



Religious Formation Conference
5401 S Cornell Ave, Suite 304
Chicago, IL 60615773.675.8362
phone

rfc@relforcon.org
www.relforcon.org

Managing Editor
Ryan J. Hoffmann

Rethinking Religious Formation for the 21st Century

Given by Sandra Schneiders, IHM

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the invitation to participate in this day of reflection on the immediate and longer-range future of Religious Life and especially of formation which is so crucial to that future. The ministry entrusted to you in forming the people who will carry Religious Life into the future is challenging to say the least, and I feel privileged to be invited to reflect with you about it during this time we have together.

When Mary [Johnson] and I first started talking about this topic of formation in the current cultural and ecclesial context in which U.S. Religious Life is unfolding today, we were both struck by the fact that the changed situation of formation in U.S. Religious Life today, in relation to what it was in the immediate aftermath of Vatican II, that is, in the mid-sixties, presents an interesting parallel or analogue to the situation faced by U.S. Religious Life in the 1950's and early 1960s in relation to what it had been in the early 1900's. In the immediate aftermath of the Council, the mid-60's, there were more women Religious in the U.S. than at any time in our history: at the highpoint in 1965 there were about 180,000; today there are about 50,000, roughly a 72% numerical decline. However, except for a few very far-sighted people who saw the handwriting on the wall in the 1950s, most Congregations in that era were not aware that Religious Life, despite its numerical explosion, was actually poised to lose its overwhelming influence in the U.S. Catholic Church. Why? Because virtually all Religious at that point were ministering in large Catholic institutions owned and operated by their own Congregations within the exclusive context of the Church, that is, only marginally and extrinsically related to their secular environs. It was the height of the Catholic ghetto in the U.S. In the Catholic ghetto, of which Religious institutions (including Religious Congregations) were an integral part, Religious could function without the kinds of education, certification, and credentialing that would very soon become mandatory, not just in secular or public schools and hospitals but in all institutions that functioned within

the civil structure. Most Sisters, at that time, i.e., the fifties and early sixties, were sent into what we then called "the apostolate" in their early 20's at the latest with little more than a high school diploma and perhaps some basic instruction, apprenticeship, or coaching from the more experienced members of their own Congregations. But these ministerial occupations were beginning to be professionalized in a way that would have rendered Catholic institutions and the people who staffed them unable to compete, or perhaps even to function, in terms of the professional standards that would be mandatory in a very short time. In fact, we did lose many of our institutions but our members were able to move into other ministerial contexts where they became, in many ways, the backbone of the U.S. Church's outreach to its cultural context in the very changed conditions of the post-Conciliar Church and world. We could have, probably would have, been put out of business, both institutionally and personally, despite our large numbers, boundless zeal, and even actual effectiveness, by our lack of qualifications and credentials. What prevented that from happening?

THE SISTER FORMATION MOVEMENT

Basically, a small group of very far-sighted women Religious initiated, in the 1950's, what was eventually called "The Sister Formation Movement" whose ultimate objective was to educate every Sister involved in active ministry to at least the bachelor's level of general education before she began her full-time apostolic involvement as a teacher, health care or social service worker, or whatever she might be assigned to. And this facilitated a further goal of appropriate advanced preparation in her own professional field as that became possible through summer graduate programs and even, in some cases, full-time university study, for which these newer Sisters were eligible because of their undergraduate college degrees attained during initial formation rather than over 16 to 20 years of piecemeal summer school courses. This college level preparation of all new members

relforcon.org

f facebook.com/relforcon
t twitter.com/relforcon

was not envisioned simply as a matter of certification but rather as an integrated personal and professional formation of these young Sisters, that is, as the intellectual, spiritual, social, cultural, and professional maturation of the whole person. The result was that U.S. Women Religious became, by the time Vatican II ended in the mid-1960's, the best qualified, best-prepared cohort of ministers in the American Church. Although they were not yet specialized in theology and philosophy, they were at least literate in these disciplines, and because of their wider *liberal arts* preparation, they were often better prepared than their ministerial peers, even in the clergy, to at least see the significance for their lives and ministries of advances in the *social and natural sciences*. They were, therefore, better prepared to participate in the initial reception of the Council and to facilitate its reception among the Catholic population. It is not hard to imagine that, had it not been for women Religious, the Council might have been basically stillborn in the highly clerical and traditionalist U.S. Church of the 1950's and 60's. In a certain sense, the recent assault on U.S. Women Religious and their leadership by the Vatican investigations was a back-handed recognition of the maturity – theological, spiritual, cultural, and ministerial – and therefore of the influence of women Religious in this country on the American Church. This maturation would never have occurred unless those far-seeing leaders in the mid-1950's had realized that unless women Religious were educated to the level of parity with their clerical and lay colleagues their sheer numbers (which no one could have foreseen would decline so precipitously within a decade or two) would not be able to keep them in operation, much less influential. The power of women Religious in the immediate aftermath of the Council, which continues to this day, I think it is safe to say, derived directly from the visionary and courageous initiative of the architects of the Sister Formation Movement, operating under the aegis of the Sister Formation Conference which is now your own Religious Formation Conference, facing today challenges as daunting as those that confronted our Congregations in the 1950s.

We should add that, although they could not have known it at that time, in the mid-fifties and early sixties, these pioneers of contemporary Religious Formation were also preparing Sisters not just to teach and nurse in their own institutions, nor even just for reception of the Council, but also for the socio-cultural-political revolution of the sixties, and the emergence of post-modernity in the seventies and eighties. But what the architects of the Sister Formation Movement did know was that they were preparing these young Sisters for the professionalization of ministry and that that professionalization would be short-circuited, merely secular competence, unless it included and integrated not simply academic education and professional training, but the theological and spiritual, personal and psychological, cultural and social, development of these Sisters. The Sister Formation leaders envisioned a new breed of Woman Religious. They intended to cultivate fully developed adult persons of faith: spiritually, intellectually, psychologically, socially, and culturally mature participants in what would turn out to be the post-conciliar Church and the post-modern world. A full grasp of the newness of the cultural and religious situation that would emerge from the tumultuous

sixties and the dawning of post-modernity was still in the future. But the founders of the Sister Formation Movement, presciently aware that the “times, they were a-changing;” were dealing with the monumental task of changing the basic notion and reality of formation for tens of thousands of young women Religious.

...although they could not have known it at that time, in the mid-fifties and early sixties, these pioneers of contemporary Religious Formation were also preparing Sisters not just to teach and nurse in their own institutions, nor even just for reception of the Council, but also for the socio-cultural-political revolution of the sixties, and the emergence of post-modernity in the seventies and eighties.

ANALOGY OF OUR CURRENT SITUATION TO THAT WHICH GAVE RISE TO THE SISTER FORMATION MOVEMENT

Today, I would like to suggest, Religious Life and therefore formation for the life, is in a crisis situation analogous to that of the late fifties and early sixties and calling for an analogously courageous and imaginative response. It is not the same situation. The challenges are not the same and the response cannot be the same. Analogy is, by definition, a resemblance in some particulars of things that are otherwise not alike. We are very aware of the critical respects in which our current existential situation as Religious is unlike that of Religious Life in the mid-20th century. But I want to suggest that there are equally important and enlightening ways in which we are facing the same kind and magnitude of challenges that the Sister Formation initiative addressed and this might suggest that we can find solutions for our time and situation analogous to those they found for theirs – and of which, in fact, many if not most of us are the products. We would not be here in this unheard of situation – a national convention – unless some very radical developments had occurred between the days of our cloistered formation and the post-modern condition in which we live today.

The differences between the two situations, are evident. In the 1950's and early 60's Religious Congregations had huge numbers of members augmented yearly by the influx of large numbers of recruits. Virtually all the new recruits were very young and part of the same historical generation and sociological cohort. They came from intact Catholic families, with (usually) 12 years of total-immersion formation in the Catholic faith in Catholic grade and high school, and virtually no real exposure to any alternatives to that all-Catholic view of reality. The young recruits were professionally uncommitted with little idea what they would choose to do if they had been asked (which, of course, they seldom were). Had they not entered the convent they would probably be where there their high school peers who did not enter the convent were



mostly married housewives with growing families. These new Religious were slated to live and minister in the Congregation they entered and its institutions for the whole of their lives. And no one, veterans or recruits, thought that there would be any real changes in the life or the Congregation's ministries (called "apostolates") any time in the foreseeable future.

Today, as we are very aware, the situation is extremely different from anything any of us could have imagined in the 1950's. We have very few new members, none very young, few coming from solidly, much less exclusively, Catholic backgrounds and usually with, at best, fragmented religious formations if any at all. But they are often professionally quite well formed, credentialed, and to some extent experienced. And the Congregation does not have placements for them even if it did have the luxury of forming them according to its requirements or desires.


There are at least two important points to make about this comparative situation if we are not to see it as a description of the beginning of the end of the lifeform we call Religious Life. First, there is **nothing normative about the 1950s version of the life**. In the history of the Church there have been periods in which large numbers of the faithful entered Religious Life and other periods in which very few did. Different forms of the life have attracted large numbers at certain times and places as other forms have declined or waned or even disappeared, only to experience, in some cases, a sociological re-emergence at another time or in another place. And the numbers have fluctuated greatly geographically, just as is the case today when vocations are multiplying in some parts of the world even as they decline in others. The still widespread, even if unarticulated, idea that Religious Life is healthy when it is numerically huge, financially flush, institutionally established, and approved of by the powers that be, and unhealthy when the numbers are smaller, resources are scarce, and approval is spotty may say more about the extent to which we have internalized the might-makes-right, capitalistic, politically dominant value system of the first world than about the health of Religious Life in our context. Jesus' movement, especially his chosen itinerant band that made a life choice of total devotion to his project – that is, the biblical precursors of Religious Life as I have suggested elsewhere – was hardly the most sociologically successful operation in first century Palestine. Jesus' band never seems to have exceeded, at most, a few dozen in his lifetime, and it does not seem to have greatly increased in the immediate aftermath of the Resurrection.

But, and this is my second point, whatever the validity or invalidity of our judgments about the health or viability of the lifeform at this moment in time, it is what it is – and, if we are not to despair, we have to assume some measure of divine volition in this situation. I am not suggesting, as the reality deniers have suggested, that a huge pile of manure must mean that there is a pony somewhere in the neighborhood. The present situation has major negative features and dynamics with which we are trying to cope. But, however we evaluate it, **this is what we have to work with**. If we throw up our hands, or throw in the towel, and resign ourselves to imminent extinction – the infamous, "last one out turn off the lights" scenario, or what I and some others have called, the cultivation of a culture of diminishment – because we find ourselves in a very different situation than the one that obtained often idealized scenario of the 1950's, then the game is, indeed, over. But if we decide to work with the situation in which we find ourselves (which is, in fact, what we seem to be doing – as Mary has pointed out in regard to mergers, reorganizations, internationalizations, and so on) we might discover that we have more options, and more control over our fate, than we have tended to think. And it is precisely some of those options that I want to discuss, particularly as they relate to formation.

THE NON-SUSTAINABILITY OF THE CURRENT SITUATION: GOOD NEWS OR BAD NEWS, THAT IS THE QUESTION

One of the irrefutable conclusions that we have come to – whether we have realized explicitly and articulated it or not – over the past 30 years or so, is that the configuration of Religious Life in this country as it existed in pre-Conciliar, modern times – especially in the first half of the 20th century – is not sustainable today. We were organized, congregationally, as 400 plus virtual silos, each Congregational silo handling every aspect of its own life – leadership, recruitment, formation, ministry, continuing education of members, fund-raising, finances, property ownership and management, health care, retirement, end of life care, etc. – in virtual isolation from, if not in actual competition with, the other 399 silos.

Necessity in some cases and wisdom in others, has radically altered this picture, even if most of us have not attended to that fact explicitly. LCWR (the Leadership Conference of Women Religious), has brought together our highest echelons of congregational leadership for mutual support, corporate self-education, sharing of resources and best practices, collective action, and even – as we saw so recently



We didn't need each other, or at least we didn't think we did, as long each Congregation had enough provisions in its separate silo. But now that, for all kinds of reasons, we don't enjoy such self-sufficiency, we are finding out that common necessity can make at least as good neighbors as do fences.

– corporate self-defense in and outside the Church. Similarly, ATRI (the Association of Treasurers of Religious Institutes) in relationship to the financial aspects of our lives, the NRVC and RFC in relation to vocational recruitment and discernment, and initial and ongoing formation, RCRI (the Resource Center for Religious Institutes) in relation to the financial and the legal aspects of our lives, both civil and canonical, NRRO (the National Religious Retirement Office) in regard to funding for the later stages of life, are all examples of organizing across congregational lines, outside our silos, because we realize that we can do together what none of us can do very well separately. At the next level down in institutional organization we see the same dynamics at work. There is considerable sharing of health care facilities and personnel, sharing of ministries in spiritual life centers, peace and justice work, political activism; re-imagining ministry in existing schools and hospitals, and the founding of new, cross-congregational types of such ministries. We have seen the emergence of artistic collectives, interactive process facilitation, shared cross cultural ministry at home and abroad, and on and on. In a sense, we have been creating, without perhaps averting to the fact, what people outside our life are increasingly seeing as a unified phenomenon in the Church: not so much a collection of hermetically sealed organizations called Orders or Congregations, but American Women's Religious Life, the reality and strength of which rose to striking visibility during the Vatican investigations. During that traumatic experience there was no such thing, in our minds or in the minds of our myriad supporters, as an isolated Religious Order that could be picked off or brought to heel. Touching one of our Congregations was touching all of us. People, parishes, and even dioceses rose to the defense, not of the "eastern province," or the Mercies or the IHMs, but simply of "our Sisters" or even "the Sisters." Like families in a healthy but challenged neighborhood who get together across blood lines to solve common problems with shared resources, Religious are discovering what our secular counterparts have long known about us, that Sisters have more in common as Religious than they have separately as individual orders or congregations. Our distinctive charisms, like individual personalities in a family, or distinct families in a neighborhood, are an enrichment in and through diversity, but not principles of division or competition. What enhances one builds up all and what threatens one must be defended against by all. In a way unprecedented before the 1960s we are at home on each others' property, seek solutions to shared problems together, share resources where we can, support each other

in suffering and crises, minister together, defend one another when anyone is under attack. Those of us who entered prior to Vatican II, if we stop to think about it, can realize how new this situation is. Who would think today that we entered our Congregation because it was evidently and unarguably superior to one across town? But how many of us didn't, to some degree, believe at the time we entered that that was, indeed, the fact? While there are some formal, organizational mergers, especially in the so-called "cluster congregations, that is, groups with similar or identical foundational charisms, the pattern seems to be primarily that of families in the same neighborhood or farms in the same countryside. Although it might not have happened if the material diminishment of the post-Conciliar period had not created such steep challenges for us in so many areas, this development, in my view, is neither a tragedy nor a counsel of despair. We didn't need each other, or at least we didn't think we did, as long each Congregation had enough provisions in its separate silo. But now that, for all kinds of reasons, we don't enjoy such self-sufficiency, we are finding out that common necessity can make at least as good neighbors as do fences. And we might even conclude that if and when the necessity no longer exists we will have learned to prefer unity to individualism, sharing to owning, working together to establishing ministerial fiefdoms.

And this brings me back to where I started, namely, that we as American Women Religious, are facing a situation analogous to that which we faced in the mid-20th century when our "Mom and Pop store" approach to ministry, or at least our "family farm" approach, suddenly faced the emergence in our fields of apostolate of large secular corporations and we realized that if we did not get our members educated, formed, credentialed, professionally up to speed in the rapidly collectivizing and professionalizing human services sector of modern society which, for us, was our apostolic sphere, we were going to find ourselves no longer major players in the areas such as health care, education, social facilitation and so on which were crucial to the health and well-being of the Catholic Church in this country.

As I have already said, our situation today is not identical but analogous to that of the pre-Conciliar period. But it is in the same area as that which gave rise to the Sister Formation Movement, namely, how to deal with the people who have recently joined us or are considering, or might consider, joining us? How do we get people who come to us, whether they are few or many, who are often considerably older than was previously the case, who arrive individually rather than in

continued on next page

large homogeneous groups, who are educated professionally but relatively unformed religiously, who are eclectically experienced spiritually in the generalized but often rootless spiritual questing of our time but unfocused denominationally or traditionally, and so on, into a growth process that will result in their having and living a genuine, ecumenically and inter-religiously open, but coherently Christian and explicitly Catholic spirituality that is theologically coherent, practicing, sharable among themselves and with others, mature and responsible, and ministerially communicable? The answer, of course, is formation – which is what you are all involved in up to your necks and which, I want to suggest, has to emerge from its current situation of constant, on the spot, re-invention and do the analogous equivalent for our times of what the Sister Formation Movement did in the mid-20th century. And I am trying to suggest that just as we have de-siloed so much of our life and ministry without diluting our charisms or losing our identities, we might be able to do something comparable in regard to formation.

Mary and I, and a number of people in this organization and in other meeting points of Religious concerned with our immediate future, as well as in conversations with a number of Congregations and groups of Congregations in their various assemblies, have been talking for some time now about how it might be possible to reconceive, structurally and content-wise, as well as operationally, the formation for Religious Life and Ministry of the people who are entering Religious Congregations today or are thinking about doing so. I want to condense some of that reflection and discussion under two headings, with the caveat that, if anything I am offering here is worth further discussion and reflection, the appropriate forum for those discussions is within Congregations and among Congregations, perhaps through the mediation of the Religious Formation Conference, the National Religious Vocation Conference, and LCWR. The two major headings, under which I want to make these suggestions are COHORT and PROGRAM, both of which have to do with the substance of the proposal. I will also mention some other topics which might be offshoots or collateral advantages of a new vision of formation, such as visibility and economies of scale.

COHORT

Let me recall what I said a few minutes ago, that, hard as it is for us to realize, there is nothing normative about the size of the Religious Life Movement in any historical period or locale. There have been periods, like the one we lived through just prior to the Council or that of the first half of the 13th century with the rise of the Mendicant Orders, when a huge proportion of the Catholic population – for various religious, cultural, economic and other reasons – felt called to Religious Life. The resulting surge in membership has, frequently if not usually, led to periods of laxity and the necessity for reforms that usually then cut the numbers back while raising the quality of the life. And there have been other times when Religious were few in numbers, but often effective out of all proportion to their numbers because of their zeal and commitment due to their sense of urgency about the Gospel and the paucity of resources to meet the need. But in any case, with the best of intentions and the most strenuous of efforts, we

do not control the number of vocations to Religious Life. Our challenge is to figure out how to make the most of the vocations God sends us. We don't get to pick our historical location or its typical problems. But we cannot solve “small numbers” problems with “big numbers” solutions, or vice versa.

One problem of very small numbers is the problem of “cohort.” One or two people do not a cohort make. The term “cohort” is borrowed from the Roman military organization in the days of the Empire. The cohort was a battalion of a certain size whose members lived and fought together, developing a shared vision and commitment to that vision, a camaraderie and loyalty and bondedness that enabled to fight as a unit more effectively than they could separately or even as part of a much larger unit. They were united by common military objectives and common designated leadership but also by interpersonal bonds of friendship and loyalty. They were “*comrades* in arms” and not just partners in a venture. The term “cohort” has been borrowed by many fields, for example, by the medical profession to analyze factors in health characteristic of specific populations and in economics for market analyses. It is used in education to help understand the relationships between educational attainments by people who share certain cohort characteristics. Often times the members of these cohorts are not related personally to each other. It is the analyst who sees something in common in the cohort's members.

But for some sociological purposes, which is our interest here, a cohort is a group whose members share a significant experience or collection of experiences, usually at a certain period of time or history, and have one or more similar characteristics precisely because of their common historical experience. A cohort is not the same as a generation although the terms are often, and causally, related. For example, people who were in college during the Vietnam War (and who are therefore mostly the same age) and who participated in the campus protests, draft-resistance, love-ins, and expressed themselves in and were moved by the music and poetry of that era, of the sixties, were a cohort the members of which, even today, have certain identifiable leanings, attitudes, fears, goals, and so on although the diversity of their later experience makes them much more diverse than they were in the 1960's. A cohort tends to be, at least at its inception, a generational group, that is, people who are basically in the same age bracket, but cohort and generation are not necessarily synonymous. When we look at the Trump cohort they can look pretty generationally similar. But not so the Bernie Sanders cohort which tends, in general, to be at least two generations removed from Sanders himself and tends to include a fairly high number of people who, age wise, should be in the Trump camp.

For our purposes, cohort refers to a sociological collectivity that is usually based in chronological or generational location but that is primarily characterized by certain shared psychological/sociological features arising from a shared cultural experience. It refers to an inbred “optique” or “take” on reality that is woven into the life experience of the members of the cohort and is, generally speaking, only vicariously available

to those who are not part of the cohort. Think of those who grew up in the Depression and the indelible features of their experience, no matter how well off they might have become in middle age, etched into their approach to money, saving, spending and so on that is utterly foreign to their children who are denizens of a throw-away culture and its built-in obsolescence. For these children of a different cohort saving, delayed gratification, bargain hunting, or repairing broken things instead of replacing them – in short, the economic proclivities of their parents' cohort – appear to them to be quaint tics of "old fogies". Or think of the 1950's Catholic ghetto cohort with its unconscious arrogance about having a lock on truth and virtue, to say nothing of salvation (from which, of course, Protestants and Jews and pagans were excluded) and its often-mindless subservience to clerical authority, even in regions in which they, the parishioners, were clearly better educated and more experienced. Or think of the pre-Conciliar cohort in the Church who, whether defenders of Council or throwbacks to Trent for whom the Council was a disaster, are something of a curiosity to 20-somethings today who cannot remember a Mass in Latin, and think agonizing about an unbaptized baby smacks of superstition at best.

Perhaps closer to home, for our purposes here, consider people who are "natives" to the electronic world, who were born after the invention of the computer and the establishment of the technological (as opposed to the mechanical) world, who think and work and communicate and consume and relate and, in general, live in a different world, in many respects, from those of us who grew up in a pre-computer, non-electronic environment in which a landline phone was the epitome of efficient communication. The very meaning of "social" is irreducibly different for the cohort born into the electronic world from its meaning to those who are transplants to the electronic continent from a planet long ago and far away which no longer exists. The possibility and actuality of constant, immediate communication with and virtual presence to anyone anywhere is not just a physical fact of contemporary social life; it is a life-shaping influence on the millennial generation that can neither be changed by (or probably fully understood by) people who do not belong to that cohort.

Participation in a cohort, the possibility and reality of sharing experience, insights, doubts, questions, etc. with companions who instinctively resonate with one's spontaneous "take" on lived reality is not just confirming or encouraging. It is not a self-indulgent, immature desire for playmates. It is, to some extent, a necessity for people, especially young people who are testing their reality sense, the validity of their judgments, the normalcy of their reactions, the effectiveness of their choices and so on. They need the confirmation that they are "not crazy", that their questions are valid, that their concerns are broader than themselves, in short, they need the lived experience that others, at least some others, live in the same world that they do. They are not aliens in a strange land – which is what the relatively isolated experience of being in a Religious Congregation in which no one is less than 25 years older than oneself. If anything, the sheer breadth of vicarious experience which exposes the young person today to continuous up close contact with cultures all over the world,

makes actual experience of their own cohort an existential necessity. That's why so many of them seem incapable of breathing if they are separated from their phone for more than a minute and a half.

The answer, of course, is formation – which is what you are all involved in up to your necks and which, I want to suggest, has to emerge from its current situation of constant, on the spot, re-invention and do the analogous equivalent for our times of what the Sister Formation Movement did in the mid-20th century.

A major problem of the one or two person novitiate or initial formation program, even when the older members of the Congregation are the best people in the world and completely open to newer members and bending over backwards to the point of psychological scoliosis to be non-judgmental, welcoming, understanding, tolerant, encouraging and so on, is precisely that these newer members have entered a very different "world" or reality construction than the one they come from and they have no cohort in which to find themselves at home, take a breather from the rarified atmosphere on planet "elderly", feel their perceptions and questions and answers validated as real, coherent, and potentially understandable and answerable. When most of us were in formation, even though we rarely talked to each other and when we did most important topics of conversation were off limits, we knew, in our heart of hearts, that the novices knew what we knew, namely, that the formation personnel were all crazy. And that helped keep us sane until we blended into the mainline of the community after developing new definitions of "crazy" and "sane" and the ability to move between those two planets without getting the spiritual bends.

Now, a weekend a couple times a year with other newer Religious is insufficient for developing a sense of cohort. It might give a sense of momentary relief from their sojourn on another generational planet, but it might simply accentuate just how estranging their basic, everyday experience is. Religious Life is composed of people who, over the course of decades, have generated and live in a highly specialized imaginative and behavioral world and even when they strive strenuously not to impose their worldview, values, attitudes, etc. on the new member, her experience, if it includes virtually no sustained companionship with people of her own generation, is bound to be one of being an exotic species in an aquarium where, beautiful as they are, even the water and light are strange, to say nothing of the other fish.

My point here is simple – although by no means easy or comfortable. Except perhaps for the enclosed monastery which has somewhat different dynamics operative – newer Religious who are entering in ones or twos, often at very different ages, into ministerial Congregations, need, for normal

continued on next page



development as Religious, a cohort environment. They need to be able to learn, grow, fail, succeed, experiment, question in an environment in which their experience is common, shared, not in need of continual translation, at least by their peers. Very few Congregations are in a position to offer newer members this kind of cohort experience, just as few Congregations can navigate the current economic or political or ministerial scene in isolation. If there were nothing else to consider, I would suggest that the time has come to consider shared formation programs just as, in the late 1950's and early 60's, the Sister Formation Movement did, although what they needed to combine, namely resources, was somewhat different from what is most needed today, namely, shared socio-religious cohort experience.

PROGRAM: CONTENT AND STAFF

Now let me turn to the other, the second problem that suggests to me that the time for shared formation programs has arrived, namely, Program, including both staff and content. As we have already recognized, I hope, the religious/spiritual background formation of most entrants to Religious Life today is not that of an intact Catholic family sending its children to the local parish school and reinforcing the stable religious curriculum of the school with the orderly initiation within the parish into the sacramental system, the mastery of a catechism of unquestioned and unquestionable doctrine, and the social reinforcement of continuous association with other children being raised the same way. We can certainly lament the uniformity, mechanistic approach, psychological pressure if not terror tactics associated with the rigid religious rules, practices, and penalties of pre-conciliar Catholic education. But it is much easier, in the long run, to modify acquired ideas and behaviors with more reasonable approaches than to fill an intellectual and behavioral vacuum, or a confused medley of beliefs, practices, and non-commitments or mental reservations with a positive and productive religious and theological synthesis that can grow with the person as she moves deeper into the Catholic Christian tradition within which her religious vocation is unfolding. Catholic Religious Life is, after all, religious and Catholic – it is not a holding operation for whatever vague transcendental aspirations or commitments a person might harbor.

As many young adults who are serious about their own religious quest are finding out, they are ill-equipped, without serious religious and theological education, to attempt to influence their world positively or even, themselves, to live in it coherently. These young people are increasingly showing up in theology departments, divinity schools, seminaries, masters

programs in theology, or young adult religious programs of one kind or another seeking, in some cases, a coherent approach to the religion they were born into, or, in other cases, the justification of their latest experiment, or some alternative to their birth-tradition that can make sense of their current experience. The people looking at Religious Life today are often not prepared, content-wise, to “give a reason for the faith that they profess” and of which they are proposing to live a highly specialized version, namely, Religious Life.

For example, we cannot expect mature sacramental practice that is life and mission sustaining from people whose last brush with sacramental theology was their preparation for First Communion. How can they be expected to take some kind of responsible position on homosexuality, same-sex marriage, transgenderism, divorce and remarriage, sex outside of marriage, pre-nuptial cohabitation, celibacy, pacifism, just war, the death penalty, contraception or any of dozens of other serious personal and social moral conundrums of our time if they do not even know what conscience is – an annoying little voice inside spoiling most of their fun or just a figment of the childhood imagination like the bogey man – much less how conscience functions or should function in a mature believer. How can they align their energies in relation to racism, sexism in society and especially in the Church, capital punishment, war (just or unjust), human trafficking, and a multitude of other socio-political issues if they have had no exposure to adult moral theology, personal or social?

A workshop here or there, a couple lectures by a visiting theologian, exposure to a book on a subject which has not just two sides but multiple reasonably argued positions, is simply not sufficient to cause very much besides confusion. People who are going to accompany others in their moral lives have to be able to do much more than “just listen to people” and “walk with them” while steering clear of intellectual content or concrete choices. One does not “pick up” moral theology and the ability to do complex, nuanced moral reasoning any more than one picks up quantum physics or literary theory or aesthetics or psychology.

What can we expect of a person who grew up in a family of multiple or no religious identity commitments, who has learned by osmosis or explicit teaching that one religion is as good as another if the adherents of both are good people, and believes that she is a Catholic by accident of birth and a Christian by cultural habit but sees no real difference between Buddha and Jesus, no difference between revealed religion and a vague ecological sensitivity to “nature” with a capital “N”?

In other words, candidates for Religious Life today, if it is understood as something more than a social service organization, or volunteer corps or some sort of surrogate family, need to have a solid theological education which, given what is involved today, requires a minimum of three or four years of sustained, competent formation by people who do theology professionally.

How can a person whose historical knowledge of the Church does not even include a realization of what happened at Vatican II, partly because she has no knowledge of what preceded the Council, situate herself in the ongoing struggles in the Church today, even struggles between bishops on different sides of the same issue, to say nothing of pastors and lay people? How can she, actually, even decide what to read or who to consult if she has not been exposed to what is “on offer” in terms of contemporary types of theology, names of reputable authors, and other resources to which she can go as new issues arise for her in relation to her own spiritual life or the lives of the people to whom she ministers?

In other words, a mature Religious needs a structured, consistent, open-minded, in-depth acquaintance and knowledge of and about Catholic Christian theology if she is to be even basically equipped to live Catholic Religious Life in the 21st century Church, much less to minister in the name of that Church. She needs not a workshop, an occasional article or book, an isolated course here and there. She needs a full scale, basic, organized, sequential theological formation that includes Scripture – both what it means to claim that a religion is biblically based and why Scripture is different from other literary or religious classics, and knowledge of the content of the Christian scriptures, both Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament. She needs a robust Christology including how Christian faith in the incarnation and the divinity of Jesus differs from the position of other religions on genuinely admirable divine avatars or savior figures; Church history, including history of Religious Life, that can help her distinguish between the substantive and the historically contingent; moral theology, both general understanding of such categories as conscience, law, sin, virtue and moral reasoning and case studies of concrete moral dilemmas and how to work with the people who face them; ecclesiology which will enable her to understand what it means to say that the Church is the Body of Christ, how this comes to expression in Scripture and how it has been understood historically and is understood today, and what that means for relationship with people who are not Christian or Christian in other denominations, and how one can think about issues such as ministry, the exercise of authority in the Church, responsible dissent, how to deal with conflicts within the Church, and so on. She needs a theology of Religious Life which is not a club or philanthropic organization or social phenomenon but a lifeform rooted in perpetual profession and what the vows Religious make really mean, not just in practice but biblically, historically, theologically. In other words, candidates for Religious Life today, if it is understood as something more than a social service organization, or

volunteer corps or some sort of surrogate family, need to have a solid theological education which, given what is involved today, requires a minimum of three or four years of sustained, competent formation by people who do theology professionally. Which is where the need comes in not only for substantial content in the theological formation program but for competent, full-time staff – trained theological professors – who are as well-equipped to educate these newer Religious theologically as others are to initiate them into the Congregations history and commitments.

Now, it is probably clear by now that I am mounting an argument for the establishment of a contemporary analogue to the Sister Formation colleges of pre-Vatican II vintage. No community today is equipped to provide a graduate level theological formation for newer members. And, I would argue, no one – short of miraculous intervention – is going to become a full-fledged Religious without theological formation any more than they will become competent teachers or doctors or social workers without graduate education in those fields. We don't have the personnel, the libraries and other research resources, but especially we cannot supply the quintessentially necessary cohort of fellow students, the diversity of faculty, and the atmosphere of intellectual variety and growth needed to bring candidates for Religious Life to the theological maturity necessary for them to live the life themselves and minister in the complex world and Church in which we live, in which they must function.

Before I make a concrete suggestion about how we might face and meet this need for a theological, cohort-based formation program at reputable accredited theological faculties, I would mention just in passing a couple other benefits that such a move might precipitate. For one thing, having such inter-congregational scholasticates, or whatever we might call them, in a couple or even several places in the United States might help solve another problem we face in regard to vocations, namely, the visibility of the life as a viable choice for younger people. Having some concentrations of people in formation at various locales throughout the country where someone considering Religious Life could come, visit, talk to people their own age, in their own cohort, about their experience of the life, even visit classes and spend community time with a variety of newer Religious would be both more realistic and probably more motivating for someone in an initial stage of inquiry than taking part in some kind of “come and see” mini-program constructed for the prospective candidate. The inquirer could spend some time with a variety of younger people actively involved in formation for the life. There is a difference between

continued on next page

reading a publicity brochure about a university, for example, and making a visit to the campus where people are actually living the life of the university and can “show you around” in every sense of the word. Visibility is a serious problem for us today because we don’t have a variety of communities of newer Religious to whom we can introduce an inquirer. Older Religious can certainly answer questions, be hospitable, show genuine interest in a visitor. But seeing what life as a Religious-in-training looks and feels like is different.

And secondly, although it would take some ingenuity and creativity, as well as some allocation of financial resources to launch a program of theological formation for newer members at established theological centers, it might, in the long run be a practical and economical move. Rather than having three or four part-time “formators” trying to juggle their own full-time ministries with the attempt at constituting a “formation community” for the new members and somehow doing what is needed by the one or two people in formation, the Congregation’s appointed formator would be overseeing the participation of the newer member or members in the established theological formation program to which they are sent and would be able, then, to orchestrate the other dimensions of formation, such as learning congregational history, getting to know the community itself, some introduction to the Congregation’s ministries, cultural immersion programs, etc. which might take place between semesters, in the summer, and so on.

So, let me make a concrete proposal, not because it is the only one or the best one, but just as a conversation starter, an incentive from which some creative planning might emerge. One negative thing we can learn from the Sister Formation Movement (and incidentally from the seminary pattern that has gone on for a couple centuries in the Church as the model for clerical formation) is that the kind of formative education we are talking about cannot be effected today – if it ever could have – by building isolated or enclosed institutions like Sister Formation Colleges or seminaries, which cocoon the people in formation from the very world they are preparing to serve, foster a sense of “distance,” “exclusivity,” “privilege,” and even “superiority” to the people to whom they will be sent, and which themselves became architectural white elephants that created more problems than they solved. There are, in this country, a number of geographically well-located institutions of higher theological education which could meet quite adequately the academic needs of a theologically based formation program. They are located on both coasts and in several places in the Midwest. Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, Berkeley come immediately to mind as centers which offer a variety of graduate level theological programs: research based predominantly academic degrees such as M.A.s and PhDs in religious studies and/or theology; specifically “religious” or “ministerial” degree programs such as STMs and ThMs, MDivs and DMin; and ecclesiastical degrees like the STL, the ThD, and the STD. The emphases in these various programs differ as does the amount of time needed to complete them, but all of them have the advantage of being structured to “cover the bases” of theological preparation – both preparation of the student to live a theologically coherent personal spiritual life of which lifelong theological development should be an integral

part, and to function as a competent and responsible minister equipped to help people in many ways and to help people get help beyond what the minister is prepared to offer when that is indicated. In other words, the theological resources newer Religious need are available. It is not necessary to re-invent the wheel or create some exotic theological entity out of whole cloth. Just as we send a prospective teacher or educational administrator to get a masters or doctorate in education or a prospective financial officer to business school or into economics, we need, in my opinion, to provide all prospective ministers (and that is what all Religious in formation are) at least mid-level (that is, masters level) theological education and formation while some might get doctoral level formation if they are going to specialize in theological ministries. And I would add, the fact that someone enters Religious Life with a masters or doctorate in a secular discipline such as economics, administration, history, chemistry, medicine or law or fine arts or psychology, does not mean that they are educated theologically or prepared for ministry, even for the exercise of their profession (psychology or law, for example) as ministry. All Religious need graduate level education in theology (which is the “form” of all ministry) and in ministry (which is not just professional practice by baptized people).

Such a plan for the theological formation of new members at schools or faculties of theology would have to include plans for formative living (probably inter-congregationally which is how Religious in the future will probably live at least some of their professed lives), spiritual direction, ministerial initiation, special instruction in Religious Life and practice in living the vows in relation to accountability, financial inter-dependence, growth in the social dimensions of a celibate lifestyle, and other elements of a formation program as well as good use of academic breaks for spending time at the motherhouse, in Congregational missions or other Congregational venues, participation in community events and so on. In other words, younger Religious need to learn by practice how to live both intensely identified with their own Congregation and inter-congregationally with other Religious, those of their own cohort and older Religious – because this is probably how they will be living and ministering throughout their mature careers as Religious.

Before you throw up your hands and say this is impossible, inconceivable, too expensive, not viable, not necessary, dangerous to our distinctive charisms, etc. I would make a plea that we at least think about it. The Sister Formation Movement managed to educate a whole generation of thousands of newer Religious, who were then ready when the time came for the task of building Vatican II into our Congregations’ lives and ministries. These products of Sister Formation are the people leading our Congregations today. We have found ways to deal corporately, without losing our identities or going broke, with our problems of aging and retirement, transforming huge physical plants into viable, flexible resources, sharing rather than duplicating health care facilities, learning to invest, recruit, finance, and fund-raise in cooperative ways. We work together in ministries – not only with lay people but among ourselves and between our Congregations. We have collaborated in learning new approaches to and methods of leadership, opening new inter-congregationally ministries, defending

ourselves corporately against unjust attacks, making our life understandable to our lay friends and colleagues even to the extent that they want, in increasing numbers, to join us as affiliates and associates and volunteers. Is it not time to face this challenge of how to form a new generation of Religious, a new cohort of theologically sophisticated younger people who will do Religious Life differently in the future because they will have been formed differently but who will be able to do for a new time what we continue to do for our time?

The present situation is increasingly unworkable. As Einstein, that intellectual “saint” of our time is famously quoted as saying, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” But Einstein also said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” I don’t think we are insane, but I do think we could be much more imaginative – precisely in our approach to knowledge, and in particular theological knowledge appropriated for spiritual development and ministry. If we are convinced that we are not going to suddenly discover hordes of young people eager to enter Religious Life, that for the foreseeable future we are going to be a relatively small band of people who must make up by the quality of each individual member what we lack in quantity, then we need to find, to raise, to generate the resources we need to prepare every single person who enters Religious Life to make a qualitatively superior contribution to Religious Life itself, to our Congregations, and to the People of God committed to us and our ministries. “Saint” Einstein had another important dictum: that no problem can be solved from within the consciousness that created it. A defeated or defeatist consciousness dominated by the specter of scarcity and diminishment, by a need to conserve resources against the possibility of extinction, or even a fear of diversity, questions, and experimentation, will not come up with solutions rooted in quality, abundance, confidence in the God who lets the rain and the sun fall copiously on all, and about whom we can never know enough much less too much. We stand on the shoulders of risk-takers and builders. May we be worthy of our ancestors.

A major difference between the second half of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st is, of course, that the numbers of Sisters below retirement age is a fraction of what it was in the 1950s. Mary has just reviewed the statistics and some of the reasons for the precipitous decline in the numbers of Religious in the so-called first world. The take-away from these facts for what I want to talk about is that the precipitous decline in numbers of people entering Religious Life is not due to something Religious have done wrong but to the ecclesiastical, cultural, and social features of our post-modern culture, including the drastic decline in family size among Catholics, the vastly expanded life-expectancy and therefore delayed maturation of first-world people and very increased life-expectancy of these people, the religious and denominational disaffiliation of a large proportion of the first world population, including Catholics; the change in the age-structure of that population from concentration below the age of 20 to concentration about the age of 60, the expansion of educational and vocational opportunities for women, and such social factors such as feminism, post-modernism, and the sexual revolution over which we, as Religious, have no control at all. I think the conclusion of the coming to-

gether of these factors is that Religious Life for the foreseeable future will be a much smaller phenomenon than it was when most of us entered. It is not that no one is entering Religious Life but we probably will never again see the life as anything other than a minority, specialized lifeform, which, perhaps, is what it should be.

We stand on the shoulders of risk-takers and builders. May we be worthy of our ancestors.

So what is the analogy between the situation of impending professional and ministerial irrelevance of Religious, due to lack of personal and professional formation, in the second half of the 20th century that was averted by the Sister Formation Movement and our current situation in which we are in danger of losing our ministerial and spiritual leverage because of the decline in numbers and increase in age of our membership? And, more importantly, is there, and if so what might it be, that would be the analogous equivalent of the Sister Formation Movement for our time. Can we imagine what, in our time, could perhaps avert, the withering away of the ministerial influence of Religious due to the changing numerical and age structure of our membership? I think there is, but I don’t think we have a long time to get in motion and I do think we will need at least as much vision, creativity, courage, and ability to take risks, deal with set-backs, and work together as the pioneers of the Sister Formation Movement needed. As they started to find or build the colleges needed to educate Sisters, engage or produce the professors needed to teach the people in formation, develop a curriculum that would provide the integrated formation they knew was necessary, confront the Bishops and pastors who did not want “their” Sisters kept out of the classroom or the hospital long enough to be formed and educated and did not want the resultant educated “uppity” nuns who knew as much as they did in their institutions, did not want to pay what an educated corps of professionals was worth and what their education cost. In other words, just as patchwork and stop-gap measures could not bring the frontier-formed Religious of the 19th and early 20th century into the post-Conciliar Church and post-modern world of the late 20th and dawning 21st century, so the formation projects that we have been experimenting with since our novitiates went from 60 candidates to 1 or 2 and those 1 or 2 entered with high-level professional qualifications and little or no religious or spiritual culture or formation cannot prepare this small corps for the specialized role in Church and world that they must play. My suggestion is that if Religious Life is to continue to make a qualitative contribution to the Church and world of our time, with far fewer personnel who will live longer, change ministries many times over that life-span, live more highly individualized professional, spiritual, and personal lives, they must be formed in new ways that have to be imagined and created –sooner rather than later. ✠