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A critic of ministerial religious life

Richard McBrien | Nov. 9, 2009 Essays in Theology

Sandra Schneiders is a member of Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Mich., and is professor of New Testament Studies and Christian Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California.

Her **four-page article** [1] in the Oct 2 issue of the National Catholic Reporter is the best, most compact, and most significant study of the biblical and historical foundations of ministerial religious life available today.

Anyone who claims to have an opinion about the current "visitation" of U.S. communities of religious women and the "doctrinal assessment" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious has a serious obligation to read this article.

As Schneiders notes at the outset of her substantial essay, too many critics of religious life in the United States "have no lived experience of or academic competence" in regard to it.

For her, it is crucial to recognize the distinction between monastic and ministerial religious life. Both are legitimate forms of religious life, but they are also different from one another. To collapse them into a single, "correct" form of religious life is to make an error of major proportions.

Monastic religious life is marked by three features: habit, enclosure, and horarium. Those who are prone to judge all forms of religious life by the monastic model are sure to find things to criticize in contemporary expressions of religious life, especially, but certainly not exclusively, in the United States.

A crucially important point that Schneiders' article makes is that the monastic model of religious life has analogues in many other religious and spiritual traditions, both before and after the appearance of Christian monasticism. Ministerial religious life, on the other hand, is a reality entirely new to the world, and it was introduced by Christianity alone.

Monasticism developed in Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries in the East, and in the sixth century in the West.

"Prior to the development of the monastic life in Christianity," she writes, "there were other forms of consecrated life that were non-monastic, e.g., professed consecrated virginity lived non-monastically within early Christian communities and solitary hermit life in the desert."

Once it developed, however, the monastic version of Christian religious life became the predominant, but not exclusive, form in the Western Church from roughly 500 to 1500.

It was not the "exclusive" form of religious life because the mendicant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans, for example) were founded in the High Middle Ages and introduced the element of itinerancy, that is, the need to move outside the monastic enclosure in order to engage in ministerial activities on behalf of the sick, the poor,

pilgrims, students, and the like.

"The most striking departure from the monastic model, beginning in the 16th century," Schneiders reports, "occurred in the clerical apostolic orders/congregations such as the Jesuits and Redemptorists."

The "sharpest and most substantial break from monasticism" came about when the Jesuits decided not to pray the Divine Office in common because it was not compatible with their apostolic vocation.

By this time, monastic habits in these clerical orders had given way to more ordinary clerical or contemporary attire, or were restricted to use in the houses of residence. Thus, the photographs of some of the first bishops and priests of the United States showed them in ordinary secular dress rather than the Roman collar.

It is of great importance to note, however, that the same latitude was not extended to religious communities of women. Pope Boniface VIII declared in 1298 that all women religious had to observe cloister under pain of excommunication, and this restriction was confirmed almost four centuries later by the Council of Trent.

"In other words," Schneiders writes, "monasticism was the only recognized legitimate form of religious life for women."

Why the double standard? Schneiders suggests, with much credibility, that the official Church's restrictions on the freedom of women religious has reflected a misogynistic bias. Thus, women always have to be under male control, whether in their public appearances, in financial matters, in their dress and types of residency, and even in their spiritual lives.

She points out how, in earlier centuries, founders and foundresses of religious congregations of women, such as the Daughters of Charity, tried to get around the Church's official restrictions by declaring their communities "not religious."

But most other communities actively fought the restrictions and struggled to be recognized as religious while refusing to renounce their vocations to ministry.

"Many people," she writes, "have expressed the suspicion that the current investigation of noncloistered women religious in the United States is another spasm of this misogynistic agenda."

More next week.

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