



Unione Superiori Generali
Via dei Penitenzieri, 19
00165 Roma

Unione Internazionale Superiore Generali
P.zza di Ponte S. Angelo, 28
00186 Roma



**CALLED AND SENT:
REFLECTIONS ON A THEOLOGY OF APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS LIFE TODAY**

Mary Maher, SSND

I want to thank the coordinators of this seminar for the invitation to share some reflections on a theology of apostolic religious life today. It is especially gratifying that you have brought together theologians and general superiors to work collaboratively to achieve the aims of the seminar. We need each other. On one hand, we have a number of significant things in common; on the other hand, the focus of our day-to-day intellectual and ministerial efforts is often quite different. Together, hopefully, we can make a contribution toward unleashing the power and effectiveness of consecrated life in the world, for the life of the world, which is the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

I was asked to highlight “main new thrusts” in the theology of apostolic religious life and “issues that are still open and being debated.” In this way, it is hoped, “a theological framework” will be presented that provides some insight into our overall theme. I want to make clear that I approached the task as a general superior who happens to be a theologian and not the other way around. I believe the difference is important. It is from this stance that I hope my reflections add something useful to our common concerns.

Where to begin?

The question of starting point in theology is a critical one. This is especially true with regard to a derivative reality such as a so-called *theology of religious life*. The latter depends upon a host of elements which would need to include a theology of God and God's action in history, a Christology, a theology of the world, an ecclesiology and theology of mission, as well as a coherent foundation for the following of Christ in biblical theology and spirituality.

Because all of these aspects of a theological vision are interrelated, one would think it might be possible theoretically to begin anywhere and eventually touch on all the rest. In actual fact, however, one's starting point provides already a perspective, a point of view, on all that follows. How one enters a discussion is already a decision among alternatives. One's starting point anticipates the range of possibilities concerning the contributions one might be able to offer.

This insight has been confirmed for me numerous times in the past few years as I have read, reflected, and prayed over the increasingly harsh debates about the present and future of apostolic religious life, especially in North America and Europe. Far too often the

point of entry into these debates is ecclesiology or canon law. Far too often the range of possibilities is limited by remaining exclusively there.

Please do not misunderstand me. I believe that apostolic religious life is an ecclesial vocation. In fact, this morning I hope to highlight something of the deeper meaning of that assertion. However, I believe that sometimes we get locked into debates about where we religious “fit” in the context of the various vocations in the Church or we focus simply on canonical discussions about essential elements of religious life, that we do not see beyond these issues. Again, let me be clear. I agree that these conversations are important and I hope we engage in some of them during these days together. I simply want to suggest that they might not be the best place to begin. If we begin only there we might end up remaining there, blinded to other theological perspectives which have potential to clarify the present and open up the future. Sometimes starting elsewhere can enable us to return to these important ecclesiological questions with freshness and inspiration.

Perhaps an example may help illustrate the point. As a general superior whose congregation has a substantial presence in the United States, I understandably have followed very closely the Apostolic Visitation of religious institutes of women in that country. Among the many articles and books I have read related to this matter are the presentations given at the “Symposium on Apostolic Religious Life,” held at Stonehill College, Massachusetts, in September of 2008. In particular, I would like to lift up the well-argued address by Sister Sara Butler, MSBT, Professor at St. Joseph’s Seminary in the Archdiocese of New York. Of all those who are reputed to have asked for a formal visitation, Sister Butler is the only one I know who put the idea in a public document.¹ I am grateful for this because it is helpful to have at least some of the issues behind the call for a formal visitation clarified in such a clear, if unofficial, manner.

Professor Butler examines contemporary apostolic religious life in relation to three challenges presented by the Second Vatican Council (clarifying the nature of religious life in light of the “universal call to holiness;” adapting aspects of our life to meet apostolic needs of the day; and expanding our apostolic concerns in view of the Church’s teaching on social justice). She then goes to the heart of her argument which is to show how the inadequate responses of apostolic religious to these challenges can be explained in relation to what she calls an unexpected development: the rise of differing, competing ecclesiologies, that is, by the “advent of unprecedented theological pluralism and public dissent within the Catholic Church.”² This is the lengthiest section of her paper. The crucial issue on which everything turns is described by Professor Butler as a polarization which she finds among religious with regard to acceptance or rejection of the Church’s hierarchical

¹ The manuscripts of the papers delivered at the conference, including that of Professor Butler, can be accessed at: <http://www.stonehill.edu/x14963.xml>. The reference here is to page 22 of Butler’s manuscript, “Apostolic Religious Life: A Public, Ecclesial Vocation.” It is important to note that the immediate context of Professor Butler’s suggestion that perhaps it is time for a formal visitation is her strong criticism of the leadership of two of the conferences of major superiors in the United States: Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) and Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). One wonders about the relationship of the concerns expressed here to the broad range of concerns of the doctrinal assessment of LCWR initiated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in February, 2009.

² Ibid., page 13.

structure. What follows is the conclusion to her talk which is both instructive and poignant. In answer to the question about what constitutes the treasure that has been lost and which apostolic religious long to reclaim, she writes:

The 'treasure' many of us would like to reclaim, perhaps, is the possibility of living the religious life fully, in peace, according to the charism of our communities, in communion with the hierarchy and collaboration with the laity, that is, according to the ecclesiology of communion, 'one in heart and soul' with the Church. . . . We would like to get beyond the stress of being suspicious and being under suspicion . . .

[We] long for the rebirth of relationships in which our place in the Church is clear and unambiguous . . .³

As I pondered carefully the full import of Professor Butler's paper, I was left with an existential wondering and a theological question. Existentially I wondered: who of us in the contemporary Church and postmodern world has a "clear and unambiguous" place or can live fully "in peace" in face of the searing problems confronting the Church and the human community today? Could this be a summary of the longing of one whose analysis stayed in boundaries too narrow to illuminate sufficiently the issues at hand?

This led to a theological question. How would the analysis have been different, and perhaps more illuminating, if it focused not primarily on differing and competing notions of the structure of the Church or on canonical questions, but on questions of Fundamental Ecclesiology,⁴ that is, on the identity of the Church in the world? This focus would lead necessarily to other critical questions, such as: How would the analysis be more illuminating if it addressed differing and competing theologies of the world, or differing and competing theologies of mission, or differing and competing understandings of the following of Christ and the ideal of holiness – all of which also have characterized the post-conciliar period, all of which also are fundamental ecclesiological questions, and all of which also bear a direct relationship to the identity of apostolic religious life? Perhaps beginning here would give us a fuller picture of the challenges facing apostolic religious today. Perhaps only then might we illuminate the contributions and the mistakes, the identity and the potential, of this unique vocation in the Church.

To this effort I would like to devote my time this morning. With sincere openness to the dialogue that will follow, I would like to offer my reflections in three steps:

³ Ibid., page 26.

⁴ This is a helpful term. I use it in the sense described by John J. Burkhard, OFM Conv., in his "Translator's Preface" to Ghislain Lafont's *Imagining the Catholic Church: Structured Communion in the Spirit*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), pp. xiii-xxi. "In reading Lafont," Burkhard writes, "I had a sense of the Church as a whole, and that this comprehensive understanding emerged from a close reading of the Church's history and the current human condition. . . . The Church cannot be contemplated in isolation from history . . . I call this general approach to a theology of the Church a 'Fundamental Ecclesiology'" (pp. xiii-xiv). As Burkhard explains, Fundamental Ecclesiology is a theology of the Church that dialogues with the traditional partners of theology – philosophy, history, and Scripture – but also is sensitive to issues of culture, pluralism of cultures, secularization, indifference to religion, and other factors of the postmodern world which prohibit theology from doing business as usual.

I will describe the identity of apostolic religious life. What is it as a form of religious life in the Church? This will require also clarifying from the perspective of fundamental ecclesiology why it is difficult for us to have a consensus today regarding the identity of apostolic religious life.

I will lift up the single most critical issue which divides us in the Church today and impedes our movement forward together.

I will highlight four significant elements of a theological framework which can guide and support the future direction of apostolic religious life. True to the starting point used in Part I, these elements will reflect some of the most significant and fundamental issues confronting the Church today and will require taking a position with regard to the critical issue raised in Part II.

I. Apostolic Religious Life and Fundamental Ecclesiology

In 1983 the *UISG Bulletin* published a paper which was the fruit of the work of a theological study group that included members of both the USG and UISG. The paper was entitled, appropriately enough, "Theological Reflections on Apostolic Religious Life."⁵ The authors articulate a vision of the foundations and distinguishing features of this form of religious life. They place apostolic religious life at the center of a centuries-long effort to divest of a monastic overlay onto the demands of dedication to apostolic works. In their words:

One can speak of a new form of religious life because since the sixteenth century the Holy Spirit has raised up in the Church orders of clerics regular, then congregations of men and women, both clerical and lay, in which typically monastic or conventual elements were abandoned so as to allow their members to dedicate themselves *entirely* to works of evangelization or charitable activity. Thus, a quite new type of religious life came into being: the apostolic religious life.⁶

I have not seen a better description of the distinguishing feature of this new form of religious life than the one articulated by these authors. What distinguishes apostolic religious life is that it is *a call to be with Christ as he is intent upon carrying out his mission as the One sent by the Father*; a call to union with him who lives with and in the midst of people and who spends himself for them; in a word, to live in union with him who 'went about doing good' (Acts 10: 38) and who 'gave his life for the redemption of all' (Mt. 20: 28).⁷

So, basically, apostolic religious are called and sent. This is to say that apostolic religious

⁵ *UISG Bulletin* 62 (1983). The authors are: Mary Paul Ewen, SSCJ, Silvia Vallejo, ODN, and Paul Molinari, SJ. The article appeared also in *Review for Religious* 43 (1984): 3-25. It was reprinted in *Paths of Renewal for Religious*, Volume 2 of *The Best of the Review*, edited by David Fleming, SJ, (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1986): 337-359. I am using this edition of the text. In addition to the three authors of the text, the study group which produced the material included: Mary Abbott, SSND; Jeanne-Francoise De Jaeger, CR; Mary Margaret Johanning, SSND; Joseph Aubry, SDB; Peter Gumpel, SJ; and Egidio Viano, SDB.

⁶ *Ibid.*, note 5, page 359.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

give their all, responding in love to a call to follow Jesus Christ into the world, to become part of a community of disciples who pour themselves out in service to those in need, as He did. In other words, *in a unique way because it is the all-consuming, defining character of their lives*, apostolic religious are akin to the disciples for whom Jesus prays to the Father in John's Gospel: "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth. I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17: 18-21).

For a variety of reasons (not only ecclesial but also cultural, social, and political), we have not arrived at a level of comfort recognizing a truly apostolic, and not monastic, religious life, especially for women. We do not seem to be able to grasp a consecrated life *in the world* – the very definition of apostolic religious life. We know well consecrated life separated from the world and we can see plainly the lay vocation as living out the baptismal commitment in the world. But we do not yet have a sufficiently evolved theory and praxis of consecrated life in the world. This is at the root of our inability to come to consensus about the identity of apostolic religious life as being called into a community of disciples and sent in mission for the life of the world.⁸

Fundamental ecclesiology can help illuminate this dilemma. The dynamic of being *called* and *sent* characterizes the life of all baptized Christians. This dynamic also captures the fundamental identity of the Church itself. The Church is the people gathered, structured, enlivened by the Holy Spirit and sent forth to proclaim the Good News to the whole world. *Communio* and *missio* – two poles held in tension by which the Church has always known itself and through which the Church has always expressed itself. Neither one is more important than the other. Communion and mission. Being and doing. Breathing in and breathing out. One cannot exist or function without the other.

The truly amazing reality revealed in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is that this dynamic of *communio* and *missio* exists not merely in us or in the Church. This dynamic describes the revelation of the inner life of the Trinity – the Godhead as a communion of persons pouring forth the fullness of love. This is the life into which we are baptized – the inexhaustible bounty of love and livingness that is the triune God. The Church is called to be a sacrament in the world of this dynamic of God's self-giving and unifying love.

While the mutually-defining relationship between *communio* and *missio* has always characterized the Church, the meanings and emphases of the two concepts have shifted

⁸ One can certainly understand the position of Sister Sandra Schneiders, IHM, who prefers to call the new form of religious life by the name "ministerial religious life." She feels that, over the course of the centuries that it has evolved, women's "apostolic religious life" has become burdened with an understanding of itself as a hybrid of the monastic and apostolic (or ministerial) forms, with expectations of living fully the demands of both. See her article, "The Past and Future of Ministerial Religious Life" in *National Catholic Reporter* (October 2, 2009), a special section, pages 1a- 4a. Connecting apostolic religious life, understood as a whole, with discipleship is well articulated by Sister Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, in "Discipleship: Root Model of the Life Called 'Religious'," originally published in *Review for Religious* 42 (1983): 864-872, reprinted in *Paths of Renewal for Religious*, Volume 2 of *The Best of the Review*, edited by David Fleming, SJ, (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1986): 35-43.

and developed throughout history. In the same 500 years that apostolic religious life has been struggling to develop, these shifts and developments in the self-awareness of the Church have been staggering in their depth and breadth. The coincidence is not accidental.

With regard to the *communio* of the Church, as institution and as communion of persons, we are all aware of the debates at the Second Vatican Council which produced its final documents as well as of the significant developments since the Second Vatican Council in "communion ecclesiology." It is important to recognize something too often hidden or ignored. Basic to these developments is the slow, centuries-long evolution from being a Euro-centric Church to becoming a world-Church. *Communio* is rich and multi-faceted, bringing together an abundant and irreducible pluralism into a dynamic unity of life and mission. The thorny question regarding episcopal collegiality is more than relevant here.

Regarding the *missio* of the Church, we are aware since the Council's decree, *Ad Gentes*, of the recovery of the Trinitarian origins of mission. What needs to be recognized and acknowledged is that, basic to this recovery, is the way in which the pluralism of religions and cultures has challenged the Church's understanding of its relationship to the world and its peoples, as well as its own theory and praxis of evangelization. This challenge also has been evolving for centuries.

Apostolic religious life has often been a significant factor in these developments in the fundamental ecclesiology of the Church. In fact, in the past 500 years, from the missionary colonization by Europe of the "new world," to the Counter-Reformation, to the emergence of the modern world and the age of the Enlightenment, to the postmodern situation in which we find ourselves today, the evolution of apostolic religious life has been a good bellwether of these developments.

The struggle for the identity of apostolic religious life is closely linked with the evolution of the Church's self-understanding at the most basic levels. It is worth all the energy we have given it. It is essential that we press on.

II. The Critical Issue

There is a key which unlocks the door to an adequate theological framework for illuminating the identity of apostolic religious life in the Church and world today. Everyone knows about this key. Some are reluctant to use it. Others use it to open the door but they remain at the threshold, thereby seeing what is on the other side only in a limited way. Others use it to enter fully, but also bring with them all that they held before they opened the door. Still others use it to enter fully but forget what they held before entering.

The key is the discovery of history, the epochal shift to a radically historical consciousness which has characterized the modern and postmodern eras. Attending this rise of historical consciousness is an appropriation of the world and of human experience in a pluralism of ways, with fundamentally secularized views of reality, and within cultural, religious, and social traditions that are mediated always and only historically.

This has enormous implications for theology and for the life, prayer, and praxis of the Church. Simply put, it means that everything has a context. To understand, for example, a

dogmatic statement proclaimed in the 4th century, I need to know something of the philosophical, linguistic, social, political, cultural contexts that sparked the question and prompted the answer given by the Church at the time. In other words, *continuity of tradition requires something of us*. As Karl Rahner noted more than once, if we simply repeat it we have not understood it. Something is required of us beyond mindless repetition.

On a deeper level, of course, the threat of thoroughgoing relativism arises from historical consciousness when Christianity is viewed as simply among and alongside many other cultural, religious, and social traditions, each with its own perspectives on the meaning of life and claims to truth. This challenge is of great concern to all of us and is being directly addressed both by the magisterium and by numerous theologians. If a specifically Christian faith and hope is grounded in the conviction that, in Jesus Christ, humanity – and indeed the *whole* of creation – has the bringer of salvation, the final, eschatologically victorious act of God on its behalf, how this faith and this hope for salvation can be sustained in an historicized (pluralistic) world is a question that must be addressed.

Now, what does all this have to do with the theology of apostolic religious life? It has everything to do with it. Apostolic religious life is inextricably linked with how the Church understands itself and its mission, its evangelization and its core belief in the salvific power of Christ's life, death and resurrection. The challenge of appropriating all this in an historically conscious way is critical for the Church and for the present and future of the ministry of apostolic religious in the world. I cannot help but believe that something of this concern was in the mind and heart of Pope Paul VI when he linked apostolic religious life to what he called a "burning question . . .

How can the message of the Gospel penetrate the world? What can be done at those levels in which a new type of culture is unfolding . . .? . . . Dear religious, according to the different ways in which the call of God makes demands upon your spiritual families, you must give your full attention to the needs of men, their problems and their searching; you must give witness *in their midst*, through prayer and action, to the Good News of love, justice and peace. . . . Such a mission, which is common to all the People of God, belongs to you in a special way.⁹

No doubt the Church needs this evangelical witness proper to apostolic religious life. Does Paul VI's plea not also imply that apostolic religious life is called to help the Church address itself to the exigencies of the contemporary world, to the great needs facing humanity today? How much ink has been spilled over the question as to whether apostolic religious life is a life lived at the margins of the Church or at the heart of the Church? Could it not be that from the very heart of the Church apostolic religious move to the margins, to the forefront of the outward movement of the Church as it is sent by the power of the Holy Spirit *into the world*? In this way are we not in harmony with Pope Benedict XVI's assertion that without the outward movement in mission the Church would face certain death? In the same talk, the Holy Father also said that

In recent years the anthropological, cultural, social and religious framework of humanity has changed. Today the Church is called to face new challenges and is ready to dialogue

⁹ *Evangelica testificatio*, (On the Renewal of the Religious Life According to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council, 1971), # 52; emphasis mine.

with different cultures and religions, in the search for ways of building, along with all people of good will, the peaceful coexistence of peoples. The field of mission *ad gentes* appears much broader today . . .¹⁰

Indeed.

III. Significant Elements of a Theological Framework

In this context I would like to suggest four significant elements of a theological framework for apostolic religious life. For sure, there are other elements to be explicated. However, I want to say that without these four there can be no adequate theological support for this way of life today. The four elements of a coherent theological framework for apostolic religious life can be disclosed as a challenge to theologians and religious alike in the following way, taking our lead from the heart of St. Paul's reflection on ministry in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19):

God was in Christ: The incarnation involves God in history in ways so profound that we are still unpacking them after 2000 years. Like the Church, so, too, are religious *in* history, not above it or outside it. We need theological perspectives on history to help us (1). Also, we are called by God to follow Jesus Christ. We need foundations in biblical theology and spirituality to support our response to this call today (2).

God was in Christ reconciling the world: Apostolic religious, in ways proper to their call, participate in this ministry of reconciliation. We need to know the "needs, problems and searching" of people in the world today (3), so that we can give our "full attention" to them, as enjoined by Pope Paul VI in the text quoted above.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself: Does this not mean that the *mission* of

God is *communion*, which is to say that ultimately all creation is destined to be brought back to God? This is the constant teaching of the church and it is imperative that apostolic religious have a solid theological grounding in what it means today (4).

I have developed aspects of these elements at some length in other contexts.¹¹ Here I will describe briefly what is needed by apostolic religious in regard to each of them.

(1) *The need for theological perspectives on history:* When we referred earlier to the basic elements of the Church's identity, *communio* and *missio*, we used repeatedly words such as "shifts," "development," and "evolution." These words are at the heart of the current debate in the Church concerning the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council. The position one takes with regard to this depends in substantial measure upon the stance taken

¹⁰ Homily at Eucharist at Av. dos Aliados Square, in Porto, Portugal, on May 14, 2010.

¹¹ "Between Imagination and Doubt: Religious Leadership in Postmodern Culture," Keynote address, LCWR National Assembly, USA, August 18, 2002; "Making Conversations Real: Reflections on Religious Life in Postmodern Times," Keynote address, Religious Formation Conference, USA, November, 2003; "Following Jesus: A Journey Out Far and In Deep," Keynote address, National religious Vocation Conference, USA, published in *Horizon* (Winter, 2005): 8-20.

with regard to the use of the “key” of the impact of history. It is more than interesting that Bernard Lonergan, Professor at the Gregorian University during the Council, is reported to have said that the meaning of Vatican II is the acknowledgement of history. In a similar vein, in the year the Council ended, John Courtney Murray stated that development of doctrine was “the issue under the issues at Vatican II.”¹²

I believe that we should use the key to enter fully the challenges of the postmodern world and I believe that we should carry with us all that we have held before this door was opened. In other words, I believe that a mutually critical and mutually illuminating relationship is possible between the contemporary world and the full scope of the faith-tradition we hold dear. I believe that a truly Catholic theology is co-relational in this respect – that what is discovered in such a mutually critical relationship illuminates both realities and produces new insights and calls to conversion to new ways of thinking and acting. I believe it always has and I believe it will for us today.¹³

(2) *Called by God to follow Jesus Christ—a need for biblical and spiritual foundations:* One thing is so foundational to religious life that we had better not say it goes without saying. We had better say it. Religious life is all about being seized by the living God. Because God first loved us we respond in love, giving our entire lives to faithfully listening to and responding to God. We become religious because God has taken hold of us in such a mysterious and attractive way that we find we can do nothing else but respond with our whole lives. If we make something other than this primary, we are not talking about religious life anymore. This is not to say that there are not a number of other things that, taken together, constitute *apostolic* religious life. There are. But nothing else is primary in the same way. Apostolic religious life is primarily about being called, lured, attracted by the living God to follow Jesus Christ in a community of disciples who are sent into the world to serve and minister in His name.

As the world and the Church continue to be influenced by classical, modern and postmodern worldviews and modes of thought, religious sometimes experience confusion regarding shifts in ways of imaging God and in the ideal of a life lived in response to God.

Some religious live very directly out of what might be called a classical notion of or experience of God. This is an experience that is comfortable with the mystical tradition. It emphasizes the transcendence and holiness of God and focuses on imitating Christ's virtues. Most of the men and women we have known throughout our religious lives have achieved holiness in this understanding. It deserves the label “mystical” in that, as Janet Rufing points out, this way of understanding Jesus draws us into the lifelong effort “to seek the one thing

¹² “This Matter of Religious Freedom,” *America* 112 (January 9, 1965): 43. Reference quoted in John W. O’Malley, “Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?” in O’Malley, et al., *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* (NY: Continuum, 2008), page 58 and page 86, note 17.

¹³ At times these conversions can feel like a complete rupture, but they are not. They do, however, imply change. They involve development, evolution, genuine shifts of perspective—all of which are included in what it means to live in history. Our faith has nothing to fear from full engagement. We have a rich storehouse and an unimaginably creative God about Whom there is always more to learn and to adore. As the Orthodox Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan famously held: tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. The difference makes all the difference.

necessary, progressive contemplative assimilation to the Christ mystery.”¹⁴ However, it must also be said that this model deserves the label “ahistorical,” in the sense that the concrete circumstances in which one lives (where one is, what one is doing, with whom and for whom one is doing it) are not elements that factor necessarily into what really counts for the achievement of holiness. The point is that *whatever* one is doing or *wherever* one is doing it, one must have the proper attitudes, the attitudes Christ had.

Under the influence of modern biblical scholarship, some religious have shifted to a profound sense of Jesus' mission to bring the reign of God to our world. You might say they have shifted to an “historical” model of holiness in the sense that they have different experience of God because of a focus on the life and ministry of Jesus. So, their action on behalf of justice, their ministries, and prayer all evolve out of the prophetic and contemplative grasp of their identity as religious in these terms. It is not necessarily that they have left the classical experience completely behind in this shift. Rather, it is the case that they have come to experience God so differently that their basic intuitions about what is most important have shifted to this justice-making, kingdom-building emphasis.

This ideal has its origins in Protestant scholarship of historical study of the Bible in the late 18th century, but really affects Catholic theology only in the 20th century.¹⁵ We learned that Jesus' whole life – what he said and did, what made him “tick” – revolved around the coming reign of God which Jesus in fact made present. In contrast to the classical model, where, as in the words of the Apostles' Creed, we move from “born of the virgin Mary” to “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” here, in an historical model, we pause over the concrete content, style, manner and meaning of the life of Jesus: what he said and to whom; how he behaved; who he favored; what made him angry; how he prayed; what his experience of God was. In this model of holiness the concrete circumstances in which a religious lives, (what she does, where she does it and with whom), make a great deal of difference.

Biblical study along these lines has unlocked tremendous richness in focus for our prayer and in liberating praxis in a variety of ministries. It has enabled the Church to articulate such phrases as “the preferential option for the poor” and “action on behalf of justice is constitutive of the gospel,” and so forth. Perhaps most profoundly of all, it has given us a perceptive grasp into the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ not as something abstractly willed by God from all eternity, but as evolving out of the concrete decisions and behavior of his life.

It is fair to say that the very richness of the second model contained within it some of seeds of the move to a third – the liberation, feminist model of the postmodern situation. Here we experience what happens when we attend to the concrete meanings of Jesus and of the Christ-event. We are led to deal with what Edward Schillebeeckx calls “contrast experiences,” those experiences of negativity, of evil, of injustice and inhumanity which plague human history in every age and place. In our encounter with these situations, the ministry of Jesus gives us the foundation and grace for the necessary protest: “No, this should

¹⁴ In a presentation she offered in the United States for Region 2 of LCWR, on models of Christology and their relation to spirituality, October 26, 1993, page 4, manuscript copy.

¹⁵ In fact, it has only been since the Second Vatican Council, where this critical method of studying the Gospels was explicitly affirmed and taught, that you have this model becoming operative in the spirituality of the faithful. See *Dei Verbum*, especially paragraph 19.

not be!"

Many religious have been rooting around for decades in both the mystical and the justice-making traditions in search of ways to express adequately their experience of God which has given them a whole new perspective on what is important for every aspect of their religious lives. We need ongoing help to ground ourselves in solid biblical and spiritual foundations.

(3) *The need for sound theological perspectives on the world situation today*: I could have, and perhaps should have, entitled this section "the need for a theology of the world" because, indeed, we do need that. I did not do this because I want to emphasize particular aspects of a theology of the world that are especially needed by apostolic religious today.

On one hand, we need to know how to enter the world. On the other hand, we need helpful theological perspectives on the multifarious complex world-situations, struggles and "meta-problems,"¹⁶ and an understanding of the light which the Christian tradition sheds on these realities. Let me say a brief word about each of these aspects of a theology of the world.

First and basically, we need a theological perspective which can help us understand why we no longer die to the world or flee the world. At the deepest levels, what does it mean for us to be called to follow Christ *into the world*, giving our lives for the life of the world? In her forthcoming book, *Buying the Field*, Sister Sandra Schneiders, IHM, offers precisely this perspective. I think we should all look forward to her contribution. She has there an insight I would like to lift up to us now. Professor Schneiders writes:

For Religious, ... the challenge of incorporating [a new attitude of affirmation of the world as the proper sphere for the living of one's faith] has proved more difficult than almost anything else they have faced in the wake of the Council.¹⁷

This is a strong statement and I believe profoundly accurate. I am perhaps a little less sanguine than Michael Buckley, SJ, when 25 years ago he stated that many American religious communities of women have transposed their heritage into a modern idiom. . . . These religious communities of women have begun, perhaps for the first time in the Church,

¹⁶ The term is from Paul Knitter, "Deep Ecumenicity versus Incommensurability: Finding Common Ground on a Common Earth," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Human*, (Volume 3 of *Religions of the World and Ecology*), edited by Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), page 368. In response to postmodern academics who insist that there are no such things as "metanarratives," there is no way beyond language to "reality" and any claim to have the meaning of history must be rejected as oppressive and exclusionary, Knitter posits that surely we must admit that we have "metaproblems." We have "universal, particular problems that affect everyone." In this context he is referring to the ecological peril, the threat to earth of humanity's modes of consumption of resources which raise "ethical issues and [make] ethical demands that apply universally, to all of us." Ibid.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Professor Schneiders for allowing me to read the first three chapters of this forthcoming third volume of her trilogy on religious life. These chapters deal with the biblical foundations of a theology of the world that is part of what I believe is sorely needed today. This quotation is from page 22 of the manuscript copy of Chapter One, "Naming the Field: To What Are Religious Missioned?"

a synthesis of religious consecration and an inculturation into forms of contemporary life—a synthesis made in service to their mission.¹⁸

I think he is correct that it has “begun” and I believe so much good has been done with regard to responsible and courageous efforts to create precisely this kind of synthesis of religious consecration and inculturation. And it is undeniable that much growth in prayer, professionalism, human development and the appropriation of the call of the Gospel has occurred in the past decades. However, it is also true, I think, that this period of struggle to enter the world reveals some mistakes and dead-ends on the part of apostolic religious in the post-conciliar period. These realities are certainly understandable given the depth and breadth of change. At the same time they need to be acknowledged and explored more fully.

Secondly, we need the good work of theologians who spend their days and years mining the depth and breadth of the Christian tradition for grace-filled knowledge and insight into the world situation in which we are called to minister. Members of our communities are living eclectically out of various combinations of pre-modern, modern and postmodern perspectives and from out of this eclecticism they have differing views about what is important, about the way the world works, and about how we should live, pray, and decide about the future.

This “partiality” or eclecticism regarding interpretations of our life in the world is itself a hallmark of the postmodern experience. We are living our religious lives and making decisions about future directions in a time of profound cultural upheaval, caught up in dynamic tensions whose roots go to the very depths of all we hold dear. The contemporary cultural context of the developed West is almost universally described with such words as “uncontrollable,” “unpredictable,” “chaotic,” “pluralistic,” and “relativized” to the point of being, according to some, “meaningless.” We are challenged in the deepest levels of our spirituality to have the courage to embrace the future to which God calls us in the face of the irresolvable uncertainty and partial grasp of our situation in the world. “Risking in hope” is indeed a quite “postmodern” path to holiness.

It is not an exaggeration to say that, with all this diversity of perspectives, the single most vexing problem facing humankind today is our inability to deal with pluralism, with difference, with the “other,” except by way of violence and hostility and the desire to exclude. From our perspective as religious we may want to see the world as one interconnected community, where everything and everyone is interrelated. However, we cannot escape the fact that the world today is *fractured* by its differences, by conflicts between different ethnic groups and nationalities, different cultures and religions and philosophies of life. The inability to deal with difference except with hostility and violence is destroying families, cultures, societies, indeed, the planet itself.

I believe that postmodern apostolic religious life needs to be more clearly defined by the call to bear the ancient wisdom of Christianity with a new justice to a world marked by

¹⁸ “The Charism and Identity of Religious Life,” in *Paths of Renewal for Religious*, Volume 2 of *The Best of the Review*, edited by David Fleming, SJ, (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1986): 64.

radical pluralism and the inability to deal with difference.¹⁹ It is obvious that responding to this call requires the assistance of good theology. Such response also has many implications for apostolic religious life which I hope we can explore together these days.

(4) *The need for ongoing reflection on the theology of mission:* In recent centuries, the church has been struggling mightily to shape spiritually, theologically and practically the way we do mission in a world marked by an irreducible pluralism of religions and cultures. In very broad terms, it can be said that contemporary perspectives on mission have evolved out of events over the past 500 or more years since Christian Europe first began to discover that there were “worlds” other than its own – in the Americas, in Asia and in Africa. These worlds had and have ancient cultures and religions in a great diversity and richness that were often not appreciated, but rather ignored, often exploited, and, in some cases, devastated by the European and, later, North American colonization of many of these lands.

Only in this context can we truly receive the understanding of mission which came to explicit expression at the Second Vatican Council and which continues to be developed by theologians and the magisterium, as well as by the reflection on experience of missionary congregations of religious at the annual SEDOS²⁰ conferences, and so forth.

An important step was the promulgation in 1965 of Vatican II's Decree on Missionary Activity, *Ad gentes*. This text makes clear that mission actually begins in the very life of the Holy Trinity with the sending of the Incarnate Word and Holy Spirit into the world. The roots of *Ad gentes* can be traced to the 1930's when theologians began to recover the sense of mission based on the theology of the Trinity of the early centuries of the church. This recovery was part of the great retrieval of the literary sources of the early church in the decades which led up to Vatican II. The term “*missio Dei*” came to be used.

In the early church, as the theology of the Trinity was developed, and already we see roots of this in the Gospel of John, mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. In classical trinitarian language, mission is understood most fundamentally in this way: God the Father sends the Son; the Father and Son send the Spirit; the Father, Son and Spirit send the church. Missionary initiative comes not primarily from the command of Jesus to his disciples to go out into the whole world and preach the Gospel. Rather, missionary activity comes even more basically from the very nature of God, a triune communion of love.

Mission, therefore, is not primarily an activity of the church; it is primarily an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. It is in the nature of God to be missionary, to reach out in relationship, to pour forth love. The mission includes the church, of course. In fact, the church

¹⁹ The felicitous phrase, “bearing the ancient wisdom with a new justice,” appears in the last line of Elizabeth Johnson's seminal work, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 273.

²⁰ SEDOS (Service of Documentation and Study on Global Mission) is a forum open to Institutes of Consecrated Life which commit themselves to deepening their understanding of global mission. SEDOS encourages research and disseminates information through its bulletin and website, public conferences, working groups, as well as its annual seminar. SEDOS publications are available in many languages. The homepage can be found at: <http://www.sedos.org>

is mission in the sense that the church exists only for sake of God's mission. So, there is church because there is mission, but not vice versa. The Church *participates in the missio Dei*. The church is *part of* God's mission in the world, but it is not the whole of God's work in the world.

It is not without difficulty that the Church's teaching on this continues to develop. The insight that mission is about participating in and cooperating with what the triune God is already doing among all peoples has enormous implications for evangelization. Some of these implications were elaborated by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) and by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990). Obviously, in a few paragraphs it is not possible for us to do justice here to the depth of the mystery we are contemplating – namely, the mystery of the Trinitarian missions in creation and in human history. This mystery is at the heart of our faith and of our very being. The Holy Spirit continues in every age to help the church unfold, appreciate, and live its depths. The point is to say with considerable urgency that apostolic religious need to be nourished by ongoing formation in the theology of mission.

Conclusion: In these reflections I have offered many challenges to the theologians present among us by expressing the expectations and needs apostolic religious have for their work. A proper conclusion might be to challenge also the general superiors with some suggestions for next steps that we need to take regarding all that has been said. Alas, this is not the purview of the task assigned to me and we are out of time. However, I naturally have a keen interest in becoming clear on what are called to be and to do as apostolic religious today, and I am bold enough to say that I even have a few thoughts on the matter. I hope we get to that in our conversations these days. For now, let me close in a manner consistent with my conviction that starting points are important. If you will allow, I will end by quoting the first paragraph, the starting point, of the Constitution of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. It is most apt.

To each of us at this moment of salvation history, the words of Christ ring clear: “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world . . . May they be one in us . . . so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (John 17: 18, 21). We are called and we are sent.²¹

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²¹ *You Are Sent*, S.S.N.D. Constitution, approved on March 25, 1986, paragraph 1.