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Discerning ministerial religious life today

Sandra Schneiders | Sep. 11, 2009

Women religious from seven Dominican communities formalize their merger with a service April 14 in St. Louis, Mo. (CNS photo)

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In the distressing ferment generated by the Vatican investigation of U.S. women Religious one question has arisen repeatedly, in various forms, and been ?answered,? sometimes quite dogmatically, by people who have no lived experience of or academic competence in regard to Religious Life. Since the question is important, misinformation is not helpful to Religious themselves or to their many concerned lay friends, colleagues, and associates. The substance of the question is ?What is ?apostolic Religious Life???

But the question often takes the form of a three-pronged query about lifestyle: ?Is culturally conspicuous, uniform garb (habit), fixed group dwelling from which members exit only by necessity and from which non-members are excluded (enclosure, cloister), and a daily schedule including shared meals, work, and especially the oral recitation of prescribed texts and vocal prayers, e.g., divine office, litanies, at several fixed times a day (horarium) essential to Catholic Religious Life as such?? The short answer is ?no.? But this answer requires historical, biblical, and theological expansion and support.

Historical Overview

Habit, enclosure, and horarium are not characteristic (much less essential) features of Religious Life as such but of one form of religious life, namely monasticism. Virtually all literate religious/spiritual traditions throughout history and across the world include some form of monasticism which itself pre-dates Christianity by millennia. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism (e.g., the therapeutae), some classical Greek philosophical/religious traditions, Islam (Sufism) all include some form of monasticism, as do Protestantism, Anglicanism, Orthodoxy, and some ecumenical Christian movements as well as Catholicism.

In all instances of monasticism the purpose of such features as habit (whether saffron robes, veils and scapulars, dervish tunics, shaved heads), enclosure (monasteries, convents), and horarium (involving chanting of sutras or psalms or recitation of devotional prayers, common meals, work, and the like), as well as such spiritual features as meditation and prayer, poverty, asceticism, celibacy, is to promote the spiritual perfection of the monastics, which is variously defined as enlightenment, nirvana, sanctification, contemplation, mystical union with God, return to the One, et al., through withdrawal from secular involvement and the practice of religious/spiritual

observances..

Monasticism developed in Christianity in the 4th-5th century C.E. in the East (under Pachomius in Egypt, Basil in Asia Minor, Cassian in Gaul) and in the 6th century in the west under Benedict of Nursia (480-547). Probably sometime between 530-560 Benedict wrote the great Rule from which most western Christian monasticism derives. Prior to the development of the monastic life in Christianity there were other forms of consecrated life that were non-monastic, e.g., professed consecrated virginity lived non-monastically within the early Christian communities and solitary hermit life in the desert.

Once it developed, the monastic version of Christian Religious Life was the predominant form in the western Church from roughly 500 to 1500 C.E. but other forms also developed during that period, notably the military and hospitaler orders in the earlier middle ages and the mendicant form in the high middle ages. Neither of the latter were strictly monastic because an important feature in these new forms of Religious Life was itinerancy (traveling about) in the service of what we today would call apostolic work or ministry, i.e., the expression of love of God through the service of the neighbor outside the monastic enclosure.

Monastic stability, fostered and expressed by enclosure and horarium, was relativized by these newer forms to allow the Religious (e.g., the Templars, Franciscans) to travel about ministering in a variety of ways including nursing the sick, sheltering pilgrims, teaching in the new universities, advising at court and counseling the laity, preaching in the cities and countrysides, confronting emerging heresies, converting ?pagans,? etc.).

The most striking departure from the monastic model, beginning in the16th century, occurred in the clerical apostolic orders/congregations such as the Jesuits and Redemptorists. The Jesuits in particular, by deciding that reciting Office in common was not compatible with their apostolic vocation, made the sharpest and most substantial break from monasticism. And by this time monastic habits in clerical orders had given way to more ordinary clerical or sometimes contemporary attire or were restricted for use in the house, and the dwellings of these Religious were not stable, enclosed monasteries but houses or residences among which members moved according to their ministries.

At this same time there was a powerful impetus among women to participate in the Church?s expanding apostolate which male Religious were exercising both in Europe and the Far East and in the new world. A number of efforts, by male and female founders, to create apostolic orders of women ran afoul of the requirement, absolutized by Boniface VIII in the papal bull Periculoso in 1298 and re-enforced by the Council of Trent that all women Religious had to observe cloister under pain of excommunication. In other words, monasticism was the only recognized legitimate form of Religious Life for women.

This conviction that women had to be under male control (of father, husband, or hierarchy), should not appear alone or act in public, could not handle financial affairs without supervision, or even pursue their own spiritual lives without male permission and direction was theologized as God?s will for women who were considered ?the weaker sex? and therefore in need of physical, social, and spiritual protection for their own good and that of those (men) they might lead astray.

But this patriarchal control agenda was, in fact, simply ?baptized? cultural gender oppression, perhaps understandable in the middle ages but surely destined for historical demise. It is still in its death throes today, and probably nowhere more visibly in the western world than in the Catholic Church. Many people have expressed the suspicion that the current investigation of non-cloistered women Religious in the U.S. is another spasm in this misogynistic agenda.

The requirement of enclosure seriously impeded, without being able to completely subvert, the development of

non-cloistered apostolic Religious Life among women. Some founders, like Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac (founders of the Daughters of Charity), declared their Sisters ?not Religious? so that they could minister to the sick and poor outside of cloister. Others, like Angela Merici (Ursulines), Jane de Chantal and Francis de Sales (Visitandines), Joseph Medaille (Sisters of St. Joseph), Mary Ward (IBVM or Loretto Sisters), Nano Nagle (Presentation Sisters), Catherine McAuley (Sisters of Mercy), Mary McKillop (Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart) and many others lived as and struggled to be recognized as Religious even while refusing to renounce their vocations to ministry.

Some of these extraordinary pioneers of women?s ministerial Religious Life were denounced for immorality, imprisoned, placed under interdict, and even excommunicated and some orders were suppressed (in some cases only to resurrect later) while others were deflected from their founding charisms by reimposition of cloister. But these women, and the people they served, knew very well that, though not monastics, they were authentic Religious. And, despite unrelenting ecclesiastical opposition, they continued to live Religious Life, including the exercise -- often impeded -- of their apostolates, and to be accepted and appreciated as Religious by the people they served.

Finally, in 1900, Leo XIII, in the apostolic constitution Conditae a Christo, formally recognized as an authentic form of Religious Life non-cloistered apostolic congregations. This was not the creation by hierarchical fiat of a new form of Religious Life. It was the public recognition of a fait accompli, namely, that over the course of nearly 400 years a new form of women?s Religious Life had emerged and its validity, already long recognized by the People of God and by civil governments (which often gave the apostolic groups the same civil privileges and exemptions they accorded cloistered monastics), required acknowledgement by the institutional church.

However, because of the struggle over cloister and its attendant monastic accoutrements (such as habit, horarium) women?s apostolic Religious Life had developed as a hybrid phenomenon. Until the 1950s women Religious actually lived two different lives side-by-side: virtually the whole of monastic life at home and a full-time ministerial life in their apostolates. The typical non-stop 17 hour day -- from 5:00 a.m. till 10:00 p.m. -- in a pre-Vatican II convent involved modern women (dressed at all times in the restrictive fluting and pleats, floor length gowns, starched wimples and veiled headresses of 17th or 18th century peasants or nobles), struggling to ?get in? to their daily schedule Mass, meditation, devotional vocal prayers, examen, some form of divine office, adoration of the Blesssed Sacrament, the rosary, stations of the cross, spiritual reading from assigned pious books as well as daily manual work assignments in the convent.

They also participated daily (usually in silence) in three meals in common including some role in their preparation and clean-up and spent an hour in common ?recreation? which usually included handwork or mending, school work, parish or community tasks. Within the same day that included this full monastic routine they prepared classes and carried a full day?s professional schedule in school, hospital, or other Catholic institutions. They often taught catechism on the weekends and gave private lessons of various kinds to augment community income. In short, they carried all the burdens of the monastic life with none of the leisure for personal prayer, lectio divina, genuine community life, or ordinary recreation of monastics, and all the burdens of the apostolate without the professional preparation or privileges enjoyed by the clergy.

Between 1900 when their form of Religious Life was officially recognized and the 1950?s when Pius XII launched the process of renewal that eventually led to the changes following Vatican II, the already heavy demands of this double life of ?monastics at home? and ?apostles abroad? intensified. Advanced professional education became increasingly necessary and Catholic institutions staffed by Sisters multiplied rapidly. In the 1950s Pius XII urged Religious superiors to begin the modernization of their congregations including abolition of outmoded customs, humanization of the lifestyle, increased attention to professional and cultural education of their Sisters, and the modification of practices which were unhealthy for the Sisters or which alienated them from their contemporaries. He specifically encouraged the modification of habits which were, besides being

outmoded, often un-hygienic as well as expensive and which required unreasonable amounts of time and energy to maintain.

At the same time the Sister Formation Movement in the U.S. tackled the long overdue project of spiritual, intellectual, and psychological integration of Sisters through education in theology and philosophy as well as the humanities, advanced professional preparation for competent ministry in the modern world, and the deepening and increasing personalization of the spirituality of Sisters. The last was encouraged by the ?House of Prayer Movement? which was primarily promoted by women?s congregations and the directed retreat movement originating with the Jesuits but enthusiastically embraced by women Religious.

At Vatican Council II council fathers like Cardinal Leon Suenens vigorously promoted the agenda of renewal of women?s Religious Life. The Council directed congregations to return to the biblical roots of their life and to the founding charisms (i.e., particular identifying graces) of their congregations. These charisms often included the apostolic visions and ministerial intentions of the founders.

This renewal was intended specifically to foster greater engagement of women Religious with the modern world. Religious were urged not to restrict their apostolic zeal to the care of children, the sick, and the dying but to put their enormous gifts as educated modern women in the active and public service of the Reign of God by influential participation in all the spheres of life (social, economic, political, intellectual, artistic) that were bringing to birth a new cultural reality that would eventually be called globalized post-modernity.

Religious congregations entered into this process of renewal with typical energy and commitment and in a period of barely forty years they fairly well bridged the historical gap between their early modern European origins and post-modern American ecclesial and cultural reality. Given the glacial pace of most ecclesiastical development this renewal seemed to many, inside and outside Religious Life, to have taken place with shocking speed and suddenness. In fact, the removal of major (mostly monastic or purely cultural) barriers of all kinds made possible the full emergence of a new form of Religious Life that had been developing within and around those barriers for nearly four centuries, namely, non-monastic ministerial Religious Life for women.

The Council mandated for virtually all congregations a renewal chapter (official congregational meetings for major decision-making). These chapters extensively revised the Constitutions (rule of life) of the various orders and almost all of these revised Constitutions have since been approved by the Vatican. The rules of these Congregations had traditionally stated, in various formulations, that the ?primary end? of the life was ?the perfection/sanctification of the members through withdrawal from the world and the practice of religious observances,? that is, the living of the monastic life. It then gave, as a ?secondary end,? a specific apostolic work(s) of the order, e.g., ?the Christian education of youth? or ?the care of the terminally ill.? Constitutions revised in response to the Council now typically define the purpose of the life as a single, integrated end in terms such as the following: ?Urged by the love of Jesus Christ and empowered by his Spirit the Sisters incarnate their total vowed consecration to God in the promotion of God?s Reign through a variety of ministries addressing the current needs of Church and society.? These revised Constitutions then go on to describe how this integrated, contemplatively grounded, ministerial lifeform is to be lived among and by the Sisters.

Perhaps the most immediately visible, though hardly the most important, expression of this commitment to the broad and deep renewal of ministerial Religious Life was the relatively swift change in regard to the habit. Uniform dress was (and remains in many monastic groups) a feature of monastic life whose purpose is to suppress singularity, concern with appearance, vanity, and competition -- even looking in a mirror or ?reflecting surface? was a serious fault in pre-conciliar days! -- so that the members of the monastery can pursue their common life without attracting the attention of each other or even themselves, living inconspicuously ?hidden with Christ in God.?

This purpose had been inadvertently turned inside out as 20th century apostolic Religious, no longer cloistered,

became more involved in modern life outside their convents. Their exotic ?costumes? (as they were called in Europe) startled people on the street, created (intentionally or not) claims to special status and privileged treatment, and often made normal, egalitarian peer relationships difficult or impossible. A fully habited Religious in a grocery store, university classroom, or professional meeting was hardly inconspicuous!

The more extreme versions of floor-length robes, trains, voluminous sleeves, and veils descending from architectural headgear soon began to disappear, as the Council clearly intended. Most congregations then went through a relatively short period of experimentation with ?modified habits? that often made their adult wearers feel (and look) like Catholic high school girls in uniform. One of Vatican II?s stated criteria for the garb of Religious, besides hygiene, poverty, and simplicity, was ?attractiveness.? Increasingly, Sisters in ministerial orders questioned not only the attractiveness of their modified garb but the ?witness value? of conspicuous dowdiness, especially in professional settings.

Within a relatively short time (and not without some embarrassing errors in judgment) most renewed Congregations had successfully transitioned into simple contemporary dress appropriate to the now quite varied situations in their lives. They realized that clothes as such were neither ?religious? nor ?secular,? did not make a person ?holy? or ?worldly,? did not communicate anything that was not communicated by one?s person, attitude, and behavior. Many discovered by experience that simple, unaffected, and appropriate contemporary dress quite effectively communicated what they wished to witness to: equality with and respect for their companions and the sincere desire to participate competently in contemporary culture without succumbing to the tyranny of fashion and consumerism.

At this point, despite the sometimes overheated agitation around the ?habit issue? on the part of some traditionalists, the issue of clothing is no longer high (or at all) on the agenda in most Congregations. By far the majority of mature Religious in the U.S. wear contemporary clothes; most lay people seem quite comfortable with this; and no one seems to object to any Congregation or individual Religious wearing traditional or modified monastic garb if they choose to do so.

If the habit was the emotional flash point of renewal, the broadening of and full commitment to ministry, finally liberated from the monastic constraints under which it had labored for centuries, was the spiritual substance at the heart of renewal. A major transition was underway, from ecclesiastically delegated and controlled apostolates of caring for Catholics in large Catholic institutions attached to monastic-style convents to more individualized ministries in situations of need regardless of the denominational affiliation or lack thereof, ability to pay, or respectability of the recipients.

Sisters became hospital and prison chaplains, poverty and immigration lawyers, and medical professionals of all kinds. They assumed ministries in parishes that were increasingly without sufficient clergy. They became tutors of at-risk youth and adults who needed to learn English. They undertook hospice care; plunged into political advocacy and peace work and staffed NGOs; assumed leadership in the promotion and defense of women; served on boards of non-profits; addressed homelessness in a variety of ways. They became skilled spiritual and retreat directors and founded or staffed spirituality centers. They started alternate schools for the disadvantaged and reached out to AIDS victims, street people, the addicted, and the societally or ecclesiastically rejected. They became theologians and artists, scientists and researchers. Their previous living situations (convents or monasteries) ceased to determine what ministries they could undertake; rather the ministries they undertook began to determine where and how they lived. (As we will see shortly, this move is deeply rooted in the Gospel.)

Living singly, intercongregationally, or in small mobile groups in function of the ministries in which they were involved furthered the dismantling of the monastic lifestyle. Ministerial Religious were no longer enclosed monastics following a horarium that demanded their prolonged presence in the convent several times a day. The

demise of the routine of vocal prayers in common and uniform devotional life demanded the development by every Sister of a serious personal commitment to a life of contemplative and shared prayer.

Unsustained by a fixed program of ?observances,? she had to develop a prayer life deep and intense enough to nourish her more demanding ministerial commitment and the relationship with God in which it was rooted and that it expressed. New ways of being and living community have had to be developed in place of ?living in? community geographically and physically which any who have lived this way know is no guarantee of genuine affective and effective sharing of life.

These changes in the way of life of ministerial Religious have been radical (in the sense of root-deep) and extremely challenging. And we have certainly not found completely adequate solutions to some of these challenges. But most renewed congregations -- and most individual Religious who have persevered through the traumatic decades of renewal -- are firmly convinced that, no matter how serious the challenges or how many mistakes are made in dealing with them, this new form of Religious Life that they are living today is that to which they are and have been called since the foundation of this lifeform centuries ago. Gospel fidelity to their vocation requires that there be ?no turning back,? no fearful security-seeking in a re-monasticizing of their life, no surrender to external or internal control agendas no matter where they originate.

Ministry has moved from its peripheral position as a ?secondary end? of Religious Life, a controlled and restricted ?overflow? of the monastic ?primary end,? to the very center of the self-understanding and commitment of women Religious. The first and second commandment have become one for them. Love of God and loving service of God?s people are no longer juxtaposed projects competing for their time and energy. They are the inhaling and exhaling of one life totally consecrated to God by perpetual profession of the vows and poured out in total self-gift in ministry which is not restricted to prayer or intention or even specified ministries in Catholic institutions.

Biblical and Theological Considerations

Important as it is to realize what ministerial Religious Life is not, namely, monastic life or a hybrid combination of monastic life and ecclesiastically mandated institutional tasks, and therefore what is not essential to it, namely, monastic characteristics such as habit, enclosure, and horarium, it is much more important to understand what this life is. Unlike monasticism which is a feature of virtually all literate religious/spiritual traditions, there is no analogue outside Christianity for ministerial Religious Life.

Doing good to one?s neighbor according to one?s means is,of course, integral to virtually all religions but only Christianity has developed an organic lifeform in which the whole of a person?s life is taken up, by profession of perpetual vows, to the exclusion of all other life commitments such as family or profession or project, into a love of God that expresses itself in complete self-giving to the neighbor.

Christianity is the continuation in this world of the life of Jesus who came to pour out his life for the salvation of humanity, to inaugurate the Reign of God on earth as in heaven . One might say that the originality of Christianity consists in the unification into one single movement of the two great commandments of the Law, love of God with one?s whole being and love of all human beings as oneself, not as a human project of benevolence but as the ongoing enactment of God?s project in Jesus: God so loved the world as to give God?s only Son that all might have eternal life (see Jn. 3:16).

Ministerial Religious Life is, in other words, an original Christian lifeform radically focussed on the coming of the Reign of God, not the Christian form of a more widespread religious phenomenon of self transcendence. (The Christian form of monasticism, of course, is Christian precisely because of and to the extent that commitment to Jesus? salvific project is integral to the prayer life of its members, but monasticism is not our topic here.) To understand ministerial Religious Life, therefore, we can only look to the New Testament for its

model. It is a particular kind of discipleship of Jesus.

All Jesus? disciples are called to participate in one way or another in his mission of the transformation of humanity (including non-human creation) in God. The pre-Easter Jesus had many kinds of disciples. Some, like Martha, Mary, and Lazarus of Bethany (see Lk. 10:38-42; Jn. 11:5), were householders who followed Jesus within the context of loving family life. Others, like Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:2-9) or the Royal Official (Jn. 46-54), followed him by just and generous involvement in secular occupations. But 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 full-time 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. 10:1-11; 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. 28:16-2; Jn. 21; Acts 1:7-8, 12-14 and elsewhere).

We know the names of 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. This is the group, the form of discipleship, which supplies the primary biblical model for ministerial Religious Life.

I want to point up, from the New Testament, some of the characteristic features of this lifeform, which was learned by his disciples from Jesus himself and which they continued after his death and resurrection, so that we can discern more clearly the theological shape of ministerial Religious Life. I will deliberately contrast some of these features to those which are characteristic of other forms of discipleship in order to highlight the distinctiveness (not superiority) of this lifeform.

Jesus did not propose this form of discipleship to all his followers, not even to some of his favorites like John the Baptist (called to desert hermit life) or Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (called to family life). He did not call to this form of life some of his most generous followers like the cured Gerasene demoniac (Lk. 8:26-39) whom he sent back to his own people who would not allow Jesus himself to remain in their town. And 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). One, at least, accepted it but ended by betraying Jesus in an attempt to defeat his project .

It is crucial to recognize that there are diverse forms of discipleship, none of which is superior to any other (e.g., celibacy to family life, secular to religious, monastic to ministerial, lay to clerical). Only a mutually appreciative complementarity of and collaboration among disciples called to follow Jesus in a wide variety of ways will allow the Church to be and do what it must if the world God so loved is to be served and saved. But our purpose here is to look at Jesus? own personal lifestyle in which he formed this small itinerant band, which they continued to live after his departure, and which is closely followed today by ministerial Religious.

Jesus began his ministerial life with prayer in solitude, a forty day ?retreat? in the desert during which he definitively renounced Satan and embraced his own God-given messianic vocation. But then he returned from the desert, in which he later occasionally sought prayerful solace, to a life of incredible ministerial exertion characterized by nearly incessant attention to the needs of the crowds who pressed upon him for food, healing, teaching, liberation from sin and even from death . Even when he attempted to take his itinerant band away to a secluded place ?to rest awhile? the crowds followed him and he gave himself to them unstintingly because they were like ?sheep without a shepherd? (see Mk. 6:30-56).

Jesus participated actively and regularly in Sabbath liturgy (e.g., Mt. 13:54; Mk. 6:2; Lk. 4:16; Jn. 6:59) and went up to Jerusalem for the major feasts (e.g., Jn. 2:13; 5:1; 10:22; 12:12). He was evidently knowledgeable in Scripture which he cited frequently and trenchantly, and the psalms came readily to his lips. But he also prayed,

in joy and fear and agony, in words that were intimately his own, often spending whole nights or the pre-dawn hours in solitary prayer to the one he called his ?Abba? (see Mk. 1:35; Lk. 6:12; Mt. 14:23; Mk. 6:46 and many other places). Jesus celebrated with his disciples but also with other friends outside the itinerant band. He ate with religious officials and the wealthy but also with the poor, outcasts, and sinners, and even shared meals with those he knew were not well disposed toward him. He taught about God but most of his teaching was couched in secular terms, his parables being drawn from the daily life of homemakers and farmers and business people and parents and, though his words and saving acts were addressed primarily to his fellow Jews, they were not restricted to them (e.g. Jn. 4:46-54; Mt. 15:21-28). In short, Jesus? personal choice was a mixed life of prayer, both communal and solitary, and intense ministerial action in the public sphere to Jews and non-Jews, to the religiously correct and those rejected by the religious officials, to women and men equally.

Jesus was an itinerant minister. He was not a member of a monastic community although there were such in the Judaism of his time and some scholars speculate that Jesus may have spent some time in one of them before embarking on his ministerial vocation. As he moved about, to all the towns of Israel to which he had been sent (see Mk. 1:38-39), he chose not to settle down, not to have a fixed abode, a home he could call his own and furnish according to his tastes and purposes. There was no place waiting for him at the end of the day, no stable much less enclosed community or routine of fixed prayers or activities on which he could rely for regularity, no prepared meals, no assured solitude or silence. Unlike the birds who have nests and foxes who have dens, he had nowhere to lay his head (see Mt. 8:20). And those he called to share this life had to make the same choice: to leave behind home, gainful employment, stable work, possessions, family and friends and to share Jesus? life on the move (e.g., Mk. 1:16-20; Mt. 19:27-29). When he began sending them out on their own, to carry his mission forward, he made this itinerancy explicit: take no bag, no money, no extra clothes; make no provision for lodging; stay where you are invited and eat what you are served and demand no payment for your ministry (Lk. 9:2-6 and par.). This was not a vocation for all or even for the majority; but for those called to it it consisted in a close imitation of Jesus? own lifestyle.

Jesus and his itinerant band had no steady income since none of them was gainfully employed. In fact, Jesus called all of them to abandon their occupations and even divest themselves of accumulated personal property. They obviously lived a common economic life sharing a common purse (see Jn. 13:29) and no one called anything his or her own. They seemed to receive support from followers and were invited into peoples? homes. But in any case, there is no evidence of total indigence on the one hand or of pre-occupation about money, either making it or spending it, on the other. But they were clearly not a ?for profit? enterprise.

Jesus was a celibate. By his own choice he made himself a ?eunuch for the kingdom of God? (see Mt. 19:10-12). He left his family of origin and resisted their attempts to lure (or even force) him back (see Mk. 3:21). He did not marry (though he had close women friends), found a family (though he loved his own and participated in that of others), or have offspring (though he obviously loved children).

Jesus adopted no special clothing or other identifying markers. Unlike John the Baptist, Jesus did not dress like a prophet or an ascetic; unlike the hierarchy in Jerusalem he did not dress like a cleric or hierarch. He and his itinerant band never seemed to be disreputable or inappropriately attired when they were invited either to the homes of the poor or the banquet tables of the rich and no one in the Gospel ever remarks about their attire (though they do about Jesus? love of good dining! [Mt. 11:19]).

But Jesus had strong opinions about visible lifestyle characteristics among his followers. In Mt. 23:1-12 the historical Jesus is speaking to the scribes and pharisees of his own lifetime and Matthew is addressing the Jewish authorities in his own context, but this passage is also aimed at Matthew?s own Jewish-Christian community and its leaders. Jesus warns harshly against conspicuous religious apparel. Religious professionals are not to broaden their phylacteries or lengthen their prayer tassels to make themselves stand out in public places so they will be greeted with deference and addressed with religious titles like rabbi, teacher, or father.

They are not to pray or fast ostentatiously so as to be admired for their fervor (see Mt. 6:5). They are not to take the front seats in the worshipping assembly or at public functions. Indeed he instructs them to seek inconspicuous places at public events (Lk. 14:10) in solidarity with the poor and sinners.

Jesus was not prescribing how all disciples of all ages and cultures should live the external features of their lives. He was dealing with sincerity vs. hypocrisy, humility vs. pride, simplicity vs. ostentation. All disciples are called to personal and liturgical prayer, to the study of the Scriptures, to service of their neighbors, to simplicity of lifestyle and humility in relationships, to inclusiveness and generosity. But Jesus himself did live a particular combination of particular expressions of all these characteristics and he did gather around himself a small band of women and men whom he initiated into this particular pattern of life.

Down through the ages various groups have felt called to live that pattern, not just interiorly or in spirit but in concrete historical fact. Beginning with the original band of Jesus? itinerant disciples, through the consecrated virgins in the earliest Christian communities, the mendicants in the middle ages, the apostolic congregations of men and of women in the early modern period, down to the ministerial Religious of today the Church has always had members who embraced this lifeform.

The salient features of this lifeform, deriving directly from that of the pre-Easter Jesus himself, include a total, lifelong consecration to God to the exclusion of any other primary life commitment (perpetual profession); the integration of a contemplative life of personal and shared prayer with a whole-hearted commitment to full-time public ministry in service of the Reign of God; community lived in mission (rather than in fixed abodes); a form of life that includes renunciation of family and home (consecrated celibacy), total personal economic dispossession and interdependence (evangelical poverty), ministry on a full-time basis (prophetic obedience in mission). However, such features as enclosed abode (cloister), special titles or culturally conspicuous dress (habit), fixed patterns of common vocal prayer, meals, and common manual labor, (horarium) have sometimes been part of the life especially when they were imposed on women by ecclesiastical authority, but are by no means intrinsic to or constitutive of the lifeform.

Anyone examining the life of ministerial women Religious in the United States today should have no difficulty recognizing their choice of and commitment to the pattern of life to which Jesus called his original band of itinerant disciples. Religious themselves are well aware of the difficulty of living in fidelity to this Gospel ideal in a contemporary first world context. In a sex-saturated culture in which relationships are trivialized and infidelity seems ubiquitous, attracting women to lifelong consecrated celibacy and forming them to live it faithfully and fruitfully is a monumental challenge.

Money plays a very different role in life today than it did in Jesus? time and how to stay alive, support new and elderly members, and continue to minister freely as we have been commissioned by Jesus to do is a huge and unresolved problem, although much progress in this area has been made in the past four decades. Women Religious are, in general, deeply committed to the egalitarian, non-authoritarian, collegial exercise of authority and practice of obedience that Jesus inaugurated among his original band but we live and minister in a Church that is not only rigidly hierarchical but functions as a divine right monarchy in which authority is functionally equated with coercive power and is entirely monopolized by men. Living situations in a first world urban culture are not conducive to flexible and mobile community in mission nor supportive of shared spirituality. Liturgy is increasingly oppressive when it is not completely unavailable. Ecclesiastical support, financial or psychological, except from other Religious and the laity, is rare at best.

Despite these conditions, Religious know what they are called to, what they are trying to live. While it may not always be clear how to do it most are quite clear that de-naturing their life is not the answer. Jesus never promised his disciples safety, approval, certitude, or comfort. He did promise that those who have left home, siblings, parents, children, lands for his sake and that of the Gospel will receive a hundredfold in this life,

persecution, and finally eternal life (see Mk. 10:29-30).

Those who have persevered through the struggles of the conciliar renewal are sustained by a mysterious but real interior taste of that hundredfold. They certainly do not lack for persecution, especially at the present time! But they believe firmly in eternal life, possessed even now and awaiting them in all its fullness in ?the age to come.? For them, eternal life has a Name.

Two earlier essays by Sr. Sandra Schneiders appeared on NCRonline.org:

- Why they stay(ed) [1]
- We've given birth to a new form of religious life [2]

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