share authority and power in community for the purpose of ministry and the realization of the Reign of God.

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### Visibility

Religious life, therefore, is a lifeform whose charism is to witness to the Reign of God in such a way that it illustrates another way of life different from that of “the world.” It witnesses to ways of relating to others, having possessions, and using power. These touch on impulses that are deep within every human person that can be used or abused. But because the way the vowed religious incarnates the expressions of these impulses--with love, freedom, respect for others--this way of life both fascinates and attracts and challenges. In other words, religious life is prophetic.

But if religious life is supposed to fascinate must it not be seen? How do religious make the Reign of God visible to others by the way they live? The ever-present controversy among religious about the habit touches this question of visibility. Some say this is the way we are noticed. Without the habit how do others know we even exist?

Others say, however, the sight of a nun in a habit often brings forth the caricature of the “Sister-disciplinarian” of a previous generation, or the person who expects respect and a certain kind of behavior from others. Thus, the choice to wear “regular clothes” concretizes Vatican II’s teaching

that the church exists *in* the modern world, not apart from it. Sisters are not higher or better than anyone else.

It is not the purpose of these examples to prove who is right in resolving the habit question. But it does ask the question: How can religious best be identified in our society today? And what do they want to exemplify to others? To make this personal, recall a time when someone has pegged you as a religious. What did they see in you that caused them to know who you were? Was it the caricature of past years, or a behavior that was gospel-like?

### Effect of the Apostolic Visitation

More importantly, if religious life as we experience it today does radically change from what it is and religious congregations of today become history, religious life in new forms will come about. When this question of visibility came up at the Sandra Schneiders Seminar, Sandra responded somewhat facetiously that the Vatican's doctrinal assessment of LCWR and apostolic visitation of women's communities in recent years was possibly one of the greatest gifts given religious because it drew attention of the public to the reality of the "new nuns." Religious were seen as women who are not afraid to oppose, stand firmly, but respectfully, in the face of accusations that were neither relevant nor true.

With interest stirred by the Vatican charges, the media began to report on the lifetime commitment and good works of religious. Many people throughout the country came to support religious. This painful incident opened a window of visibility that has left a favorable impression on the public. These women are witnesses to the gospel, dedicated to Christ and to the people of God. In the words of Pope Francis in his exhortation to

religious, these recent difficult experiences have served to "wake up the world."

Religious life ought to promote growth in the Church by way of attraction. The Church must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world... [R]eligious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way. It is this witness that I expect of you. Religious should be men and women who are able to wake the world up.<sup>9</sup>

### The Numbers Question

The title of Sandra Schneiders' seminar was "Religious Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Inevitably, the question of the declining numbers of religious came up in the discussions. Will the increasingly high median age of religious lessen attractiveness of the life? Doesn't that already seem to be happening? Will there even be any religious left at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to witness by their unique prophetic lifeform?

Sandra responded by making a distinction between "diminishment" and "relinquishment" in connection with the numbers question. She noted that "diminishment" is passive, people just watching it happen. However, "relinquishment" requires an active choice. Thus, even as we age and grow smaller, we have to relinquish certain abilities. This does not mean we cease to be a prophetic lifeform, for it is our lifeform that is prophetic. In religious life we don't age out.<sup>10</sup>

More importantly, if religious life as we experience it today does radically change from what it is and religious congregations of today become history, religious life in new forms will come about. Why? Because religious life is a charism of the church. Immediately after one expression has served its purpose in attracting others to the gospel way of life through its charism, new expressions will emerge through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

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## It All Takes Time

In the beginning of this essay, I referred to Lohfink's view that Christian salvation takes time because it is spread, not by force, but by word and example—and this is an historical process, not a sudden event. So much has happened in the lives of religious since Vatican II but sometimes the process has seemed to slow down, especially today with resistance from the hierarchy, and with our concern for our aging numbers. We get impatient.

Pope Francis' teaching on the principles of evangelization in *Evangelii gaudium* are helpful in addressing these issues:

- Evangelization takes time.
- In the process of evangelization, differences and conflicts will surface. These must be faced and dealt with in a process of reconciliation.
- The good news is incarnational. It is more about the realities of life than ideas or theories.
- Evangelization is a community effort. Individuals often don't see the results of their own life-witness. But it is necessary to believe that each person contributes to the whole prophetic endeavor.

Moreover, as the title of Francis' apostolic exhortation indicates, the efforts of religious to be faithful to their lifeform, along with its charism and mission, will involve challenging events and issues. Despite difficulties, these efforts should be clothed with joy and assurance of the truth with which we have been entrusted.<sup>11</sup> The unique charism of religious calls for lifelong commitment and patient fidelity and open-eyed alertness to the world in which it lives. This way of life is a gift to the church, which will endure.

## Conclusion

In the Introduction to a newly published book, *From Teilhard to Omega*,<sup>12</sup> Ilia Delio the editor refers to Ewart Cousins' description of the dawning of a new age of consciousness rising

from mass communications, modern science, and technology. This new age is marked by a consciousness of community and ecological relatedness. "For the first time since the appearance of human life on our planet, all of the tribes, all of the nations, all of the religions are beginning to share a common history." However, this new age is still under construction and the builders are "mutational" persons, those that "think outside the ordinary sequence of events and whose insights can inspire others to think in new ways."

Doesn't it seem apparent that the prophetic lifeform of religious is a resource for such "mutational" persons? Wouldn't that be fascinating? ♦

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *No Irrelevant Jesus: On Jesus and the Church Today*, trans. Linda Maloney (MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> In this article the words salvation, freedom, redemption are used interchangeably, though it is recognized that each carries its own nuances theologically.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout his works Lohfink emphasizes the relation of Judaism and Christianity as one of promise and fulfillment.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit., p. 256.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., p. 258.

<sup>6</sup> This seminar took place at St. Mary's College in South Bend, Indiana on July 13-18, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> This definition was on a handout given at the beginning of her first lecture.

<sup>8</sup> This trilogy consists of these titles: *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000); *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy and Community in Catholic Religious Life* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2001); *Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World*, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> "Wake Up the World!" Conversation with Pope Francis about the Religious Life," trans. by Donald Maldari, S.J., *La Civilita cattolica* (2014) I, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> In an interesting aside, Sandra Schneiders observed that there's need today in religious Communities to describe a new formation period to prepare for the new sociological category emerging--Adulthood II, ages 65-85.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *The Joy of the Gospel*, pars. 222-237. USCCB, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Ilia Delio, ed., *From Teilhard to Omega: Cocreating an Unfinished Universe* (New York: Orbis Books, 2014): 1.