THE APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

By MARY ST PAUL EVANS

'NOT ONLY a woman but wicked', wrote St Teresa of herself in her autobiography; and we need have little doubt but that, in the average clerical mind of her time, the one state was not far removed from the other. *Etiam in sexu fragili victoriam martyrii contulisti*,[1] ran the old collect for a woman martyr, thus in effect contradicting the Church's teaching that the achievement of martyrdom is the outcome not of personal valour but of the conferring of a special grace.

> *Parce que cette pureté d'ange . . . est merveilleusement délicate . . . les Religieuses veulent qu'aucune chose de dehors ne vienne à l'offenser, et qu'elles soient toujours éloignées des nouvelles du monde, de la communication des personnes externes et même des parents et des hommes tout saints, de peur que, dans ces espèces de rencontre, ne se glisse insensiblement quelque distraction pour elles ou pour autrui.*[2]

These words were written early in the seventeenth century by St Peter Fourier for the Congregation he had helped to found, with the express purpose of exercising an apostolate among young women and girls. That he would gladly have dispensed with the necessity of enclosure is evident from his letters; he was unable to obtain authorization for the foundation unless he accepted it, and so had to make the best of a bad job.

Woman, the eternal mystery, was an embarassment to church officialdom of the period roughly contemporaneous with the Renaissance. In the early middle ages things had been jollier: bishops had their difficulties with local nuns and abbesses, and tried to bring them to heel, but often the religious had powerful

---

[1] '. . . You have granted the victory of martyrdom even to the weak(er) sex . . .'

[2] 'Because this angelic purity . . . is extraordinarily delicate, women religious are anxious that nothing extraneous might prove to be an obstacle, and that they may always be withdrawn from worldly novelties, from commerce with outsiders – even with parents and very holy people, for fear that, by encounters of this kind, worldly distractions may imperceptibly find a place in their lives'.

read more at www.theway.org.uk

lay supporters, and as a rule the bishops got the worst of it. A prioress on pilgrimage was a perfectly acceptable travelling companion in the eyes of most people, and nobody was astonished if she contributed to the general entertainment with a good (though pious) story.

Then holy Church, needled by the ravages of the Reformation, suddenly seemed to lose all her sense of humour. The Council of Trent clamped down seriously and strongly on all religious, men as well as women. It took about thirty years for the decrees of Trent to be put into effect, but in the end there was no escape; however recalcitrant, religious had to conform or forego their right to be considered religious. St Teresa of Avila had said that laxity over enclosure was the sure ruin of religious life, so enclosed all convents had to be. Even the tender shoot of the new apostolic religious life for women was put under the same umbrella: so Mary Ward, St Peter Fourier, St François de Sales all had their problems of how to reconcile a true apostolate with the exigencies of the rule of cloister as laid down by the roman authorities. Only St Vincent de Paul, the canny peasant, managed to get his sisters through the net by the stratagem of annual vows which placed them outside the strict category of religious.

From that time on, these rules, together with a quasi-monastic style of living, were automatically adhered to in the case of women's apostolic foundations, with very few exceptions. They were taken seriously. Until the eve of the second Vatican Council, most women religious themselves, though they sometimes expressed a passing regret at the limitations imposed by the rules of enclosure upon their apostolate, did not question their appropriateness. They knew that in most men's congregations things were otherwise; that Benedictines, for instance, even went home for holidays. But in many conventual circles there was a rooted idea that men needed special concessions to human frailty.

We are apt now to forget what a breath-taking change was instituted in 1965 with the appearance of the decree for the adaptation and renewal of religious life, in which it is simply stated that 'nuns, whose Orders were founded for the active apostolate, must be released from their strict enclosure, to be in a better position to do the apostolic work entrusted to them, while keeping the enclosure which their Constitutions require'.[3] Almost certainly, the abrogation

[3] *Perfectae Caritatis*, 16.

of enclosure for apostolic Congregations has been the greatest single factor in the far-reaching changes which the feminine religious life has undergone in the past ten years. Different families of religious have applied the directive of *Perfectae Caritatis* in different ways, but in general now the *exeats* of the apostolic religious are left to the individual conscience. The reception of 'outsiders' into community quarters is also widely practised. In fact, many of the recently founded small communities have no special quarters apart from the sisters' own rooms.

The removal of the enclosure ban has resulted in *dis*closure; and this in itself represents an extension of the apostolic field. For now the apostolic community is obliged to take into account, far more than formerly, the witness which its hitherto strictly private life obscured. I wonder whether many religious realized in the past that their privacy, so piously conserved with a good conscience under the guise of the holy enclosure, could and often did minister to a form of selfishness. 'Men religious live in the pig-sty; women religious live in the dairy', an eminent Jesuit once declared. Probably the pig-sty has always been a more welcoming circle than the dairy; but anyway, the door of the dairy is now more often open and the cream-pans, if any, available to a wider public. The converse process, of religious being able to enter the homes of laypeople on a more informal basis, to witness the charity, self-sacrifice and frugality which so often reign there, can surely do nothing but good.

And yet, and yet, there is the nagging feeling that our forbears in the religious life cannot have been totally lacking in intelligence. The *quelque distraction* of which St Peter Fourier wrote, is it really a completely nonsensical concept? Is there such a thing as a distraction? If so, how damaging is it to the life of an apostolic religious? Yes, of course, any concentration can be undermined by the intrusion of a series of non-essential objects. There *is* a form of withdrawal which is desirable; its desirability is acknowledged in the universal custom of the annual retreat. Surely, though, there is a form of *daily* retreat, which can only be ensured by the avoidance of taking on too many commitments. It is not merely a question of time; a mind can be so saturated with non-essentials that even if the actual minutes are there, its efforts towards an untramelled reflection are seriously impeded. To be at the service of others, especially at the service of their faith, one needs in a certain degree to withdraw from them. Certainly it has at last been openly admitted that

a continuous attention to 'divine things' is impossible at the same time as carrying out an absorbing task. Much anxiety and unnecessary burdening of conscience have been excluded by this admission. Nevertheless, if there is *never* any time, either in the accepted or in the psychological sense, for an undivided attention to divine things, we might as well all go home. At a time when lay-people are often taking drastic means to extricate themselves from the rat-race, is it good that religious should seem to be aiming at a photo-finish with the foremost of the rats? Surely we should be seen as people concerned with one thing only: the kingdom of heaven and its extension.

A change of more moment, perhaps, than is always realized has been the adoption of the system of a personal allowance for each sister in many women's Congregations. With greater mobility and the wider involvement in 'outside' jobs, this really became essential if the community treasurer were not to be driven mad with continual requests for small amounts of money. It was also suggested that, until a religious had personally experienced the pinch of having to make do, instead of drawing upon what may have seemed to be an inexhaustible supply (though that depended upon the dispositions of the treasurer!), she had never truly experienced poverty. Many masculine Orders, of course, had always enjoyed the facility of a small allowance, and some had never adopted community of goods in the fullest sense of the term. Having money in one's pocket confers a certain measure of independence, but also constitutes a challenge to the individual to use it wisely; for after all there is a sense in which it is the product of the labour of one's sisters, not to speak of other considerations. Besides taking care of personal necessaries, it enables a sister to give modest support to some charity of her choice at the cost of a genuine personal deprivation, instead of charitable enterprises being undertaken globally by the community only, which usually meant that no deprivation was felt by anybody. Obviously, if such allowances were to exceed real necessity, there could be a danger of the eventual dissolution of the spirit of community of goods – a danger which is all too clearly evident from the history of religious Orders in the past. A readiness to account for what one has spent is surely essential, even if the requirement is seldom put into effect. In a small community this accountability is most appropriately exercised to the whole group.

A 'small' community? If you ask among different feminine Congregations you will find that notions of smallness vary. To some, a community of twelve is a small community. Others have

long been accustomed to communities of three or four. Marie René-Bazin, of the Society of Helpers, in her book *Some Sisters of Mine*, remarked on the tremendous strain put upon charity in those circumstances. The men's apostolic Congregations have, much more frequently than the women's, practised a deployment in very small groups or even singly; it depended, probably, on their approach to or remoteness from the monastic type of life. An interesting fact is that at least one Congregation of men has recently legislated in favour of a basic minimum of three, in order to exclude a harmful isolation with its attendant temptations, especially in the foreign mission field. The movement towards 'human-sized' groups has been evident now for some time in the feminine Congregations, stemming from the reaction – not confined to church circles – against the vast, impersonal organization which is a feature of the modern world. The sharing of a common roof and table without the underlying link of mutual knowledge and appreciation, and the resultant loneliness in some cases, was seen as the almost inevitable result of large-group living; and people wondered what happened, in that case, to the gospel value of brotherly love. Effective participation in decision-making, too, was affected; for anyone who has tried to direct a discussion with two or three dozen participants knows that, short of unlimited time, it just is not possible for every member of the group to give her opinion. Hence, even in communities where there is some compelling reason for large numbers to live together, the expedient is being tried of breaking down the large group into smaller ones. Where there is great disparity in ages between the sisters, this may be the only possible means of ensuring to the younger the depth of communication which they need, and to the older the slowness of tempo and the opportunity for explanation which alone can help them to follow the evolution of religious life.

Contemporaneously with the movement towards a closer and more authentic common life, it has been recognized in many women's Congregations, particularly those which have posts in the Third World, that an apostolic urgency may validly call a single religious to a mission where she must work alone or in collaboration with others who are not religious. In that case, in what does her religious community life consist, even though she may have a *type* of community life with her collaborators? There are those who hold that a valid community life can be lived by those who do not share the same roof. Their basic community is their Congregation, and more

especially the sisters of the province to which they are attached. Sometimes the sister is reckoned as a member of an existing local community with whom she keeps in touch by means of correspondence and by occasional visits. Sometimes again a number of sisters in isolated posts meet one another at stated intervals, and can feel united by a strong bond. Although I would have reservations about this situation of the individual mission if it were allowed to continue for a long time, I recognize that the deprivation of the warmth and support which we expect of a local community might well be considered a form of ascesis or of poverty. But if this form of life were to become the norm instead of the exception, what would happen to the value of 'community witness'? As a young religious said in my hearing not long ago, 'We did not enter for that, but for community'.

Some interesting reflections might be made at this point on a conversation which I had this year with a catholic psychiatrist. He was speaking of the possible psychological damage which could be caused to religious by too frequent moves from one community or locality to another: damage which he claimed to have detected in cases referred to him for treatment. When I asked him what he thought of the 'flying squad' idea of apostolic religious moving in at short notice and for short periods wherever a pastoral need arose, he reacted strongly in opposition. Not only did he consider that it was wrong to risk the frustrations and unhappiness of certain religious in face of frequent moves, but he thought that a value which needed to be emphasized to the world of today was precisely that of stability, and he saw this best exemplified by a settled community. By this type of community witness, the values of hope, unity, simplicity of life and the 'revalorization' of persons for their own sake, and not merely as work-units, could be shown forth to our society. He considered that the true apostolate lay in these things, and that 'works', though they embody the spirit of Christ-like service, were secondary in importance. Perhaps the truth of the matter is that great care needs to be taken in the selection of religious to go on individual missions, even if they are themselves willing; still less should regular moves be written into the Constitutions.

We all know, however, of the opposite case in which a religious *needs* a move, either to stimulate a renewed sense of mission, or in order to extricate her from a dreary or deadening situation, but whose superiors find it next to impossible to effect the transfer.

There seem sometimes to be impasses which no power on earth can find a way through. Often external pressures from clergy or laity are a factor in the situation. A person may become indispensable in her work; her removal will not only seriously affect the work but may cause a great deal of extra burden to fall upon others. Here lies one of the justifications of the flight from the institution so evident in apostolic religious life at the present time.

Plainly it is wrong to sacrifice the individual to the institution; but perhaps this now well-known dictum is pronounced rather unthinkingly at times. After all, the institutions in which religious have hitherto been involved were for the benefit of *people*. A certain reluctance to assume responsibility for large organizations is discernible in our present age, not only within the religious life. But are we not obliged to suppose that hospitals and schools (*pace* Ivan Illich) are going to be with us for a long time yet? Is it quite in conformity with the serious purpose of religious life to refuse to shoulder the burden, if not of their proprietorship, at least of their organization and direction, where that continues to be asked of us; or, still more 'at least', of a steady measure of co-operation in their maintenance with lay people? Are we moving towards a butterfly-like type of existence for the religious, while the lay christian sticks doggedly to the task? There have been instances of schools being seriously inconvenienced by a sister's desire to 'do something more apostolic', without adequate consideration of the difficult circumstances which her departure would create for the children and staff.

Seldom can any human institution (and let us not forget that religious Congregations are human institutions) have undergone such a radical change in so short a time as has religious life in the decade following on the closure of the Second Vatican Council. This applies with particular force to the feminine apostolic Orders, for the strictness of the rules applied from Rome, together with the pressures often put upon convents by bishops and clergy, certainly resulted in women having less freedom to decide their own affairs than men. I exclude here the women's contemplative Orders, since they have changed less (but possibly more traumatically?). Has the access to so great a degree of freedom gone to the heads of sisters? Not so many months ago a catholic periodical carried an article about the Catholic Colleges of Education in this country.[4] The author had this to say about nuns: 'The commitment-to-the-

[4] *Christian Order*, February, 1975.

world of the religious Orders has resulted necessarily in the drying up of recruits to what are now but societies of unmarried women teachers, bereft of the romantic attraction and status which they formerly enjoyed'. One can only think that the ordinary person's reaction would be, 'if those were the things religious women were seeking, they deserved to fail'. No; the commitment to the world is right and it is facilitated by greater freedom, so long as we are realistic and realize that we have a great deal to learn about how to use it. We do not have to have any inferiority-complex based on a belief that men have nothing to learn about how to use the freedom which has always been theirs; but, come to think of it, I do not seem to have met with a great deal of corporate inferiority-complex among nuns lately.

One thing we tend to forget (although we talk so much of the third world) is that both the third and the second worlds have their religious, and that their attitudes are not necessarily identical with ours when we make predictions about religious life. In Africa, for instance, some of the ideas which seem to us new have always been taken for granted, such as an intensity of community solidarity (though off-set by deep-seated tribal variance), while a high degree of freedom for the individual religious is far from universally accepted. Their style of life is a good deal soberer and more austere than is ours. And behind the political 'curtains', of whatever material, the second-world religious, often carrying on her apostolate under incredibly difficult conditions, almost certainly longs for a much more 'internal' style of life than we should now accept. Who is to say which form of religious life will prove the most durable?

Inevitably, the subject of mixed celibate communities will come up in the near future, and it will doubtless be debated as hotly as the subject of the habit in its time. In *The Tablet* (London, August 16, 1975), Father Denys Lucas raises the question of mixed communities and gives his own answer to it. It would take a whole series of articles (which I am certainly not competent to undertake!) to deal adequately with this concept. While entirely subscribing to the thesis that there is a psychological complementarity between men and women which should not be overlooked in the religious life, while agreeing that benefits to both sexes can accrue from their working together, and while holding that celibates of either sex must know how to behave in the presence of the other, I still do not think that the time has come, if ever it does come, for mixed celibate communities to exist *on a permanent basis*. I think that the needs of

men and women are too different to ensure the success of such a venture, other than in the context of marriage, where either party makes it his or her business – or should – to procure these needs for the other. So far from promoting immorality, I would suggest that the mixed situation would be more likely to promote divisiveness. It certainly would not work in the developing world where the older custom obtains of a separation of labour and environment for the two sexes.

On the other hand, a development which I should like to see taking shape is a greater rapport between the contemplative and the apostolic branches of the feminine religious life. A reawakening of interest in prayer characterizes the apostolic congregations today. Would we not have much to learn from living contact with our contemplative sisters, from comparing ideas with them, even if the two spiritual streams must forever run separately – not that I am convinced that they must. Could not apostolic and contemplative communities be 'twinned', and actually share one another's lives, *as communities*, from time to time (as do, for example, the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion, and the Holy Family of Bordeaux)? Might this idea not be a more fruitful expedient for the renewal of religious life than, say, the House of Prayer movement, though this might well be a stage on the way? It would be heartening and surely profitable to both sides, if contemplative sisters could more easily obtain permission to attend the meetings held by apostolic religious (are we really such a contaminating influence)?

It is clear to me that this article is open to challenge on many points. I have posed questions to which I have produced no answers; I have been – horrid crime nowadays! – too negative in my approach . . . I have sat on the fence, a position in which one is an easy target, at least. And not too comfortable a seat, with a Papal Bull on the one side and a Sacred Cow on the other! I feel sure that readers of *The Way* will, if they read this far, regret that there is no correspondence column in which they could 'have a go' and demolish some of my Aunt Sallies.