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Religious life as prophetic life form

Sr. Sandra Schneiders | Jan. 4, 2010

This is part one of a five-part essay by Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders on the meaning of religious life today. In this part Schneiders, professor of New Testament Studies and Christian Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, sets the context for ?Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form.? These installments run from Jan. 4 through Jan. 8.

Introduction

When the Vatican investigation of U.S. women religious was announced some months ago without any preparation, consultation, or even the courtesy of a notification to congregational leaders that it was about to happen, many people, religious and laity alike, were stunned at what seemed like a surprise attack aimed at a most unlikely target, given the massive and unaddressed problems besetting the clergy and hierarchy at the moment. Persistent efforts to learn the charges and the accusers hit a stone wall since virtually no one believed that a decline in numbers of entrants constituted a ?crime? calling for such a massive response or that a judicial proceeding of such magnitude was instituted to ascertain (much less foster!) the ?quality of life? of religious.

tLittle by little pressure from a variety of sources seems to have uncovered the answers to those two questions. The ?charges? are that LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious)-type Congregations (the vast majority of Religious in the country) have implemented in their lives and in their ministries changes called for by Vatican II to the detriment (manifested in the decline in numbers of vocations) of religious life itself. Cardinal Rodé (the highest officer in Rome on religious life) believes, in his own words, that the council precipitated the first ?world-wide crisis? in the history of the church and women religious, in his view, are primary promoters of that crisis in the United States.

tThe ?accusers? are a small group of extremely conservative women religious who, in September 2008, held a conference at Stonehill College in Massachusetts on consecrated life as they understand it, to which they invited Cardinal Rodé. At this conference, which included no presentation of positions at variance with their own, they put contemporary ministerial religious Life on trial in absentia, found it seriously wanting, and raised the cry, ?Investigate them!?

tCardinal Rodé, having heard what he apparently thought was a widely held consensus that U.S. women?s apostolic religious life was in serious decline concluded, ?We have no further need of witnesses.? Unfortunately, he failed to consult the many thousands of Catholic laity who have received from women religious their formation in the faith, ongoing spiritual support, pastoral care in times of need, and colleagueship in ministry and who are now expressing their solidarity with the sisters by petitions and personal letters of

protest to the Cardinal, the Visitator, the Apostolic Delegate, and local ordinaries as well as by individual and collective testimonies to and about the sisters (see, e.g., U.S. Catholic, ?Entered into Evidence [75:1, Jan. 2010]).

He failed to consult moderate bishops, like those in California, who have publicly testified that without women religious their dioceses would not have become what they are and would not be functioning as well as they are today. He failed to consult significant groups of religious outside the United States, such as AMOR (conference of women Religious in Asia and Oceania) and UISG (International Union of Superiors General in Rome), which have expressed in public statements their appreciation of, support for, and solidarity with U.S. religious. He failed to consult the sisters themselves who could have enlightened him on the size and ideological commitments of the one small group of religious he did consult and the few rightist bishops, in this country and in Rome, to whom he listened.

tMany people, including many religious, think this investigation is an unprecedented assault on religious. Its scope may be unprecedented but its content certainly is not. Many, perhaps most, religious congregations in this country have in their archives documents and correspondence chronicling equally or even more serious confrontations between their order and the local ecclesiastical authorities. (I suggest ?Topic 11? in the excellent CD course, "The History of Women Religious in the United States," by Margaret S. Thompson in the Now You Know Media Series, for archival documentation on this point.)

These records, going back decades or even centuries, tell of threats and intimidation to enforce conscience-violating policies or practices (such as racial discrimination) instigated by members of the hierarchy, drastic sanctions for non-subordination to clergy in matters over which the clerics had no jurisdiction, demotion and even permanent exile without due process of lawfully elected and even revered superiors (including founders), appointment without election of compliant puppet governments, interference in appointments of sisters, unilateral closing of institutions, forced acceptance of apostolates not appropriate to the congregation, and even outright theft of financial assets, to name only the most egregious examples.

tMany sisters, until very recently, did not know this part of their congregational histories. These often protracted and traumatic struggles were dark pages that, like many abuse victims, the corporate victims (the congregations) tried to bury or forget. Even when the abused know rationally that they are not to blame for what happened to them there is often a sense of deep shame, of being somehow responsible for inciting the abuse, of being ?damaged goods? because of what one has undergone (especially if there is wide disparity of power and/or status between abuser and abused), of just wanting it to go away in hopes it will never happen again.

tOf course, it is still happening. The forced dispensation from vows of most of the members of the Los Angeles IHMs in the late 1960?s by a furious Cardinal James F. McIntyre, who could not force these women to submit to his will; the years of struggle by superiors who refused to violate the consciences of the twenty-four women Religious who, in 1984, signed a *New York Times* statement asking for honest discussion (not a change of doctrine or even practice) of the issue of abortion that was seriously dividing the country and the church; attempts, some successful and some not, to force the dismissal of Sisters legitimately appointed by their superiors to certain ministries, and so on, are within the memory of most religious alive today. In other words, there is nothing new (except perhaps the comprehensive scope of the present investigation) in the struggle between some elements of the hierarchy and women Religious.
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tOne of the most pernicious and characteristic aspects of these episodes is the pervasive appeal to a supposed obligation to ?blind obedience to hierarchical authority? as the legitimation for clerical control, and even abuse, of women Religious. This neuralgic issue of the meaning of obedience is central to the current investigation and it is important to realize that it is not new, not precipitated by late 20th century developments in American society or the post-conciliar church, and not likely to be settled by heavy-handed exercises of coercive power.

The issue goes back to the Gospel and the life of Jesus in his religious and social setting and it will only be clarified by faithful meditation on the Scriptures, prayer, and courageous action.

tThere is an instructive parallel between the questions religious are asking about the Vatican investigation (and which they have asked before, many times, in similar situations) and the questions scholars (and many ordinary believers) ask about the trial and execution of Jesus. There is a tendency to ask and to stop with, the questions ?Who is responsible for the death of Jesus?? and ?Why was Jesus executed?? (Like who is responsible for this investigation and what are the charges?)

tAt one level the answers are fairly easily available to a careful study of the Gospel texts. Jesus was executed by the collusion of the political (Roman Empire) and religious (Jerusalem hierarchy) power elites in first century Palestine. He was executed because his ministry threatened to cause an uprising of the Palestinian peasantry. This would have been fatal to the career of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor whose job was to keep the Jewish province under control. It would have been even more disastrous for the Jewish leadership who retained what little authority they had over their own religious affairs and population only as long as the Jewish populace did not become problematic for the Empire.

tBut this basically political-religious motivation is only a first level answer to the questions of ?who? and ?why?. It does not get at what we really need to know about Jesus and his mission if we want to understand the human predicament from which he came to save us and the radicality of the solution to that predicament that God offered us in Jesus. Until we realize that it is really the human race, including me/us, rather than a few historical figures in first century Palestine, who crucified Jesus we do not yet ?get it.? Until we realize that the reason for his execution is anthropological, theological, soteriological, rather than merely regionally political or religious, and that those factors permeate the experience of the whole human race, we have not begun to plumb the real meaning of the paschal mystery or our own implication in it.

tJesus? prophetic ministry of word and work was not merely a threat to the particular domination systems of Rome and Jerusalem. It was a fundamental subversion of domination itself as the demonic structure operative in human history. The incarnation was God?s revelation in Jesus that God is not a supreme power controlling humanity through fear of damnation or extinction, nor the legitimator of human domination systems, but One who has chosen loving solidarity unto death with us to free us from all fear and bring us into the ?liberty of the children of God.?

tJesus was the end of all domination systems, all systems of salvation by the power exercised by a few over the many. No such system, political or religious, could ever again claim divine sanction. It was this definitive subversion of the violent human way of running the world by God?s loving way of luring creation, including us, toward union with Godself that was the ultimate threat Jesus represented. The demonic ?world,? the kingdom of Satan, was undone by Jesus who was bringing into existence a new creation, an entirely different ?world? which ?God so loved as to give the only Son.?

In this new creation those who held power, Rome and Jerusalem, males and masters, strong and rich, were finished. This is why he had to be killed. The historical reasons were real. But they were the local, even surface, manifestation of the deeper reason which involved the re-orientation of the entirety of human history.

tAnalogously, it is not very complicated, or illuminating, to figure out that women?s religious Life is being used as a symbolic scapegoat in the power struggle in the contemporary church between the promoters of the renewal initiated by Vatican II and a program of tridentine restoration. Nor is it difficult to identify who have vested interests in the outcome of that struggle. (This is not to suggest that the stakes in this struggle are not very high or that we should be naïve about the extent of damage that could result.)

As empire and temple were threatened by the growing sense of empowerment among the oppressed in Palestine,

so the absolutist power structure of the institutional church is threatened by the growing consciousness of the People of God of their identity and mission as the Body of Christ. As Jesus was an agent of empowerment who had to be eliminated before he ?stirred up the people? and brought down the wrath of the empire on the nation, so those in the church, lay leaders, pastors, bishops, or others -- but especially sisters -- who are fostering the conciliar renewal must be brought under control lest the ?crisis? Cardinal Rodé has named explode and bring about a radical claiming of their identity as the People of God and their mission to and in solidarity with the world God so loved.

tBut why the sisters? We must not overlook the crushing of lay initiatives, the banning of progressive bishops from traditionalist bishops? dioceses, the brandishing of excommunications, refusal of the sacraments or Christian burial, and public condemnations of Catholic politicians and theologians, etc. as we examine the investigation of Religious. This is not a historically unique occurrence and Religious women are not alone as its objects.

tBut sisters are a particularly important target for several reasons. First, their sheer numbers and influence. Women religious are not only people who are voluntarily engaged in the life they lead because they are passionately committed to its spiritual and ministerial goals and to Jesus Christ who called them to this life. They are also the largest, best organized, most geographically ubiquitous, most ministerially diversified, and therefore probably most effective promoters of the vision of Vatican II. In some eyes, of course, this means that, as so many lay Catholics have testified, religious are the greatest source of hope for the contemporary church. In other eyes, this means that they are the most serious danger to the ?real (that is, pre-conciliar) Church? which these people are trying to restore.

tSecond, as relatively public figures in the church women religious are easier to target. The attempt by the investigation to identify in writing every single individual woman religious in the country by name, age, location, and ministry appeared decidedly more than a routine survey to anyone with eyes to see.

tThird, the objects of this investigation are all women. Male religious whose numbers have declined as steeply as women?s are not under investigation even though, in its 1983 revision, canon Law (# 606) specified that women and men Religious should be treated equally unless some specific reason (not based on gender as such) made differential treatment necessary. The Roman Catholic church is the most resolutely patriarchal organization in the western world. Keeping women in absolute subjection to male authority is critical to the maintenance of patriarchy.

tBut, as in the question about the execution of Jesus, there is something much more important at stake for religious in the question about the ?why? and the ?who? of this investigation, namely, the meaning of their life as a participation in the prophetic mission of Jesus rather than as a support system for an ecclesiastical power structure. What understanding of the theology and spirituality of ministerial religious life as a prophetic life form in the church is in contention? What understanding of the critical role of religious obedience in the exercise of that prophetic vocation is in dispute as this current drama unfolds? It is the biblical, historical, and theological examination of these deeper questions that I want to address in this essay.

Tuesday: Jesus as Model: Call and Task of Prophetic Action

The essay in five parts:

Part One: Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form [1], Jan. 4

Part Two: Call, Response and Task of Prophetic Action [2], Jan. 5

Part Three: What Jesus taught us about his prophetic ministry [3], Jan. 6

Part Four: Tasks of those who choose the prophetic life style [4], Jan. 7

Part Five: Religious life: sharing Jesus' passion, resurrection [5], Jan. 8

Read NCR's coverage of the apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious here: Index of stories [6]

Read an interview with Sr. Schneiders. She explains why she wrote this essay: Schneiders to explore meaning of religious life today [7]

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[3] http://ncronline.org/node/16464
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/16465
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/16466
[6] http://ncronline.org/apostolicvisitation
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