

RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE VATICAN II ERA: “STATE OF PERFECTION” OR LIVING CHARISM?

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Religious life has consistently played a prophetic role in the church; its post-Vatican II era is no exception. The failure of dialogue between those leaders whose ecclesiology is described as traditionalist and those labeled progressive continues to wound the Body of Christ. This article argues that it is in and through the dialogical living of their charism in service of the global church and society of the 21st century that religious offer healing and hope in and through their prophetic, ecclesial witness.

RELIGIOUS LIFE: PRE-VATICAN II

THROUGHOUT THE LIFE OF the Christian church, religious life has been in dialectical tension with both its ecclesial and cultural contexts. The various histories of religious life attest to the presence in the church almost from the beginning of lifestyles different from that of the baptismal norm.¹ The early eremitical and monastic forms were ways of commitment to God different from those of the typical “faithful.” The monastic, ministerial, or secular institute forms of religious life² have usually been generated by the inspired response of a significant leader who saw a situation of need,

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¹ Elizabeth Rapley, *The Lord as Their Portion: The Story of the Religious Orders and How They Shaped Our World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). This study focuses on the missionary initiatives of religious through history.

² There are various forms of naming active religious life in contrast to the monastic. I use the term “ministerial lifestyle,” following Sandra M. Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011).

of people suffering on life's margins for one reason or another, and who reached out to them in compassionate response. In most cases the charismatic leader was joined by a group of other dedicated Christians inspired to serve Christ and to live the Christian life in and through a community of discipleship.³

The pre-Vatican II church was predominantly European in terms of identity, discipline, and the exercise of power. It was a church in a problematic state as a consequence of the two world wars, global depression, and rebuilding that followed. In face of local or global upheaval or radical change, the tendency to solidify roots and identity in a familiar form is a common occurrence. The strong resistance of the institutional church to the uncertainties of the post-Enlightenment world along with the maintenance of a 19th-century fortress identity at its institutional center had set up tensions within the various European Catholic communities.

Religious life in the early 20th century was a largely northern hemispheric reality. While there were significant differences between the experience of ministerial religious life and its demands in Europe and that of North America, the demands of the 1917 Code of Canon Law had engendered a control and structuring of religious life that was not characteristic of previous eras.⁴ The repression of European religious congregations and communities during the two wars had its own impact. In postwar years, religious were active in ministry but their numbers were decreasing. There were more calls to open new institutions even though there were no religious to minister in them. Awareness of the dire situations faced by many European congregations led some bishops to envisage and argue for alternative religious lifestyles to meet the changing needs of the time. During Pius XII's papacy and into the 1960s, the Vatican

³ While religious life in the present era has been characterized by women and men who experienced a call to the contemplative or ministerial life of prayer and service, this was not always the case. Both Jo Ann McNamara and Elizabeth Rapley point out that in earlier centuries, women joined religious life as an alternative to marriage, and it was quite usual for affluent women to take up this lifestyle. See McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1996); and Rapley, *Lord as Their Portion*.

⁴ The Code of Canon Law, based on the previous *Codex juris canonici*, was promulgated under Pope Benedict XV in 1917 and published in English in 1918. For the implications of the new code and the transition of religious life from "extralegal if not illegal" aspects of lifestyle and ministry see Margaret S. Thompson, *The History of Women Religious in the United States* (Now You Know Media, <https://www.nowyouknowmedia.com/the-history-of-women-religious-in-the-united-states.html>, 2010, Topic 7. Thompson's work is available only on audio CD; a second CD allows one to print the text; I refer to the latter as "Written Guide"; topic and page numbers refer to it). All URLs cited herein were accessed on March 10, 2013.

Congregation for Religious Affairs commented on the situation of many religious communities:

It is unfortunately true that there are convent communities which are nearly dying of hunger, neglect and privation; and others which, because of material difficulty, lead a very painful life. There are other communities which, without living in need, often decline, because they are separated and isolated from all the others. Moreover, laws of the cloister, often too strict, frequently provoke great difficulties.⁵

Concerns about declining numbers of vocations, aging and overworked religious, ministerial burnout, and loss of an authentic religious spiritual life were major issues for the church hierarchy in the first half of the 20th century; they were not simply a post-Vatican II phenomenon.

Although their history was different from that of European religious, North American women religious were experiencing similar struggles. Along with the ever-expanding demands of their ministries as women, they faced the problem of antiquated but romanticized religious habits that not only set them apart from those they ministered to but required hours of time in their laundering and maintenance.⁶ The significance of this did not receive much attention at the time.⁷ Aware of the pressures on religious and the difficulties they faced mainly as a result of the tensions between the required monastic practices and the competing ministerial demands, Pope Pius XII called religious leaders to Rome to address the problems they were facing, including the need to adapt to the present.⁸

This was the pre-Vatican II period that is remembered nostalgically by many as a time of flourishing religious life. In the mid-20th century,

⁵ Quoted in Gérard Huyghe, *Tensions and Change: The Problems of Religious Orders Today*, trans. Sister Marie Florette (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965) 7.

⁶ The romantic attitude of many older Catholics toward the habit in both the pre-Vatican II period and at present fails to take into account the elitism of the habit and its privilege rather than its witness to service. The situation of congregations that were refused the right to wear their religious habit during the war and were oppressed is quite different.

⁷ While issues of numbers, problematic lifestyles, and religious habits were important, far greater problems were being faced by both male and female religious in their dealings with bishops, whose sometimes autocratic demands created significant pressures on communities and their leaders. For a comprehensive examination of the history of women religious in the United States, see Thompson, *History of Women Religious in the United States*.

⁸ See Pius XII, *Menti nostrae* (September 23, 1950), *Acta apostolicae sedis* 42 (1950) 657–702. Friedrich Wulf, “Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life,” trans. Ronald Walls, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967–1969) 2:301–70, at 301, points out that an account of Pius XII’s efforts at renewal of religious life can be found in P. Lombardi, S.J., “Il rinnovamento dei religiosi,” *Civiltà Cattolica* 100.1 (March 12, 1949) 615–29.

religious congregations were exercising significant ministerial leadership in education, health care, and community service. But this was also a period when few options other than religious life were available, particularly for women, to exercise a life of dedicated service to the church. With the rise of feminism leading to the awakening of women to issues of longstanding oppression, new questions and concerns began to surface especially for women.⁹ This was the heritage and the reality of the diverse forms of religious life that were to be the object of concern for the bishops of Vatican II.

VATICAN II: STATIC VERSUS DYNAMIC WORLDVIEWS

A more expansive understanding and appreciation of the contribution that Pope John XXIII believed the church could make to the 20th-century world inspired him to call the Second Vatican Council. It was to be a pastoral council, not an easy concept to grasp for those in curial power at the time. The first documents produced by the curial committees on church, liturgy, Scripture, priesthood, and religious life were juridical and disciplinary in character. The council members rejected these documents almost immediately. From that early period onward the council was characterized by polarization.¹⁰ The vision of church that was integral to Vatican II as it progressed through the five sessions was one that moved from a static worldview to a more dynamic approach of connectedness to and service of the world.¹¹ As Yves Congar noted:

The church of Vatican II relates to the world and wants to serve. Of course, the first article of the Christian mission in the world talks about conversion to the Gospel but the mission of the church entails a second article, service to the world as it is, until, in the eschatological kingdom, church and world will be one.¹²

This commitment to presence in and service of the world has played a major part in the strategies for renewal and adaptation of religious life in the post-Vatican II era.

While the aim of John XXIII was intrinsically pastoral, the vision and mindset of many of the bishops who attended the council was less so.

⁹ See Rapley, *Lord as Their Portion* 321–25.

¹⁰ Massimo Faggioli comments that the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Pope Benedict XVI were two important elements in the “broad theological and ecclesiastical landscape of the debate on Vatican II in the last few years” (*Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* [New York: Paulist, 2012] 17).

¹¹ While the debates and divisions between factions continued throughout the council, voting on the documents showed the movement toward *aggiornamento* and the pastoral intent of John XXIII.

¹² Quoted in Massimo Faggioli, “The Battle over *Gaudium et Spes* Then and Now: Dialogue with the Modern World,” *Origins* 42 (2013) 545–51, at 551 n. 16.

Caught within the textbook certainties of their own juridical training for sacramental ministry and the questions and ambiguities raised by their pastoral roles and experience over the decades of their ministerial lives, many of the Council Fathers struggled between the two extremes of openness and closure to the world as exemplified by various conciliar leaders during the debates. From the council's opening to its close, the polarized positions were clearly evidenced in the membership of the various committees appointed to write the document on religious life.

Among the significant bishops calling for openness to a less juridical approach to religious life were Cardinals Julius Döpfner, Léon Joseph Suenens, and Bishop Gérard-Maurice-Eugène Huyghe. Döpfner played a significant role in shaping the documents on the church and on religious life. He argued for the importance of recognizing the foundations of religious vocation in Christ and in the life of the church and the importance of moving beyond the perspective focused simply on personal salvation.¹³ Commentators point out that those involved in writing *Perfectae caritatis* (PC), the Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, had not grasped key issues that would have to be faced by religious in their efforts at renewal and adaptation due to the long history of accretions of stylized and ritualized ways of living, dressing, and apostolic service that had virtually become the essence of religious life.¹⁴

Perhaps the greatest and most practical challenges to the document on religious life and to the mentality of the bishops present especially in regard to religious, particularly women religious, were offered by Suenens, whose writings and exhortations on religious life were inviting religious into more contemporary and much-needed ministries. He lamented the

¹³ I do not intend to address the history of the development of PC; for that see Friedrich Wulf, "Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life"; and Maryanne Confoy, *Religious Life and Priesthood: Perfectae caritatis, Optatum totius, Presbyterorum ordinis* (New York: Paulist, 2008) 177–206.

¹⁴ Ian Linden describes the degree of control over horarium and clothing exerted within religious life by authoritarian religious superiors in the pre-Vatican II era: *Global Catholicism: Diversity and Change since Vatican II* (New York: Columbia University, 2009) esp. chap. 10. See also Wulf, "Decree on the Appropriate Renewal" 306. The surrendering of both autocratic control and these accretions was a costly experience. It is ironic, and perhaps an example of the depth of the traditionalist mindset of some religious that at a postconciliar meeting of leaders of religious congregations called by Paul VI shortly after the conclusion of Vatican II to express his gratitude to religious for their service of the church; one angry superior general, apparently unwilling to implement any form of renewal asked, "Could I have Cardinal Suenens's head on a plate?" Neither the superior's facial expression nor her tone of voice gave the appearance of a comment made in jest! See "Author of Reform: The Cardinal Suenens Story" (Alexandria, VA: Journey Films, 1999) VHS tape.

fact that particularly women religious were limited in how they could serve the church and world of the time because of outmoded customs and habits, and by their apparent institutional confinement to roles of education of children. Suenens also commented that religious women were treated as less than adults themselves because of the oppressive lifestyles and relational structures in their communities. Although the traditional ministries of health care, community care, and education of children were seen to make a valuable contribution to the church, Suenens believed that religious could play a significant role in evangelizing and by working with laity through other ministerial outlets.¹⁵ He recognized that with the numbers of religious in that period—300,000 men and 1,200,000 women—new ways of serving church and world that addressed the cultural needs of the time could be generated. He argued that the council must elaborate a spirituality of the active life for religious, so that they can get away from “the traditions and mentality of the cloister.”¹⁶ Huyghe criticized the various early drafts and the static approach they presented for being preconiliar, Occidental, and juridical. His hope was for religious whose role would be a source of unity among Christians and contribute to dialogue with non-Christians: “Within the church, religious should exercise a unifying role both by example and by action. They should not separate themselves from other members of the church; on the contrary, they should forge bonds with them, cooperate with all and fulfill an ecumenical role.”¹⁷

In contrast to the understanding of Döpfner, Suenens, and Huyghe, which highlighted the dynamic dimensions of religious life, was the static mindset of, for example, Cardinals Francis Spellman and Ernesto Ruffini. Spellman disagreed with Suenens’s interventions that promoted adaptation and renewal of religious life and ministry. Spellman wanted to maintain the ministries of religious in his archdiocese as they were. The need to reinforce the regulatory practices of both convent and cloister along with the fear of losing the religious workforce in their dioceses informed the interventions of those bishops who resisted what was seen as a more liberal approach.¹⁸ Opposition to any idea of renewal and adaptation was led by Ruffini, who worried about “imprudent demands

¹⁵ Léon Joseph Suenens, *The Nun in the World: New Dimensions in the Modern Apostolate*, trans. Geoffrey Stevens (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1962) 209.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 210.

¹⁸ For the concern expressed by those bishops who wanted to maintain the status quo of religious in terms of both lifestyle and ministry, see Hanjo Sauer, “The Doctrinal and the Pastoral: The Text on Divine Revelation,” in *History of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, vol. 4, *Church as Communion: Third Period and Intersession, September 1964–September 1965* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 196–233, at 211.

for reform” and the danger that this might mean for the call to the life of perfection.¹⁹

The dissension between the two groups continued in debates in both the committee meetings and the council hall on the document’s sections relating to the baptismal and religious consecration and on the vowed life. The baptismal call to participate in the saving mission of the world is present to all people in Christ, and the love of God and neighbor cannot be separated. Monastic or ministerial religious life is not an individualistic way of living “for God alone” (nos. 5, 6). This expresses the foundational ecclesiology of both *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes* that is integral to the call and response of all Christians in general and of religious in particular through their public profession of following Christ in a communal life. As Gregory Baum notes, “Essential to religious life . . . is the commitment to a community as a way of intensifying obedience to the Gospel.”²⁰

Wulf comments that in the post-Vatican II era, it is not so much the contemplative life that nourishes the love of God and of neighbor within the individual and thus gives “life and direction” to the practice of the counsels; rather, it is ordinarily “the distress of the neighbor who needs our help, the worldwide concerns of the church, the helplessness of so many nations facing catastrophe . . . that bring evangelical counsels to mind and reveal afresh their urgent necessity.”²¹ This is ordinarily the basic dynamism of ministerial religious life. This is certainly the basis of many of the diverse forms of ministry that have characterized religious life in subsequent decades, and that have been judged by traditionalists as deviations from the state of perfection.²² The dynamic dimension of the vowed life and its broader foundations are described in *SC* no. 12, par. 1. The meaning of celibacy has its foundations in the christological, ecclesiological, and eschatological dimensions:

It not only symbolizes in a singular way the heavenly goods but also the most suitable means by which religious dedicate themselves with undivided heart to the service of God and the works of the apostolate. In this way they recall to the minds of all the faithful that wondrous marriage decreed by God and which is to be fully revealed in the future age in which the Church takes Christ as its only spouse. (Translation from the Vatican website.)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gregory Baum, “Commentary,” in *The Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life of Vatican Council II*, trans. Austin Flannery (New York: Paulist, 1966) 9–55, at 41.

²¹ Wulf, “Decree on the Appropriate Renewal” 348.

²² In his “Extending the Dialogue about Religious Life,” a 1983 address to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious Assembly, Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco observed that during the past 20 years of renewal, American nuns have been “exposed to an unprecedented level of misrepresentation and attack from both the right and the left” (*Origins* 13 [1983] 213–21, at 216).

This relational understanding is in contrast to the more static articulation of pre-Vatican II treatments of celibacy, which were, in terms of an unqualified and unexplained exhortation to religious to embrace “the chastity of angels,” an approach that failed to take human reality into account.²³ Rather, religious are encouraged not to “overestimate their own strength but practice mortification and custody of the senses. Neither should they neglect the natural means which promote health of mind and body” (PC no. 12). A more holistic and human approach is recommended, along with some form of personal discipline that will support a lifelong commitment.²⁴ Attention to the relational aspect of celibacy came as a result of the endeavors of those bishops who promoted the living charism of religious life in the mandate that all, “especially superiors, remember that chastity is guarded more securely when true brotherly (or sisterly) love flourishes in the common life of the community” (PC no. 12). The emphasis on the mutuality of responsibility for authentic communal relationships and the special emphasis on the leadership of the superior in this matter is a fruit of the greater awareness of the coresponsibility of all for the common life, and a breaking down of autocratic approaches and the subordination of subjects.

The closing section of *Perfectae caritatis* (no. 25) offered a vision for the future of religious life that was in sharp contrast to the carefully separated identities and ministries of the past, reinforced by the narrow canonical interpretation of the period. It affirms the importance of encouraging vocations, recognizes the generosity of religious, and recommends more initiatives in collaboration and communication.

While the new understanding of religious life and the recognition of its importance for the church of the future energized many of the council members with the possibility of renewal and adaptation that opened up ways of collaboration and cooperation within parishes, dioceses, and between institutions, many Council Fathers were fearful of what might be let loose as the well-educated and committed religious envisaged alternative ways of living their charism in different ministerial contexts.²⁵ The Tridentine understanding that had remained active, or that

²³ The implications of the formation of religious in the pre-Vatican II period when the “chastity of angels” is the model are surely evident in the exposure of abuse at both administrative and ministerial levels in the post-Vatican II decades.

²⁴ For a more detailed development of the vows according to *Perfectae caritatis*, see Confoy, *Religious Life and Priesthood* 216–23.

²⁵ For a long time frustration has characterized the relationship between bishops and members of religious orders, particularly clerical orders. This seems to be primarily due to the fact that many council members were against the rights and privileges of exempt religious. Some bishops felt religious should be more accountable to the local bishop than to the works of the congregation.

simply stayed below the surface throughout the council sessions, kept numbers of bishops insulated in their traditional mindset and unable to hear the significance of the pastoral and dogmatic constitutions on the church or of the call for a new approach to ecclesial ministry in relation to religious life.²⁶ Commentators on the outcomes of Vatican II point out that *Perfectae caritatis* ranked among the weakest and most limited of all the documents produced.²⁷ The polarization that characterized the committees that produced the document has continued throughout subsequent decades and extended its influence in the Catholic community at large.²⁸

RENEWAL AND ADAPTATION VERSUS RESISTANCE IN THE POST-VATICAN II DECADES

Commentators on the post-Vatican II period describe the wide-ranging polarities of interpretation of the 16 documents in various ways. Faggioli expands and deepens the understanding of these divergent viewpoints.²⁹ In addressing the question of the impact of Vatican II over the past 50 years, Joseph Komonchak describes three interpretations of Vatican II that have taken shape that are most apt for this analysis. He describes a progressive interpretation that dichotomizes “the pre- and postconciliar Church.” This stance is more negative on the preconciliar church and more positive on the council itself and on the postconciliar church and its reforms. The second group, described as taking a traditionalist approach, also dichotomizes but with reversed polarities. The preconciliar church had responded appropriately to the challenges it had faced, while the postconciliar church had generated chaos, a chaos for which the council was responsible. The third interpretation, between the other two, is described as reformist. This stance rejects the dichotomizing approach and stresses “elements of continuity in the conciliar teachings and reforms. . . . It argues that the popes and bishops of Vatican II never intended revolution but rather reform and especially

²⁶ For an alternative reading of the Council of Trent, see John O’Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2013).

²⁷ Wulf commented that there was little unity in the document, or in the commission that produced it. Evident throughout the deliberations were the different approaches to, and understandings of, religious life in the authors of not only *Perfectae caritatis* but also *Lumen gentium* chaps 5 and 6. See “Decree on the Appropriate Renewal” 301.

²⁸ It was questioned consistently within various meetings and debates whether the traditional doctrine of the counsels, which so decisively characterized the self-understanding of the religious orders of the past could still be maintained in the post-conciliar years. See Wulf, “Decree on the Appropriate Renewal” 306.

²⁹ Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning*.

spiritual renewal.”³⁰ It is surely the understanding of a reformist response to Vatican II that has characterized religious in the past 50 years. While “reformist” carries its own accretions of meaning and interpretation, the meaning I intend here is that of religious re-forming and renewing religious life spiritually in dynamic response to the call of Vatican II.

The resistance to the renewal and adaptation endorsed by *Perfectae caritatis* by those described as traditionalist during the council debates was to any understanding of religious life other than that of the call to a state of perfection; and in subsequent years, they carried this understanding back to their dioceses. The polarized perspectives and the tensions that had been present in the debates in the aula were echoed in most congregational meeting rooms as the concrete issues and implications of the meaning of renewal and adaptation came into action. While the authors of *Perfectae caritatis* had worked on the renewal of religious life with both intensive and expansive theological and canonical understandings of “constant return to the sources” and “to the original spirit of the institute” (PC no. 2), religious in their own contexts worked to understand what this might mean in their own concrete situations, in their own local efforts to adapt to the changed conditions of our time.

One of the difficulties for ministerial religious was that they were facing the immediacy of the task in their communal lives at the same time as they were trying to promote and implement Vatican II in their ministries. As they endeavored to reconnect with their “founding identity” as the council had mandated, some religious realized that they did not have a founder in the way the document assumed. They had come into being not because of any charism handed on by a founder, but rather as a consequence of a ministerial need at a particular time, and at the invitation or mandate of a bishop or other founding cleric.³¹ Thompson describes the origin of the Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, where the parish had a school but no teachers, and where no religious were forthcoming from any of the local religious congregations. The comment of the parish priest at the time was, “We cannot obtain nuns? Then let us make some.”³² The fact

³⁰ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Interpreting the Council and Its Consequences: Concluding Reflections,” in *After Vatican II: Trajectories and Hermeneutics*, ed. James L. Heft, with John O’Malley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012) 164–72, at 164–65.

³¹ Schneiders comments that congregations typically begin “in the charismatic experience of one or more founders who feel impelled to give themselves to God and God’s work, almost always in response to some historically pressing need. Subsequent members respond to a personal call to join the founders in this divinely originated enterprise” (*Prophets in Their Own Country* 100).

³² Thompson, *History of Women Religious of the USA*, “Written Guide” 42. See especially Topic 10, “Charism and Personality: Individuals as Shapers of

that the congregation of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin came into existence and that young women generously gave their lives for this ministry, indicates something of the ethos of the period and its understanding of the religious vocation. The contrast between the experiences of those congregations that were intentionally founded and those that seemed to arise “accidentally” was emphasized in the early decades after Vatican II as the decisions by the religious leaders of the period came into conflict with the will of the bishops in the diocese where they were located, or who saw themselves as the founders of the communities.³³

The polarization between those religious who were locked into the status quo of religious life as a state of perfection and those who responded to the dynamic of renewal that was a constant issue during the council had destructive consequences both within some religious congregations and between the congregation and the local bishops.³⁴ This was particularly the case for some women’s congregations in the United States. Los Angeles Cardinal James McIntyre’s 1968 rejection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters’ renewal and adaptation decisions created division within the community.³⁵ The IHM chapter had mandated adaptation in five areas: more autonomy in choice of ministry, choice of dress, and issues related to prayer, leadership, and formation. This was anathema to the cardinal, and the appeals of

Communities” (42). In describing the diverse origins of religious communities Thompson comments that not all congregations have a founding charism; rather, their origin is in an “instrumental” need for religious to minister, rather than in a founder’s charismatic response to a perceived need. She describes the ensuing experience and history of such religious congregations as a “deep story.”

³³ *Ibid.*, Topics 11 and 12, in “Father Didn’t Always Know Best: Relations and Tensions with the Clergy,” Parts I and II.

³⁴ Thompson also records some horrendous examples of the suffering of some women religious leaders and their congregations at the hands of their local bishops (Topics 11 and 12, on audio CD only).

³⁵ Although this conflict between the cardinal and the IHM leadership took place shortly after the council, I believe it is important to see the continuity of resistance and of the abuse of power exercised by some bishops in reaction to the ministerial leadership of religious in their diocese. There are multiple examples of the suffering caused by autocratic and sometimes inadequately informed bishops in reaction to leadership exercised by individual religious as well as in congregational initiatives. The public censuring of religious has been occasionally scandalous and tragic in their consequences—e.g., the 2009 excommunication of Sister Margaret McBride, R.S.M., without full knowledge of the facts surrounding an induced abortion case at St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center, Phoenix, Arizona. This action and the inadequacy of the follow-through of the situation at the level of leadership has been a cause of unnecessary suffering and misunderstanding at many levels of Catholic church life. Such occurrences have been repeated in contemporary civic cases of administrative failures of Catholic church leaders in relation to situations of sexual abuse globally.

both the cardinal and the congregational leader, Sister Anita Caspary, to Rome resulted at first in an uneasy stalemate. The cardinal was forced to back down to a certain extent and to recognize the authority of the chapter. But there was uneasiness among some members of the community in this unusual resistance to episcopal authority. When the sisters proceeded with their adaptation decisions along the track of renewal, the cardinal saw this as defiance and issued the ultimatum that if their decrees were not retracted, he would expel them from the archdiocesan schools.³⁶

McIntyre referred the case to the Vatican, which censured the IHM leadership and congregation, classifying the changes they had made as deviations rather than adaptations. The Vatican required compliance with the cardinal's demands and ordered the dissemination of its findings to other religious women's communities. The public conflict that followed resulted in a division in the IHM community and their eventual decision to move to a noncanonical status.³⁷ The division was highly publicized and caused concern and even dissension within some religious communities and in other dioceses and parishes. As a consequence, hundreds of letters of support were sent to the dissenting IHMs, and Catholic newspapers published editorials and articles on the scandal.

The issue of "appropriate" adaptation, however, was not confined to Los Angeles. The Major Superiors of Religious Women at the time took varying stances on this issue. Some wanted the relatively newly established Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) to speak out against McIntyre's action and in support of their fellow religious leader.³⁸ Others were concerned that this could be seen as disobedience and a lack of

³⁶ Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh, *Women in the Vanishing Cloister: Organizational Decline in Catholic Religious Orders in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1993) 139–40.

³⁷ While 50 sisters opted to comply and stay within the Los Angeles schools system, 400 others were dispensed from their vows and reconstituted themselves as a lay community in the church. A contemporary perspective on this from outside religious orders is found in Kenneth Briggs, *Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns* (New York: Doubleday, 2006) 154–55.

³⁸ The opponents of the California IHM sisters decided to rename their organization Consortium Perfectae Caritatis after the title of Paul VI's Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, October 28, 1965 (http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html); they were concerned for the status quo of religious life and the current direction of leadership. In this decision they had the support of conservative bishops. When Cardinal James Hickey of Washington, DC, obtained Vatican recognition for the organization's dissenting position, the Consortium was renamed Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious. See Thompson, *History of Women Religious in the United States*, Topic 17: "Reaction and Response: Adjusting to New Circumstances."

loyalty. The resultant establishment of an alternative leadership group in the United States, the only country with two such leadership groups for religious women, has had its own deleterious consequences over the decades, with the Stonehill “Symposium on Apostolic Religious Life since Vatican II” being an example of the divisiveness in action.³⁹

The different and inconsistent interpretations of the meaning of renewal and adaptation, along with the formalized expectations of what post-conciliar religious lifestyle and ministry might be, generated a range of publications both from the Vatican and from conciliar participants. Within twelve months of the conclusion of the council, the apostolic letter *Ecclesiae sanctae* (*ES*) (August 6, 1966) was published with the essential norms for religious congregations that had been promised in *Perfectae caritatis* no. 1.

This document spelled out the implementation of the spirit and practice of religious life. The approach taken was an enabling one; for example, where *PC* no. 4 required the “cooperation of all the members of the institute,” *ES* reads: “The cooperation of all superiors and members is necessary to renew Religious life in themselves, to prepare the spirit of the chapters, to carry out the works of the chapters, to observe faithfully the law and norms enacted by the chapters” (Part I, I., no. 2). The choice of the word “members” rather than “subjects” is important in the new movement toward mutuality of responsibility within orders.⁴⁰

It took time and much work for religious to deal with the diversity of interpretations generated in those early post-Vatican II years. While many congregations were characterized by either one or the other polarized response to the implementation of renewal and adaptation in terms of identity, lifestyle, and mission, some congregations suffered division within

³⁹ For an analysis of the contemporary equivalent of the IHM conflict that was provoked by a meeting of traditionalist religious and bishops at a 2008 symposium entitled “Apostolic Religious Life since Vatican II . . . Reclaiming the Treasure: Bishops, Theologians, and Religious in Conversation,” see Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country* esp. 4–7. It was on this occasion and in her symposium address that Sara Butler, S.M.B.T., called on Cardinal Franc Rode, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life, to initiate an apostolic visitation of American women religious. Such an investigation followed this small but powerful symposium. In February 2009 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) announced that it would conduct a Doctrinal Assessment of the LCWR; the findings were released in April 2012. The responses to it both nationally and internationally were largely in support of the LCWR and US religious women. The consequences for the 80% of US women religious represented by the leadership of LCWR are yet to play out.

⁴⁰ For a more extensive analysis of the implementation of *PC* over the decades following *ES*, see Confoy, *Religious Life and Priesthood* 224–54. *ES* can be found at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19660806_ecclesiae-sanctae_en.html.

their ranks. Some split into two groups, one clinging to the traditional lifestyle and the other opening up to new possibilities of lifestyle and ministry. Conferences and congregational gatherings were held, and numbers of books were published to help religious discover their founding charism or originating story.

The gospel and ecclesial foundations for religious life were the basis of much of the ongoing post-Vatican II research and implementation of the living charism in religious life. Founding stories, rules, and constitutions were reviewed and reformulated using a scriptural rather than a juridical lens; the intent was a renewal that would enable religious to minister more effectively in the church and society of their cultural contexts.

Huyghe describes some of the responses that were taking place among European religious orders. They seemed to be following the patterns that prevailed in the council itself. The conciliar tensions were echoed in the receptivity or resistance to the vision of Vatican II:

Some have completely accepted this new world along with its dangers and hopes. Resolutely detached from the sociological milieu in which former generations lived, they are alert to the needs of the people who now expect a new type of evangelization. Others cling desperately to the earlier forms of religious and apostolic life which, they declare, have stood the test of years; and in the shelter of their institutions which have become for them a sort of artificial Christianity, they do not see that the world is being formed without them and, unfortunately, without the message of Christ which they should be bringing to it.⁴¹

New ministries, new ways of being present and of service to those in need in the world continued to challenge the entrenched understanding of those traditionalists who saw loyalty and orthodoxy expressed in maintaining established institutions and lifestyles of the early 20th century. The religious habit was and continued to be a key source of conflict for traditionalists and for bishops who used the criterion of a religious habit as a basis of invitation into their diocese.⁴²

Wearing a habit as a symbol of consecration (and, therefore, separation from the world) and maintaining institutional works in preference to newer services in the public sphere (again, a curtailment of involvement in the world) were particularly controverted points. Since many American communities besides the IHM sisters had adopted similar provisions, discussions focused specifically on whether religious life was what church law stipulated it to be or what was developing through the experience of communities.⁴³

⁴¹ Huyghe, *Tensions and Change* 4.

⁴² Sometimes traditionalist religious were brought into a diocese to administer parish elementary schools even though they had neither the educational competence nor the language skills to accomplish the tasks given them.

⁴³ See Lora Quiñonez and Mary Daniel Turner, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1992) 42.

The confusion and turmoil within religious life that characterized the early response to Vatican II continued into the next decades. Review and revision of their founding charism and the examination of the trajectories of their congregations had led to the redirection of ministries and the consequent adaptation of lifestyle to engage in such ministries. The mandate for a “preferential option for the poor”⁴⁴ rather than for a maintenance of established ministries was taking shape in the context of new levels of collaboration of religious and laity in education, health care, and welfare initiatives. Laity who had been looking for ways to exercise their baptismal vocation more ministerially began to take on leadership roles that previously had not been open to them. It cannot be ignored that this was disturbing both within the ranks of religious themselves, who felt that they were being passed over, and among the laity who looked for carefully differentiated levels of leadership.

Attitudes of authority and subordination instilled in both the civic and Catholic cultures of the 20th century saw women’s roles as in the home or in the church and exercised in traditionalist modes. The rise of feminism, the awakening by women and men to the mutually enriching possibilities of collaboration in ministry, home, and workplace were shaping relationships in the community at large as well as in home and church. This unsettled the very settled world of the Catholic community, particularly that of the Western world.

Sociologists began to analyze the consequences of the council. In religious life, Maria Augusta Neal was a leading figure of this analysis.⁴⁵ Her research showed the courage alongside the suffering that characterized religious women of the post-Vatican II decades, as they worked to transform the monastic asceticism of the vowed life for their contemporary ministry and communal lifestyles. For example, the radical change from the conventional understanding of the vow of obedience as one of unquestioning submission to one of mutuality and careful attentiveness to one’s own conscience as well as to the voice of the superior or “community leader” required new acceptance of personal and communal responsibility and depth of spirituality.⁴⁶ The publication of Neal’s research confirmed

⁴⁴ This phrase seems to have been first used by Jesuit Superior General Pedro Arrupe (1907–1991) in “The Jesuits of Latin America,” a 1968 letter republished in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed., intro., comm., and trans. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990) 77–83.

⁴⁵ From 1950 to 1984 Neal surveyed over 139,000 sisters to “determine the readiness of American sisters to implement the directives of the Vatican Council” (Maria Augusta Neal, *Catholic Sisters in Transition: From the 1960s to the 1980s* [Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984] 16).

⁴⁶ The range of interpretation of the vows in those decades was extraordinary. Diarmuid O’Murchu wrote of obedience as the “vow of mutual collaboration”

the dynamic response of religious to the call to exercise their commitment to God and their ministry in the church in the modern world. The ecclesial consequences of returning to the sources of religious life and of reclaiming their charism or “deep story”⁴⁷ were transforming for religious and those with whom they ministered in church and society. This was not an easy transition; misunderstandings ensued between religious and laity, and between religious and their ecclesiastical leaders, and a heavy price was paid in many cases. But Neal argues that regardless of issues of declining membership and the high costs of living that followed from the new movements of vowed religious toward the poor and away from the financial support and recognition that came with ministering in traditional institutions, there was a revitalization of the experience of the call and the mystery of religious life:

It might seem that as we have moved with the church to this new mission embodying a special option for the poor, we have lost the security that others envied in our lives: the contemplative serenity, a dependable community, care in retirement and something important and significant to do, i.e. relevant work. Yet in reality, all these advantages have been heightened, not lost as we have responded in new ways to the mission of Jesus.⁴⁸

Neal sustained her analysis of post-Vatican II religious life into the 1990s. The consistent commitment of religious to serve the marginalized was not unequivocally approved or understood by the Catholic communities in which they ministered. Neal used the metaphor of a tortoise shedding its shell, accepting vulnerability for the possibility of new life. “The composite carapace of an outmoded institutional framework and accumulated customs finally shed, these congregations now allow their members an environment for a more faithful response to their apostolic ministry in the church.”⁴⁹ This metaphor for religious life was appropriate for the renewed claiming of the prophetic role of religious women and men that was taking shape in these decades.

(Consecrated Religious Life: The Changing Paradigms [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005] 209). His renaming of vows in relation to the evangelical counsels was a creative and provocative initiative. In this study his research on quantum theory and evolutionary science was foundational to his approach to the vowed religious life. Vadakethala Vineeth, in an alternative approach to religious life and the vows, takes into account the cosmos and a transformation of consciousness informed by “Indian genius and modern psychology” (*Call to Integration: A New Theology of Religious Life* [New York: Crossroad, 1981]); he also renamed the vows against an alternative horizon of meaning (33–70).

⁴⁷ As the initial story takes shape in the living memory of the congregation, Thompson describes it as a “deep story”; see her “Written Guide,” Note III B, p. 42.

⁴⁸ Neal, *Catholic Sisters in Transition* 78.

⁴⁹ Mary Augusta Neal, *From Nuns to Sisters: An Expanding Vocation* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third, 1990) 114.

A different approach to postconciliar religious life was taken by Patricia Wittberg, who called the decline in religious orders an “ideological limbo.”⁵⁰ The various changes taking place, along with the reactions within the Catholic community in the United States led to an unprecedented intervention by Pope John Paul II. A gathering of bishops and leaders of religious congregations was asked “to enter into the process in order to support and to second the efforts of the religious to strengthen and renew their communities.”⁵¹ During this period traditionalist documents continued to be promulgated, such as the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institute’s *Essential Elements of Religious Life*.⁵²

The work of the joint commission of bishops and religious that resulted from the papal intervention acted as a discernment process contributing to a deeper understanding of the mission and ministry of religious women and men.⁵³ After his experience of listening to the religious of the time, Quinn commented that, “American nuns have been exposed to an unprecedented level of misrepresentation and attack, from both the right and the left.”⁵⁴ His endorsement of the state of religious life was wholehearted and validating for religious life. He recognized the new directions that were taking shape in religious life in general and the fruit of these directions particularly for religious women:

In these United States toward the close of the twentieth century, for the first time in history there is appearing a radically apostolic form of religious life for women, which heretofore had been possible for men only—a life characterized by professional personal ministries, and by small and flexible communities.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Patricia Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York, 1994) 265. Wittberg analyzes the cultural context and illustrates the historic and systemic problems that were operating during these decades of renewal and adaptation.

⁵¹ John R. Quinn, “Addresses of the Pontifical Delegate, John R. Quinn D.D., Archbishop of San Francisco,” in *Religious Life in the U.S. Church: The New Dialogue*, ed. Robert J. Daly et al. (New York: Paulist, 1984) 11–53, at 11.

⁵² This document, while appearing to draw on John Paul II’s letter to the American bishops (April 3, 1983), in fact misrepresented aspects of it. See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_31051983_magisterium-on-religious-life_en.html. For an analysis see Confoy, *Religious Life and Priesthood* 240–43.

⁵³ At one of these meetings the term “charism” came under discussion. A panel contributor to the discussion, Howard Gray, S.J., described his understanding of the term: “By charism I mean the gift given to individuals within the church for the good of the church and for the good of humankind. Founders of religious communities were gifted both to do good and to establish a way of life in which others could sustain that good work” (“Religious Life: Continuing Summons to Renewal and Reorientation,” *Origins* 23 [1993] 115–20, at 117).

⁵⁴ Quinn, “Addresses of the Pontifical Delegate” 26.

⁵⁵ John Manuel Lozano, C.M.F., “The Theology of ‘The Essential Elements’ in the Teaching of the Church,” in *Religious Life in the U.S. Church* 98–133, at 102.

While the primary tension between those whose focus was on the religious life as a state of perfection and those who maintained the commitment to the living charism of the founder or to the sustained commitment to the deep story of their congregation seemed to be focused primarily on the northern hemisphere. The Catholic Church, however, was expanding globally, and religious life has been taking its own shape in the diverse cultural contexts in which it was being lived.⁵⁶

What has been described as a seismic shift that has taken place both locally and globally in the experience of Catholic communities cannot be ignored or trivialized. Theological debates about whether Vatican II was an “event” or an “occurrence,” whether it represented “continuity” or “discontinuity” in the life of the church, are important for both Catholics and other Christians in terms of the sustained openness to dialogue that was integral to the spirit of Vatican II, if not always lived out in the debates in the aula.⁵⁷ However, of equal importance at every level of church life and integral to ecumenical engagement is the reality of accountability to ministry in the changing world in which the call to evangelization must be lived out. As Gray put it:

When our renewal followed the leadership of Jesus best, it did so in our obedient listening, like Christ, to God’s voice in the community of faith, in the needs of God’s people everywhere, in the wisdom of our tradition, in the struggles within our cultures for justice and human dignity—in brief, in all that constitutes God’s action and invitation in our Catholic and human lives. Renewal was for us closely allied to our membership in the church’s communion, but it was also allied to our graced solidarity with human history and experiences.⁵⁸

Obedient listening in the multiple levels described above is the energizing force for enabling the founding charism to take authentic shape in religious life in today’s world. Such listening is an integral element in the contemporary initiatives and in ministerial outreach exercised by significant numbers of religious in church and society.

TRANSITION AND TRANSFORMATION: RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT OF THE 21ST CENTURY

The tension between those who have wanted to hold the Catholic church in a nucleated European identity that no longer exists except in closed,

⁵⁶ Space restrictions require the omission of a detailed description of the impact of Vatican II on religious life in Latin America, but on this topic and Medellín’s impact on religious life in Latin America see Confoy, *Religious Life and Priesthood* 242–52.

⁵⁷ See especially Faggioli, *Battle for Meaning*; Komonchak, “Interpreting the Council and Its Consequences,” in *After Vatican II* 164–172; and Gerald O’Collins, “Does Vatican II Represent Continuity or Discontinuity?” *Theological Studies* 73 (2012) 768–93.

⁵⁸ Gray, “Religious Life: Continuing Summons” 117.

monological mindsets and those whose response to the call of Vatican II has been one of prophetic discernment of and dialogical response to the needs of the time, both locally and globally, is still operative. But the demography of the 21st-century Catholic Church has changed radically demographically. The importance of attending to this is described by Phan, who recognizes that despite the openness of its ecclesiology, Vatican II could not have foreseen the impact of cultural and religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue on the church of 21st century:

In the postconciliar period, battles were waged not only within the Catholic church on intra-ecclesial issues (e.g. collegiality, liberation theology, liturgical reforms etc.), but the church itself had to confront a new situation caused by the massive demographic shift of Christians and Catholics (from) the global North (Europe and North America) to the global South (Africa, Asia and Latin America). In this new predicament the church has become truly multicultural—again one might say—and can no longer pretend to possess cultural and religious homogeneity, of course, not for lack of effort.⁵⁹

The transition from a Western church to an authentically global church, Phan reminds his readers, requires a radically new approach, and he sees that intercultural and interreligious dialogue are not simply essential for the survival of Christianity, but that they are issues of justice and peace. To understand the present reality, he suggests that instead of the traditionalist approach to an understanding of church and of leadership, “attention should be turned to the contributions of the people who have been marginalized in church history, such as lay men and women, religious sisters, the poor, the tribals, and those accused of heresy, schism, and syncretism.”⁶⁰ This level of attention has certainly been the subject, as well as the prophetic engagement, of religious, particularly of religious women in this period.

It is the awareness of the changing demands of a changing church and society that has shaped much of the contemporary transformation in religious life. *Lumen gentium*, the Constitution on the Church, with its emphasis on religious and its call to new collaborative relationships with laity, and *Gaudium et Spes*, with its call to service in and for the modern world, have generated the breakthrough and breaking down of the exclusivist barriers of the pre-Vatican II church for ministry in general and for religious in particular. Openness to the dynamism of renewal and engagement with both the constant and changing issues being faced in the

⁵⁹ Peter C. Phan, “World Christianity: Its Implications for History, Religious Studies, and Theology,” *Horizons* 39 (2012) 171–88, at 186.

⁶⁰ Phan, *ibid.* 178. He also gives a timely reminder of the importance of reading the works of Dana L. Robert on the role of women, e.g., *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

context in which they live has characterized the adaptations of religious in the 21st century. Gray sums up the responses of religious in the United States as having two directions:

that of renewal and that of apostolic reorientation. The movement of renewal was inspired by a return both to the Gospel and to the founding charism of each institute as well as a discerning sensitivity to the needs of the times. The movement of apostolic reorientation of ministries was inspired by a faith that testified to its authenticity by works of justice. These two movements summarize how religious men and women integrated their communal and apostolic lives into a single mission.⁶¹

A major transition of apostolic life of religious women in the present time has been in relation to governance of major institutions. The call for ministerial collaboration between all the baptized has taken shape in the movement away from previous governance models of the major institutions of many congregations of men and women religious. The transition of governance of many of the health care, community care, and educational institutions from congregational ownership to lay governance through the establishment of public juridic persons⁶² is an expression of the ever-expanding and deepening understanding of the collaborative call to holiness of *Gaudium et spes*. Such transitions may be seen by observers simply to be a consequence of diminishing numbers of religious, but the reality is that religious and laity are collaborating in ministry, so that religious may focus on more evangelical and communal ways of living their founding charism. Those in lay governance in the not-for-profit corporate context enable the charism to continue to both deepen and expand in new ways of meeting the needs of the present and future world.

In addressing the issue of a dynamic or “ever-re-forming” understanding of charism versus a traditionalist understanding of religious life as “state of perfection,” it is essential to acknowledge the reality of suffering that is a consequence for contemporary women and men in relation to the gender oppression that continues to impact church and societal relationships. This is something that religious women in particular have suffered from, protested against, and are working to eradicate.⁶³ The present situation

⁶¹ Gray, “Religious Life: Continuing Summons” 119.

⁶² A public juridic person is a legal entity under canon law that allows the church’s ministries to function in the name of the Catholic Church. See John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas Joseph Green, *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (New York: Paulist, 2002) 171.

⁶³ That this is a global and urgent issue is apparent in the recent outcry in the world media against the vicious rape of a woman in India and shooting of a teenage girl in Bangladesh as punishment for her outspoken stance on behalf of the education of girls. These occurrences in relation to the endemic issue of violence against women cannot be reduced to the issue of women’s ordination.

in which the 21st-century Catholic Church finds itself—the public disclosure of both administrative and sexual abuse—is an issue for all Catholics, women as well as men. That it is a global situation can be seen in the issues being addressed in the Asian church and that women religious have brought to light.

The phenomenon of women's movements is yet another positive development. They are increasing in Asia, making women aware of their potentialities and resources, challenging centuries of subordination to men, enabling them to claim their rights and participation in public life. The Spirit of God is present in these developments.⁶⁴

In a July 2005 symposium on “The Role of Religious in the Building Up of the Local Church in Asia” organized by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Office of Consecrated Life, the gathered bishops, women religious, and laity from 20 Asian countries passed the resolution to “enhance and strengthen greater knowledge, esteem and promotion of all forms of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, particularly that of Religious Sisters and Brothers.”⁶⁵ Integral to their deliberations was the expressed importance of mutuality between the various ecclesial vocations in accord with *Lumen gentium* and the recognition that “charisms are cultural in that their externalization is always mediated by culture; they are transcultural in that they transcend cultures; they are countercultural in as much as they provide criteria against which cultures can be judged.”⁶⁶ If these affirmations take hold, they will impact the ways religious life is lived in Asia surely, but globally as well.

Asian, African, and Latin American religious have been meeting together, both in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and in other groupings, to share their understanding of church in other than a Western environment.⁶⁷ Many of the women religious present have a more comprehensive picture of the needs of their church, their society, and of religious life than do their local leaders. Indications of the impact of these new voices on the postconciliar discussion are now being heard in a variety of meetings and publications.

⁶⁴ FABC Theologians, “The Church in Contemporary Asia” I, 5, *Origins* 24 (1994) 85–90, at 86.

⁶⁵ Federation of Asian Bishops Office of Consecrated Life, <http://www.fabc.net/offices/ocl/ocl.html>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the Latin American and Asian churches and religious life, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008) esp. 190–202.

One expression of the Asian voice can be heard in a comment by a Korean religious woman at a 2002 Bangkok meeting of the *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*.⁶⁸

The Second Vatican council proclaimed the mystery of the church to all wo/mankind. The mystery of the church is a symbol of the deep unity of all the people with God, and it is the sacramental sign and instrument of Christ (GS 2, LG 1). However, in 1976 the Vatican Sacred Congregation of Faith and Doctrine [sic] reaffirmed that women could not be ordained priests. The reason why I am discussing the issue of women's ordination here is the following. Today, thirty-eight years after the close of the Second Vatican council, the issue of ordination negates the call of Vatican II for the deep unity of all humankind with God. . . . The church, through a dynamic relationship with human persons in each age, always establishes and transmits new traditions. Just as Jesus broke down prejudices of his time, now we must break down the prejudices of our time.⁶⁹

A serious issue for Asian women religious stems from the fact that although women comprise over 60% of church congregations, and that over 70% of those who are active in the churches are women, they occupy only around 5% of appointed leadership roles. It is particularly important in the new millennium, which has been dubbed "the age of women," and in a culture where "at least one family in ten experiences serious violence" and "nearly all married women experience some kind of violence from their husbands."⁷⁰ This is a necessary concern for religious women and men in their ministries on behalf of the church, which is struggling with its own failures. The question of women in ecclesial leadership is much larger and more urgent than simply the question of who can or cannot be ordained.

Members of religious congregations are not free from accusations regarding both aspects of the abuse that has taken place. Whatever form it takes, abuse is sinful, and the whole Body of Christ is suffering in the necessary cauterization that is taking place in our civic as well as our ecclesial context. The prevailing resistance to an open and just dealing with this evil and the awareness of the failures of church leaders at key levels is confronting all the baptized. The Catholic Church has been brought to its

⁶⁸ See Evelyn Monteiro and Antoinette Gutzler, *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced* (Delhi, India: ISPCK, 2005.) The six areas addressed in the conference were: women and violence, women and the Bible, women and church structures, women and spirituality, eco-feminism and theological method, and women and world religions.

⁶⁹ Jeong Ja Leo Kim, L.S.H.F., "God our Ma/Father's Korean Women's Church," in *Ecclesia of Women in Asia* 170–71.

⁷⁰ Kim, "God our Ma/Father's Korean Women's Church" 172.

knees publicly for what it failed to do within the institution for longer than we may realize. This is tragic, but in and beyond the despair felt by all, and in the reality of the breaking down of the barriers of ecclesiastical elitism, Catholics are being invited to a new level of active hope and to move beyond the culture of unquestioning submission of conscience by laity to their ecclesiastical leaders. Religious can play an important role here. Where they have also been complicit in administrative and sexual abuse, they can continue to acknowledge their sinfulness and ask for forgiveness. The choice of many religious today to side with those on the margins who suffer from injustice and rejection is one that redounds on the religious themselves in their local communities. They have experienced and continue to experience insecurity and social disfavor because of their radical commitment to justice and peace.⁷¹ Their outreach and commitment has been recognized in Ian Linden's research on the changes in global Catholicism that have taken place since Vatican II:

The response of Women Religious to sexual trafficking in the last decade is an unsung story of globalization, building on earlier changes in the Religious Orders. By the 1990s in North America and Europe the crisis in religious life that struck after the Council had abated. Changes since preconciliar days were dramatic as a result of a wider interpretation of the "charism" of each Society's founder: from a pervasive subordination to authority in the convent and work circumscribed by bishops, to a spiritual life in small communities employed in innovative forms of catechetical, social or medical work.⁷²

The work of religious on behalf of those people who are the subject of human trafficking has increased and become a collaborative initiative between laity and religious.⁷³ This stance has not found favor or support with those conservative members of the hierarchy or members of the Catholic community for whom the maintenance of the status quo is of the

⁷¹ In his commentary on *PC*, Baum pointed out that the two marks of poverty in ordinary society are "insecurity and social disfavor" ("Commentary" 45).

⁷² Ian Linden, *Global Catholicism: Diversity and Change Since Vatican II* (New York: Columbia University, 2009) 271.

⁷³ These organization are working internationally and nationally. For example, "UNANIMA International is a non-governmental organization (NGO) advocating on behalf of women and children (particularly those living in poverty, immigrants and refugees, and the environment. Our work takes place primarily at the United Nations headquarters in New York, where we and other members of civil society aim to educate and influence policymakers at the global level. In solidarity, we work for systemic change to achieve a more just world" (<http://www.unanima-international.org/eng>). National groups, such as Australian Catholic Religious against Trafficking in Humans, are endorsed by Catholic Religious Australia, the peak body for 190 religious orders in Australia, representing 8000 religious sisters, brothers, and priests; see <http://acrath.org.au/>.

highest importance. The consequence of disfavor is a risk that many religious are already taking, in the various ways in which religious have collaborated with diverse groups to advance the common good. "The charism of religious life is about the transformation of life."⁷⁴

This comment of Margaret Brennan calls readers to attend not simply to human life but to all aspects of living together in the cosmos in which we find ourselves. This is another area in which religious have made their presence felt in the 21st century. The global crisis of human trafficking is connected to the global crisis of "unprecedented poverty, environmental destruction and social disintegration that have disrupted whole communities" and threatened the possibilities for healthy communities and environments for future generations.⁷⁵ The work that religious are doing with NGOs and other organizations whose concern is for the wellbeing of the cosmos, is deeply connected to the living charism that enables transformation that crosses the boundaries of religious and philosophical belief systems and enables religious to work with people from all walks of life for the benefit of the human community as well as the planet in which it lives, so that there will be a future for all.⁷⁶

In discussing the future of religious life, Schneiders emphasizes the importance of the prophetic vocation in responding to the changing social and cultural contexts, and the revisioning of those on life's margins. She points out that religious are on the front lines in what Gray refers to as their "obedient listening like Christ, to God's voice in the community of faith, in the needs of God's people everywhere"⁷⁷ and in their response to issues of oppression and discrimination in their world, especially in regard to sexual issues. Religious are active in, for example, addressing "the realities of marriage and procreation within the framework of a patriarchal moral theology, mandatory singleness and sexual apartheid in ordained ministry that is causing eucharistic famine throughout the Church." The ecumenical and interreligious commitment of religious in addressing the dominant "ecclesiastical elitism and exclusivism in relation to other Christian traditions" places them in the forefront of prophetic challenge to the status quo. Their concern for "intellectual freedom in theology and freedom of

⁷⁴ Margaret R. Brennan, I.H.M., "Religious Life's Charism: Transforming Life," *Origins* 23 (1993) 207–11, at 211.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ The impact of Vatican II on religious life can be seen in the ways documents such as *Unitatis redintegratio* (On Ecumenism), *Nostra aetate* (On the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), and *Dignitatis humanae* (On Religious Liberty) have taken a human shape in and through the collaborative ministries of both religious and laity.

⁷⁷ Gray, "Religious Life: Continuing Summons" 117.

conscience in religion, and numerous other issues that the Vatican would like to declare 'settled,' or 'closed,' or 'forbidden' has led them to be the subject of attack from within traditionalist and ghettoist fortresses."⁷⁸

The basis of Schneiders's position is her understanding of religious life today as a prophetic life-form:

Intrinsic to the prophetic vocation within the Judaeo-Christian biblical tradition is the tension between prophecy and institution. Jesus was executed not because he did good works but because his doing of good works, like his preaching and teaching, was in the service of the liberation of the oppressed—those oppressed by secular power but especially those oppressed by religious power. Jesus was a quintessential prophet, a deeply committed Jew who was profoundly loyal to his religious tradition and, for that very reason, an implacable opponent of its perversion by the institutional power structure and its enforcers.⁷⁹

New depths and breadths of living the paschal mystery in our present era continue to challenge all the baptized, but surely this is particularly true of religious called to take the living of their charism or deep story seriously, as they respond to the universal call to holiness that was the hallmark of Vatican II.

CONCLUSION

While so much of the present Western discussions about religious life focuses predominantly on diminishing numbers, aging religious, loss of ministries, and other statistical or ecclesiastical preoccupations regarding property, this is not an accurate picture of religious life in its global reality. Arguments made about whether the numbers of religious in traditionalist congregations are growing more than those in ministerial religious life have missed the point of Vatican II and indeed of Christianity itself. Christianity has never been a numbers game. Actuarial studies will never do justice to the past, present, or future of religious life. It has always operated through the dynamic of the Holy Spirit and the graced response of individuals and the communities they generate in and through their depth of commitment to their call. Those who attempt to project the future through numbers alone have missed the story. The history of religious life defeats demographic projections. The impact of religious today transcends the limits of their physical presence. The witness to the vision engendered by Vatican II is alive and well globally in and through the range and diversity of ministries and in terms of prophetic witness of contemporary religious. In her

⁷⁸ The quotations and substance of this paragraph are from Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country* 25.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 23.

keynote address to the LCWR in 2010, Shawn Copeland reminded the religious present of their contribution to church and society:

The fact and hard-won achievement of your openness incarnates creative, faithful Christian responses to situations that many of us have chosen to disregard or belittle. In your lived passion for the mission and vision of Jesus of Nazareth, you women religious have become a symbol of contradiction and scandal among the people of your time and place. You have become a living protest of a perhaps unintentional but nonetheless real reduction of ourselves as church to the law-abiding but lukewarm; the unthinking but self-righteous; the domineering but fearful. We “good Catholics” would like to make you—and you must resist—into the talisman, the good luck charm, of our call to holiness. You must not, indeed, you cannot allow or submit to this. The very nature of prophetic ministry opposes patronage and true prophets are never on sale.⁸⁰

This public recognition of the prophetic, ecclesial life-form of religious life in the 21st century is surely yet another indication among many that religious life is more significant in its dynamic service of the global church and society in the 21st century than in any other era, and perhaps never more needed.

⁸⁰ M. Shawn Copeland, “Radical Openness, Suffering, and Hope,” keynote address to the Annual Assembly of the LCWR, Dallas, TX, August 2010, <https://lcsr.org/calendar/lcsr-assembly-2010>.



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