

## Religious life: Another opinion about its scriptural underpinnings

Michael H. Crosby | Mar. 30, 2010



Fr. Michael Crosby

In light of the ongoing Vatican investigation of U.S. Women Religious, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders recently [wrote](#) [1] in the *National Catholic Reporter* a very thorough apologia regarding many of the present forms in which it is being expressed: "Discerning Ministerial Religious Life Today." When I saw it there, I took it out for future reading.

Not long after this I was asked to give a keynote at the Spring Chapter of a large group of Women Religious. The theme they gave me was "Discipleship and Religious Life." The origin of the title, they told me, was Schneiders' article. Not yet having read it, I accepted, thinking I'd develop notions of discipleship I have discussed in my own writings based in the Gospels of Matthew and John.

When I read her article, I found her "Historical Overview" one of the best and most succinct summaries I have read regarding the status question vis-à-vis what she calls "Ministerial Religious Life." However, while I agreed wholeheartedly with her application of the scriptures to the practical considerations she used to close her article, I found myself having serious reservations with the scriptural part of her "Biblical and Theological Considerations."

Having been taught by Sandra Schneiders at the Graduate Theological Union while I was getting my PhD, I realized I was questioning a formidable biblical scholar—one who has actually been a leader in the Catholic Biblical Association and one who helped edit its quarterly. Furthermore, since graduating I've only disagreed with her once—and that privately (regarding our differences as to the identity of "the Beloved Disciple?"). However here I think that, given the public nature of her NCR article, some key elements of her argument, especially regarding her "biblical model" for ministerial Religious life, invite a critique. In the process I look forward to a spirited dialogue on the issue.

In this article I want to do two things: 1) share my differences with Schneider's biblical arguments and 2) why I do not believe one can find any clear biblical foundation for ministerial religious life actually based in the scriptures as we know them today. I do this making a critical nuance based on the two fonts that constitute Catholicism: scriptures and tradition: while there may be no real biblical basis for ministerial religious life (or

any other form of religious life as we know it today), it certainly has some foundation in the early church (before the cenobites and monastics) in the virgins and widows (even though we have no clear evidence of them living communally until after apostolic times). In fine, religious life has come from our tradition with many wonderful results; however any appeal to a scriptural basis for it is shaky at best, especially when we consider its basis in an unique form of discipleship or from seeking a clear biblical mandate for the vows as we live them.

### **The Lack of a Clear Biblical Foundation for Ministerial Religious Life**

In her fifth paragraph discussing "Biblical and Theological Considerations," Schneiders begins by stating that "all Jesus' disciples are called to mission." She then distinguishes various ways this was done at the time of Jesus: 1) family-based disciples (like Martha, Mary and Lazarus of Bethany (see Lk. 10:38-42; Jn. 11:5); 2) those promoting "just and generous involvement in secular occupations" (Zacchaeus [Lk. 19:2-9]) or the Royal Official [Jn. 46-54]); and, finally, 3) her thesis regarding a scriptural foundation for ministerial religious life. This is found in "the characteristic features" of a definite "lifeform which was learned by his disciples from Jesus himself: ". . . there was one rather small group of women and men (see Lk. 8:1-3) whom Jesus called to abandon everything?home or fixed abode of any kind, family of origin, marriage and progeny, all personal property, occupation or profession?to be in his company on a 24/7 basis, to take on in real time his itinerant form of life, to participate in his daily fulltime ministry of announcing the Gospel in word and deed that was so intense that they sometimes :did not even have time to eat? (see Mk. 6:31), to be intensively apprenticed to and formed by him, to be sent out by him to do the very deeds of teaching, healing, liberating, and enlivening that he did (see Lk.:1-11; Mk. 6: 7-13), and after the Resurrection to continue, full time his lifestyle and ministry even unto the laying down of their lives (see Mt. 28:16-20; Jn. 21; Acts 1:7-8, 12-14 and elsewhere.

Immediately in the next paragraph Schneiders names "some members of this small itinerant group: Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, Susanna, James and John"and later members who were assimilated to this group like Paul and Barnabas." She declares: "This is the group, the form of discipleship, which supplies the primary biblical model for ministerial Religious life."

As a member of the Capuchin Franciscans, trying to follow Francis of Assisi's "evangelical" calling, I sure wish I could ditto the point above as definitively as Schneiders. I just can't; a critical exegesis of the scriptures invites challenge.

First of all, for someone who taught me a good portion of my biblical exegesis, Sandra Schneiders violates a critical thesis: don't proof text. She does this in her thesis paragraph by jumping from one synoptic writer to another. Indeed, here she refers to all the Synoptics, including Luke's Acts of the Apostles. Each of the synoptics has a certain lens or theological viewpoint. Theologically they are quite different.

Secondly, if we do allow for her proof texting, there are serious problems with it. These I want to raise up here.

Maybe Schneiders, by referring to a "form of discipleship" that included the women is safe insofar as any "form," short of formal discipleship (i.e., being called by the historical Jesus), would apply. However, contra Schneiders (as well as Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza), I am one of those who cannot conclude that, in that male-only world, that there exists any formal call to a specific discipleship in any of the gospels that includes women. In the broader sense of women following Jesus, there is foundation; but not in any listing of "disciples" as such. Consequently the most that can be said of women has been well-argued in a 2007 article by In-Cheol Shin in *Neotestamentica*. He notes that, given their social status, the most a writer like Matthew can do is afford women the role of being "indirectly adherent disciples;" the men named formally as disciples are "directly adherent disciples."

In her key paragraph (above) Schneiders also refers to this "rather small group of women and men (see Lk. 8:1-3) whom Jesus called to abandon everything . . ." The actual scriptural passage refers to the whole group as consisting of "the twelve. . . and also some women." Furthermore she fails to note that the very text she

references ends by saying that the women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Chuza, and Susanna (and many others) "provided for them [i.e., Jesus and the twelve] out of their means." If they have abandoned "everything," what means do they have available to provide for Jesus and "the twelve"?

Another concern is that the biblical text that Schneiders uses to indicate "some to whom Jesus proposed this itinerant form of discipleship, like the "rich young man," did not accept the invitation (see Mt. 19:16-22)." She would have done much, much better to buttress her argument about the "small group . . . whom Jesus called to abandon everything" had she used its parallel in Luke 18:18-23. In it, going beyond the question about inheriting eternal life to what is a fuller form of discipleship, while Mark (10:17-22) and Matthew have Jesus saying he should "go, sell what you possess and give to the poor; and you will have treasure in heaven; and follow me," it is Luke who makes it an absolute: "Sell all that you have. . . ."

Almost every New Testament scholar will say Luke is much more radical about wealth/poverty issues than Mark and Matthew. Indeed in my own doctoral thesis written while in Berkeley at the Jesuit School of Theology and the Graduate Theological Union where Sandra Schneiders taught, I argue that, despite Matthew quoting Jesus as saying he had nowhere to lay his head (8:20; Lk. 9:58), a point also made by Schneiders as an argument for the itinerancy of Jesus and his select disciples, a clear case can be made for Jesus himself having his own house, based in Capernaum. The Greek makes Capernaum his "house-town" (Mt. 4:13). Furthermore, as I also have shown elsewhere, just the differences in Matthew's and Luke's beatitudes show that Luke was writing to a more economically depressed community of house churches than was Matthew.

Returning to Schneiders' inclusion of Peter (one of the twelve) in this unique group who left everything to follow Jesus, again an inclusive sourcing in the scriptures for a consistent basis cannot be found. In Mark and Matthew, Peter's call to discipleship involves him leaving the nets he shared with Andrew to follow Jesus; in Luke, Peter and his partners James and John leave "everything and followed him" (Lk. 5:11). The difference between leaving everything to follow Jesus and "leaving their nets" to follow Jesus is the difference in logical argument between an absolute and universal versus the particular or specific. Something is particular unless it is clearly universal. Luke makes a "universal;" Mark and Matthew do not.

When I find myself in discussions with people who take the New Testament literally, by proof-texting, the above difference is often something I point out. I begin by asking such literalists: "When did Jesus call Peter to discipleship: before or after the healing of Peter's mother-in-law in his [Peter's] house?" They never know.

In Mark (1:29) and Matthew (8:14), the healing of Simon/Peter's mother-in-law in the house of Peter [and Andrew] takes place after their call to discipleship and their "leaving" their nets. In Luke it comes (4:38) before Simon's call to discipleship (5:11). In Mark and Matthew, the nature of the call to discipleship does not demand an absolute renunciation of "everything;" in Luke, this call is much more universally demanding. It would have been good had Sandra Schneiders noted the different (contradicting?) biblical theologies at work here.

Furthermore, if Peter is to be included in the unique group modeling ministerial religious life, beyond the contradictions related to what we call the vow of poverty (noted above), what are we to do when we know Peter didn't leave his wife (see Mark and Matthew above)? First Corinthians is one of the first epistles to be written. There Paul argues to "the right" of being accompanied by a wife "as the other apostles and the brethren of the Lord and Cephas (9:5)?" Indeed, in this text, Paul writes just the opposite of Schneiders' contention that part of being in this unique group of disciples involves the abandonment of "occupation or profession." It seems the opposite is argued when Paul immediately states: "Is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living (9:6)?"

In other places I have shown that there is no clear biblical mandate for celibacy and that the two biblical sources for it do not apply directly to celibacy as we know it as a foundation for "ministerial Religious life." Matthew 19:10-12 makes the case for future (permanent) celibacy vis-à-vis the aggrieved party in a marriage while 1 Cor.

7:25 about Paul's opinion related to remaining unmarried (i.e., chaste/celebrate) was articulated from the view of the present crisis, i.e. the end of the world. Indeed, before giving his own human opinion on the issue of remaining unmarried, Paul himself says that he had no command of the Lord. So, literally speaking, from this text, one cannot even say that Jesus ever called anyone to celibacy except the aggrieved party in a marriage. This includes permanent celibacy in the form it is taught today which applies equally to religious, diocesan priests in the Latin Rite and homosexuals.

Having noted these points, however, I do agree with Sandra Schneiders in her writings elsewhere (especially The Revelatory Text) that we can take such texts as those above and give them a wider interpretation (meaning as appropriation) that justifies a way of life calling some to evangelical poverty and to be permanent celibates in the church. Furthermore, when it comes to obedience, which we give to humans believed to be acting in the name of God, there is no place in the scriptures where the adult Jesus obeyed any such way; indeed those acting in the name of God killed him for being prophetically obedient to his only Higher Authority: the Gospel of the Kingdom/Kindom of God which he proclaimed and for which he was willing to lay down his life even though, humanly speaking, he wanted that cup to be taken away.

### **The Basis for Ministerial Religious Life in Christian Tradition**

In my lectures and writing on Religious Life and its future (limited to its expression in economically developed nations like the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Japan), I think it is imperative that we make distinctions as well. This is critical if we are to offer a viable and meaningful way of communally-oriented celibate life in the future.

Starting with the idea of ministerial discipleship, as Sandra Schneiders notes, all disciples are called to ministry. This has been reiterated at the Second Vatican Council as well as subsequent teachings from the official church, as late as Pope Benedict XVI's May 26, 2009 speech to the Church of Rome about the need for a change in mentality vis-à-vis the need for all the baptized to witness, alongside the hierarchy, to evangelization and evangelical mission. Unfortunately, as he noted in that speech, there is still a tendency to unilaterally identify the Church with the hierarchy, forgetting the common responsibility, the common mission.

The tendency to unilaterally identify the Church with the hierarchy has its application in the nations noted above with the interpretation of some that ministerial Religious life is not to be an unique form of ministry in the church that stands in contrast to the dominant model of church that increasingly is equated with the hierarchical church. Indeed, a core argument of Cardinal Rodé in his Springhill College talk seems to be that such actually defines what it means to be Catholic, much less religious. The purposed of Religious Life in his model ultimately seems legitimate to the degree it reinforces the interpretation of church that is hierarchical. This is in contrast to a way of organizing a church (or religious life) that is biblically balanced (following that proffered in Matthew 16 and 18 vis-à-vis the power to bind and loose given to Peter and the people or the need to have a Johannine model of the Community of the Beloved Disciple in a church increasingly defined by the Petrine/Apostolic model).

As the recent CARA study showed, ministerial Religious life is growing in this nation in those communities that fit the former, hierarchically-oriented model of church. It is not that case among the groups that have a more balanced ecclesiology promoted by Sandra Schneiders, and especially among those who accept the movement of religious life from being more ministerially-oriented to being prophetically challenging the abuse of power by elements stressing the hierarchical model of the church.

In my mind the future of religious life in nations like ours will find fewer and fewer adherents except for those who identify with a more hierarchically-defined church. I also believe a key reason for this is more psychological than theological, more because one's personality type than any specific call. Having said this, I would like to share my rationale as to why, in economically developed countries like ours and the others noted

above, we will have less and less people committing themselves to the traditional vows in a community form.

1. First we need to address demographics. Recently, when a new bishop was named to a diocese, at his opening press conference, he called on Catholics to have more children. He argued that vocations to the priesthood come from large families. At that time I facetiously responded by saying, "what if those families have only girls; will they count?" However, his original insight is true. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life in their hey day in countries like ours came (and still come) from larger families. The future, on this count alone, does not bear well.

2. In the peak days of religious life (i.e., during my early years in it), celibacy was not severely challenged by the secular world in its culture. There still were severe restrictions on what could be seen on television and pornography was not readily available. Now parents have to put blockers on their television sets to keep wondering children from finding it and easily becoming addicted to it. The consequence: celibacy is not valued in the wider culture. In the church, too many reports of its abuse by priests and religious undermine its witness value. Indeed, in many cases, it has become suspect as a front for other unresolved personal issues.

3. Religious at all levels, in the main, have failed to witness to the kind of poverty outlined by Pope Paul VI in his important *Evangelii Testificatio* (which I still consider the best papal outline of the importance of our way of life). In it he noted that the reality of global poverty must be the lens from which we interpret our evangelical way of poverty. From this perspective our poverty is only a means by which we minister to alleviate the poverty of others by our promotion of justice. This demands, he said, no compromise whatsoever with any form of social injustice as well as the need to awaken consciences to the drama of misery actually experienced by people who are poor. In my mind, few if any religious institutes have embraced this papal teaching. Some have members doing so, but this demand for social justice envisioned by Paul VI is still a long way off. Indeed, while some ministerial religious seem to limit poverty to wearing simple habits or sleeping on floors or having no television and/or to limit their ministry only to those who are poor, Paul VI's vision is much more like that transformative justice envisioned in Matthew's Chapter 25:41-46.

4. If there is one area of the vows that is needed to be counter-cultural today by religious, it is obedience. If we consider the issue of the individual/community dynamic, I find the biggest challenge to create the kind of lifestyle that will honor both dimensions of a healthy religious life. Having studied Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* while I was getting my PhD in Berkeley, his thesis still holds for me as I consider the future of religious life and some of the obstacles facing us.

There are basically four forms of obedience that are being played out today in religious communities:

a. The individual is subsumed by the community. This is the kind of life that I entered and which seems promoted by many of the new forms of religious life today that are more hierarchically oriented (magisterially defined).

b. The community exists to support the needs/desires of the individuals. In effect leadership is followership. This finds communities giving up corporate ministries in a way that isn't effectively replaced by a common mission that finds the members able to be held accountable. Meanwhile the individuals find their community outside the traditional religious congregation.

c. The individual needs and the community's needs are honored in a way that results in a kind of negotiated placement in ministry. This entails a model of mutuality that assumes the needs of both are legitimate.

d. I have yet to see obedience following the natural model of community we are discovering from science: the kind wherein the whole is not greater than, less than or equal to the sum of its parts. Rather the whole is contained in each and every part. In other words, the community of the whole is found in the dreams and life-

force of each member. How this works out in the future will be fascinating indeed.

## **Conclusion**

As I consider the basis and direction for 'ministerial' religious life, it is clear we are at a crossroads. While some clearly want a 'turning back' and others are still arguing for its validity on faulty scriptural grounds, I firmly believe in the future of religious life in economically 'developed' nations like ours. However, as recent documents coming from Rome and the religious communities themselves attest (and which I detail in my *Can Religious Life Be Prophetic?*), it must not try to base itself on false biblical assumptions, but evidence a prophetically-obedient, justice-based, celibacy-demanding model in a church and world where people are perishing precisely for want of such prophecy. While such a kind of 'ministerial Religious life' may not strictly be a 'call' from God (as Paul noted in First Corinthians) it certainly is the call of the day.

*Michael Crosby is a Capuchin Franciscan. He lives in community with other friars in a downtown Milwaukee parish. He is the author of seventeen books.*

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