NOT FOR OURSELVES ALONE

When I was first asked to do this presentation on the spirituality and theology of apostolic religious life in the 21st century, I was somewhat daunted, considering the audience. There's a world of expertise here! To share a personal story: my local community includes a second year novice and three other professed sisters. One evening the novice offered to share her integration project from her canonical year. Using visual aids she had prepared, as well as a script she had written, she gave us a 45" presentation on the vows, community, and ministry. My reflection was that I wouldn't have been able to give such a coherent and compelling presentation of the essence of religious life until I was in the community at least 25 years. So I have a deep respect for work that is done in our incorporation programs these days, work that the RFC promotes and supports.

That said, religious life is not principally an academic subject, but a way of life. It is a path which has had myriad twists and turns over the centuries in response to new graces called forth by emerging needs and changing circumstances. It has survived attacks from without and betrayals from within. It has nourished saints and scholars, pioneers and explorers, founders and leaders whose names we revere. And enabling all of their great works were the countless sisters and brothers, nuns and monks who lived religious life with integrity and dedication. We have a great legacy to celebrate!

But now we are at the beginning of a new century and a new millennium. What is asked of us? What new insights and courageous beginnings will we leave to those who follow us? I would like to frame a response—or at least some intimations of a response—in light of a passage from the synodal document on consecrated life, *Vita Consecrata*.

> Its universal presence and the evangelical nature of its witness are clear evidence . . . that the consecrated life *is not something isolated and marginal, but a reality which affects the whole Church*. . . . In effect, *the consecrated life is at*

> *the very heart of the Church* as a decisive element for her mission, since it "manifests the inner nature of the Christian call" and the striving of the whole Church as Bride towards union with her one Spouse. . . . the consecrated life has not only proved a help and support for the Church in the past, but is also a precious and necessary gift for the present and future of the People of God, since it is an intimate part of her life, her holiness and her mission.[i]

Taking my cue from that passage, I would like to frame what follows in terms of 'Church' as a context for apostolic religious life. How and in what sense is our life and witness a gift to the Church? Let's step back for a minute and ask ourselves why we seek new members for our congregations. Is it to guarantee our security in our old age? Or to vindicate the choice each of us has made of a way of life? Such answers are unworthy of us. The response has to be that we seek to grow our congregations because the Church would be somehow diminished without this distinctive witness. This life is such a means of deep joy—not only as individual seekers, but as members of the community that we call Church--that we are eager to share it with others. The gift of a vocation is given not for ourselves alone, but for the sake of the Church.

Framing a talk in terms of our gift to the Church may seem foolhardy in today's world. Have you ever heard a member say, "I am happy being a Sister of St. Joseph or a Sister of Mercy, but I don't feel like I belong to the Catholic Church? This isn't an easy time to embrace our membership in the Church! We all know about the struggles of individual theologians with bishops here or in Rome, about apostolic visitations and investigations, about clerical scandals, about unpopular liturgical changes, about quarrels over insuring women for contraception and over health care reform. The list goes on. The only thing that is empirically verifiable about the Church is its humanness, and our humanity is tainted by sinfulness. All of this raises challenging, even uncomfortable, questions about our role in the Church, the gift that we bring. I will try to respond to the question under three headings: the charismatic and prophetic dimension of our gift, the communitarian dimension, and the ministry dimension. In a final section I want to address the gift of change in religious life.

Before going further, however, let me offer a definition and propose a thesis. My definition of Church is the *life and work of Jesus Christ extended in time and place.* If you think about it a little bit you can see what depth is contained in a few words. My thesis is that our life is profoundly ecclesial, that it enriches the Church in unique ways and that, conversely, we are validated and strengthened by our membership in the Church. In what ways do we extend the life and work of Jesus Christ in time and space? What is the specific gift we bring as vowed religious?

Charismatic and prophetic dimension

Let me distinguish first between our two adjectives: charism refers to a gift; prophecy to the use we make of the gift. Let's look at each of them. V2 advanced the distinction between the institutional and charismatic dimensions of the Church. The former consists of the structural elements such as offices, ministries, and teachings. The latter, the charismatic dimension, consists of all those spiritual gifts which are freely bestowed by the Spirit on pastors and laity alike. The familiar words of St. Paul to the Corinthians come to mind, in which he exhorts his readers to appreciate the many kinds of spiritual gifts and forms of service: "to each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit." (I Cor. 12:7) Among the gifts is the charism of religious life, the special call or grace some women and men have received to found a new congregation, frequently in conjunction with launching some new ministerial initiative. For a new congregation to take root and to flourish, its charism is recognized by the institutional Church and its members nourish the original inspiration through subsequent generations.

All of this is very familiar. But I think our perceptions vary when we use the word 'prophetic.' What does that descriptor mean, and how are we entitled to use it? In its strictest construction, to prophesy means to speak for God, to reveal God's message in some way. Prophecy doesn't necessarily mean dramatic speeches and gestures and public demonstrations, although some occasions do call for them. Rather, it connotes a

transparency to the divine which is the fruit of a life focused on Jesus. It requires a facility in drawing the gaze of the inquirer from ourselves to the Gospel that we proclaim and which animates us. The very suggestion that our life is prophetic is enough to make one tremble!

What is it about our lives that draws the gaze of an onlooker from us to the divine? The synodal exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, responds this way: "Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God's will, for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom." (#84) The exhortation continues that our affirmation of the primacy of God is evidenced in "the following and imitation of the chaste, poor and obedient Christ, who was completely consecrated to the glory of God and to the love of his brethren" (#85)

The imitation of the chaste, poor and obedient Christ suggests that the prophetic core of our life is located in the authentic living of our vows. There's no need to develop the meaning of the vows to this audience, but let me suggest some dimensions that contribute to their prophetic witness. The first is permanency. To promise, "for life" and to live that out, is so profoundly countercultural that it demands attention.

The second qualification of the vowed life that makes it prophetic is the ability to remain faithful while adapting to changing circumstances. To live a vow of poverty in the 21st century when, in all likelihood, you have a car and a computer, an I-pad and a cell phone to your personal use is almost incomprehensively removed from my experience fifty years ago when we had to ask the superior for bus fare in order to go to the library or the dentist. And yet the core commitment of holding all things in common, of living simply, of radical dependence on one's congregation for everything is unchanged. Similarly, living a celibate life felt different when we seldom interacted with persons of the opposite sex compared to today when our ministerial, and even our

social, settings bring us into contact with a wider array of persons. And our lives of vowed obedience have matured from constant seeking of permissions into experiences of shared discernment and decision-making. I would suggest that the evolution of new circumstances for living our vowed lives requires a greater intentionality than it did when so much was prescribed for us. To live the vows with integrity and passion in the 21st century is as prophetic as it was in the 4th or 12th or 18th centuries.

Still one more qualification that makes our vowed life prophetic is the visibility of our commitment. This leads me to the communitarian dimension of our ecclesial vocation.

Communitarian Dimension

The notion of 'communio' or communion is often described as the heart of the message of the Second Vatican Council. All members of the Church are united by one call to holiness. Whatever our walk in life, we all share in the universal vocation to extend the life and work of Jesus Christ to and among the people of our time. As religious, we can say that, more than any other group in the Church, our vocation is specifically and publicly communitarian. I don't want to talk about the challenges to living community life today—issues of housing, of mobility, of individual preferences, etc. There is a time and a place for those discussions and congregational leaders have to attend to them. Instead, let me connect community living to our experience of the Eucharist. I'm inspired by another passage from *Vita Consecrata*: "By its very nature the Eucharist is at the centre of the consecrated life, both for individuals and for communities. It is the daily viaticum and source of the spiritual life for the individual and for the Institute. By means of the Eucharist all consecrated persons are called to live Christ's paschal Mystery, uniting themselves to him by offering their own lives to the Father through the Holy Spirit." (#95) This is a pretty lofty ideal, probably honored more in the telling than the doing. But let me suggest a few ways in which I think community living is related to the Eucharist.[ii]

Both the Eucharist and religious community are inherently incarnational. **The Word is made flesh.** There is a physicality about each that is intrinsic to its nature. Part of our Eucharistic belief and piety embraces the concept of a Real Presence, i.e., the concept that under the appearances of bread and wine the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained. The accidents of bread and wine are tangible, able to be seen, touched, and eaten.

We know that religious community is also tangible: it is a social experience in which real people relate to one another in significant and mutually supportive ways. Sometimes we speak of 'community' as an abstraction, one which is easy to affirm because as an abstraction it makes no demands on us. But religious community is meant to be a tissue of daily relationships, the context in which we realize all the other dimensions of our vowed life.

Carrying the incarnational analogy even further, both Eucharist and religious community are preeminent realizations of Church. As the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy reminds us, "The liturgy is the outstanding means by which the faithful can express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church." (#2) When the faithful gather to celebrate Eucharist, Church 'happens.' The Synod on Consecrated Life also saw a unique ecclesial manifestation in this life. *Vita Consecrata* calls community life "an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion," that is, of the Church's fundamental identity. (#42) Community demonstrates that sharing in trinitarian communion can change human relationships and create a new type of solidarity, not built on family ties or natural attraction, but on common values and commitments. Community is described as a "God-enlightened space in which to experience the presence of the risen Lord."

In literature there is a figure of speech called synecdoche in which the part is used to represent the whole or contains the whole. Perhaps we can use that figure of speech to illustrate a similarity between the Eucharistic assembly and religious

community—each in its own way, limited in time and space, is a special manifestation of the Church, past, present, and future, throughout the world.

Still another similarity between Eucharist and community is that each lives by a story. **Do this in memory of me.** Whenever Mass is celebrated, the story of our redemption is re-told and the stuff of our lives is incorporated into that story. For example, in the penitential rite we are reminded that Jesus heals the wounds of sin and division, and then we recall our sins and ask and receive forgiveness. Scripture readings highlight some aspect of salvation history, and the homily applies it to our lives. In the Creed we recite the ancient truths and affirm our contemporary belief. In the Offertory our gifts are brought to the altar in order to be transformed into Christ's Body and Blood, and so forth. The words of consecration recall the Last Supper, but it is the present action which is important. The telling and re-telling of the story of salvation is a not a sterile repetition, but an opportunity for us to be drawn into an ongoing story and to make it our own. It is ultimately a transforming story. One day recently the prayer after Communion included the words, "Become what you have received." We could never exhaust the meaning of that short phrase. Nourished by Christ's Body and Blood, we are incorporated into his identity and become Christ in the world.

Each religious institute also lives by a story. The circumstances of the founding, the teachings of the founder, the sufferings and hardships of early members, accounts of new missions undertaken, tales of saintly individuals—all of these are elements in a congregational history which is still being written. A new member is gradually introduced to that story in a process analogous to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Bit by bit he learns the story and becomes a part of it. The story is more than facts: it includes beliefs, values, customs which have to be interiorized if a new member is to be really incorporated. These latter are best taught by example. The new member lives in a community that shows her or him in a natural and unself-conscious way what it is to be a Sister of Mercy or a Brother of Mary. Gradually she or he takes on the new identity and lives out of it in an authentic way.

Both processes—Eucharistic and congregational incorporation—illustrate the meaning of theological tradition, the process of preservation and development by which some truth, whether divine revelation itself or a founding charism, is made available to succeeding generations. Through successive generations of recalling and living and praying that truth, new persons are enabled to enter into the community of belief and practice and to contribute their insights. The words used may differ as languages and cultures change, but the essential identity endures, under the guidance of the Spirit. Eucharist community and religious community are communities of memory, nourished by re-telling the story. The words of the evangelist John apply to both, "What we have seen and heard, we proclaim now to you, so that you may have communion with us." (1 Jn 1:3)

Still another analogy between Eucharistic and religious communities is captured by the phrase, **That All May Be One**. No group on earth is more diverse than the community of Christian believers. A Coptic Christian in a refugee camp in Ethiopia, a *campesino* in the highlands of Peru, a mid-West tourist at St. Patrick's Cathedral. All take part in the same liturgy, albeit in different languages and rites. Nor does the diversity end there. Even within the same national or ethnic group vocational choices, personal gifts, economic circumstances, theological tendencies, and spiritual preferences may differentiate worshipers from one another. Just look around the church some morning and appreciate the diversity present there. Retirees, business executives, students, factory workers, a few street people--all feel comfortable. The Church's identity as *communio* means that all members share a fundamental unity, rooted In baptism. Whatever their differences, the liturgy inspires the faithful to become of one heart in love.

Religious community has its own diversity. Prior to renewal we often ignored our differences or tried to eliminate them through adherence to minutiae of rules and customs. Once we began to recognize and appreciate individual differences, however, we did not always differentiate between wholesome and destructive diversity. Or

perhaps more accurately, we did not always differentiate between accidental differences which can enhance community and substantive differences which can erode common meaning.

It's easy to think of examples of diversity within a single congregation—national origin (especially if it's an international institute), ethnicity, age, personality types, education, professional expertise, ministry experience, tendencies in theology and spirituality, preferences in art, music, and recreation. On the one hand, this variety of gifts is a wonderful treasure. On the other, it creates a formidable challenge to the unity of mind and heart which is the ideal of religious life. If it is to flourish this unity must be rooted in a common understanding of the core commitments of the vowed life and a common passion for the mission and be nourished by the sound traditions of the congregation. For we are not on individual spiritual journeys which only occasionally intersect, but on a shared journey in which the successes and failures of each are challenges to all to grow.

The successful integration of a variety of gifts within a religious community mirrors ecclesial communion and contributes to its flourishing. Hospitality and inclusive love are characteristics of both Eucharistic and religious community celebrations.

Finally, as the liturgy draws to a close, **We are sent forth in mission**—still another analogy to our religious communities. In the prayers of petition we remembered the needs of our families, friends, community members, the Church and the world. We offered ourselves with the elements of bread and wine and now Christ has incorporated us more deeply into himself so that our hands will be his hands, our hearts his heart in a mission of service to others. Each liturgy ends in a commissioning which echoes the commissioning of Jesus' disciples before his Ascension: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." The message isn't "keep safe and stay well until we meet again," but rather, "go forth to love and serve me in the least of my brethren. What you have received, give freely. And

when next you gather at my table, bring the cares and needs of your neighbors with you."

Liturgy is not a place to retreat from the world's problems for an hour of spiritual comfort. It is a time to penetrate more deeply into the meaning of the world's problems through the lens of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Communion should help us see with his vision. This means seeing beneath the surface of events to the roots of the world's problems. Seeing with Christ's eyes—what we call contemplation—is necessary for entering into the struggle against evil in the depths of human hearts and in the structures of society.

Ministry Dimension

Similarly, religious community life is oriented toward mission. "Not for ourselves alone," should be the watchword. Consecrated life is apostolic in its very essence. It is not that persons in religious congregations do apostolic works or have individual ministries, but that the whole way of life is for the sake of making visible and attractive the love of God. Community life, therefore, as an intrinsic element of the consecrated life, should be mission oriented in its intentionality and expression. An apostolic community welcomes neighbors and friends and even, at times aliens and strangers. An apostolic community weaves the needs of the world into its spiritual consciousness and common prayer. An apostolic community shares its resources with the needy. An apostolic community responds to the needs and priorities of the larger congregation and also welcomes new members and introduces them to the way of life. In short, an apostolic community is not turned in on itself. Isolated and self-sufficient, but open to receive and share with others. Both Eucharistic and religious community generate a dynamic of apostolic engagement and support.

Moving out from the reality of our community life as an expression of mission, how do our other ministries constitute a gift to the Church? How are they an extension of the life and work of Jesus Christ?

Here we find ourselves in new waters. For many reasons which time doesn't permit us to elaborate, but with which you are all familiar, our ministerial landscape has changed enormously in the last fifty years. Our members are engaged in a variety of ministries which didn't exist decades ago, and we have largely left many of our traditional ministries, especially the institutions, the schools, colleges, residences for the elderly, hospitals, etc. that we founded and staffed for generations. I want to suggest three things we can do to ensure that these new expressions of ministry are a gift to the Church.

First, articulate the Gospel-oriented value of the work. This should be a shared conversation between the individual religious and his/her congregational leader. Too often I hear it said, "Sister is looking for a job." Believe me; I know from the congregational side how important it is for each member to be employed, for her sake and for the sake of the congregation. But there is something askew when ministry discernment is reduced to a job hunt. Whether the quest for a new ministry ends up in direct service or in a supportive or administrative role which backs up a service role, the sister should be challenged to articulate the specific ministerial dimension of her new work and, if possible, how it aligns with the congregation's charism and mission. How are the poor and vulnerable in society impacted by this work? What social change can potentially be achieved by the efforts of this organization which I am supporting? How is the Good News of Jesus Christ proclaimed, even if indirectly?

Second, in whatever ministry the sister is engaged, she should be recognized as a member of her congregation and as an agent of its mission. At times I notice a distressing tendency toward anonymity in ministry, as if the sister were indistinguishable from every other employee. The lack of a religious symbol, the lack of the use of 'sister' in introducing oneself, the infrequency of references to one's community—all diminish the effective ministry of the sister.

Third, the encouragement and development of the laity in whatever ministries we are engaged should be a priority. The Church encompasses the whole People of God. Strengthening them in their commitment builds the Church. Our sponsored institutions frequently have formal programs of formation for trustees, executive, and employees. But even where these don't exist, we have the opportunity to lead by example, by the quality of our work, by our articulation of Gospel values when significant decisions are being made, by our relationships with our co-workers, by our concern for anyone who is undergoing some personal trial. Who knows—our presence may prompt an inquiry about association or even membership, but whatever the outcome, it should be evident that we are there in ministry.

The Gift of Change

Let's move now to a fourth way in which our lives can be a gift to the Church, namely, by navigating the waters of change. This may not be intuitively obvious, in view of the considerable pain we may associate with change. But I want to step back and view the changes we've made since Vatican II and the changes we will make in the future through the lens of ecclesial life. (Earlier I named our ability to adapt to new realities in our observance of the vows as an element in our prophetic gift.)

First of all, change is a characteristic of a living organism; to adapt well to one's changing environment is essential to continuing vitality. The Church has changed often through two millennia, in its organization, its political activity, its rituals, and its teachings. It was once considered sinful to borrow money at interest; that is no longer taught. Slavery was once condoned; that is no longer the case. Vatican II ushered in countless changes in teachings and practices which many had come to consider unchangeable. Here's where we come in. In the 1960s we were more prepared than any other group in the Church to understand and accept the changes. Our leaders, encouraged by Pope Pius XII, had inaugurated the Sister Formation Movement some fifteen years earlier, thus preparing a generation of young sisters uniquely ready to understand and implement change. Meanwhile, most seminary curricula were still

based on 19th century theology manuals, and the laity had had no opportunity to glimpse the changes which were in store.

As a result of our unique state of readiness, we launched into an unprecedented period of experimentation and renewal. Let me share a short personal anecdote. In 1993 I had the privilege of attending the Synod on Consecrated Life as an auditor, on behalf of the LCWR. The American delegates to the Synod, Cardinal Bernardin and others, were lodged at the North American College, the residence and formation house.for Americans and Canadians studying at the various Roman universities. One evening we were asked to give a briefing to the seminarians and young priests on how the Synod was going. As I looked at the group of young men, probably among the best and the brightest that the American Church had to offer, I realized that none of them had any idea of why the sisters had changed. They had nostalgic images of sisters in traditional habits staffing every classroom, but where we were now and what we were up to—they were clueless. In response to a question about why we changed, I responded, "We changed in obedience to the Church." Not in defiance or in disregard of authority, but in obedience. The Council fathers recognized something that our own leaders, by and large, already understood, that much about our lives was irrelevant and fostered immaturity.

The Norms for the implementation of the Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life charged us to enter into a period of experimentation which was to be concluded some six or more years later by the adoption of a new or revised constitutions. The notion of experimentation was a flawed concept from the beginning. Any social science experimentation involves an experimental group and a control group. After a period of time the impact of some new behavior on one group can be compared with the impact on the other group, and suitable conclusions reached. But in our experimentation, everyone was mandated to take part. There was no control group. Meanwhile, the whole world around us was changing. So if, after a few years of some new behavior, such as going out without a companion, or driving cars, or donning contemporary dress, the results weren't quite what had been anticipated, there was no going back. We had

changed and the world had changed. Another observation is that we didn't do a very good job of explaining to the laity our reasons for change, either assuming the reasons were self-evident or that it was solely our concern. As a result we became less and less visible and as our number decreased, seemingly less relevant.

Looking back on all of this from today's vantage point, I think we can agree that there were intended and unintended consequences of the changes we made. As a result of our new mobility we are more apostolically available, but we can also be distracted by a lot of things that diminish our apostolic focus. Our contemporary dress inserts us more integrally into contemporary culture, but risks suggesting that there is nothing distinctive about our way of life. Our withdrawal from many institutions made us available for new and cutting-edge ministries of social justice and spirituality; at the same time we lost the opportunities for leadership development that professional administration of institutions provided.

What of change going forward? How is this a gift to the Church? We have talked about the prophetic living of the vows, about the witness of community life, about the impact of our continuing commitment to ministry as constituting part of our gift. These workshops are opportunities to imagine the future, to think about how our congregations might change and adapt to the present reality in preparation for the future still before us. Here are a few suggestions prompted in part by the CARA study of young religious.

- Don't be afraid to re-examine long-discarded practices for potential future relevance. For example, daily prayer together may be infrequent due to disparate schedules, sisters living alone, or a preference for individual spiritual practices. But the discipline of showing up, of being responsible for leadership in prayer, of uniting our intentions for the Church and world fosters community life. People want to know that prayer together is central to who we are. Occasionally mentioning our prayer or even inviting others to share in it can be powerful. Attending Eucharist together, at least on Sunday, is another sign of

our shared public commitment. Returning to some form of common dress, at least for ministry and public occasions, could be another strong witness. To depart from a practice for one set of reasons, and to return for another, is not restorationism, but evidence of a deeper insight.

- Don't be afraid to ask hard things of members. If we consider the phenomenal success of the lay movements such as Communion and Liberation, the Neo-Catechemenate, Focolare, and San Egidio in some parts of the world, we have to recognize that they have grown not because they are a watered down version of religious life, but because of the uncompromising demands they made on membership, including married couples and families, for daily prayer and service. (In a half century or so they have grown to include hundreds of thousands of members in Europe and Latin America.)

- Do involve the whole congregation in creating the future. Change within our communities will not come from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious or from the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious. It won't even come from the Congregation for Religious. To be authentic, it has to emanate from the creative imagination and shared discernment of your whole membership. We all have individual members who lead lives of uncompromising generosity, of admirable goodness, but it's easy to marginalize them, to excuse ourselves from similar efforts because 'they' are unusual or special. Effective change has to be endorsed by the chapter itself and embraced by the whole membership.

- Do integrate the inner and outer focus in your plan for the future. Sometimes it's easier to commit to some external focus like ecology or immigration than it is to re-examine the integrity of our daily living of the vows. After all, the leadership will take the lead on the ministry to immigrants, perhaps signing a petition to Congress or donating to some organization. A few of our members may even travel to Texas or New Mexico for a border witness. To be a genuine

mission of the congregation, everyone has to see how she can participate, e.g., by integrating the needs of immigrants into daily prayer together, by occasionally inviting a new immigrant to share our table, by personal service to some local group.

The sum of the challenges before us may suggest to the faint-hearted that our best days are behind us. But no one has the luxury of choosing his or her own time. Our 19th century founders and our 20th century predecessors had no more certainty about the path forward than we do in the 21st century. Like them, we have to listen to the voices of the poor and act with compassion. Like them, we have to marshal our resources and act with courage. Like them, we have to renew our purpose and act with confidence. What if the Church seems indifferent to our gift? Our vocation is not given for ourselves alone, but for the building up of God's people, for the extension of Christ's work in our time and space. Let us run toward the future with glad hearts!

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[i] Pope John Paul II, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Vita Consecrata. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996. No. 3. Italics in the original.
[ii] This section is adapted from a presentation to the Eucharistic Congress, Archdiocese of Washington, DC, October 2000. Published in Review for Religious, March-April, 2001.