

# PROCEDURES FOR RELIGIOUS RENEWAL

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RELIGIOUS RENEWAL begins, where it began for the Council itself, in the desire 'to shed on all men that radiance of Christ which illumines the face of the Church'. It is a desire which is to be accomplished 'by preaching the gospel to every creature';<sup>1</sup> which must be alive in the hearts of every individual christian, in every group in the Church, and particularly in religious families; for 'if the teachings of the Council are to reach their full achievement, religious institutes especially must inculcate a newness of spirit'.<sup>2</sup>

The Council itself laid down the broad strategic lines of this renewal. Recognising that the holy Spirit dwells in the whole people of God, in each individual and in each group, each of which has its own proper mission in the building of the kingdom of God on earth under the individual guidance of the holy Spirit, the Council Fathers listened to the voice of the people in a way that was never done before in any previous general council. Commissions were set up in which lay people, religious, priests – every vocation and walk of life, were represented, although the Council reserved to itself the final authoritative utterance, which it alone has the power and right to give. In all this there was a freedom and openness such as never before; and, in addition, there were present at the Council members of other christian denominations, who could make their voices heard in the Secretariat for Christian Unity, and so further the purposes of the Council and of Christ himself: 'that they may all be one'.

In all this we can discern new and important emphases which have bearing on the way in which a religious institute might set about the work of renewal.

## *The Climate of Renewal*

Particularly noticeable in the Council's deliberations was the readi-

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ecclesiae Sanctae*: cf *supra*.

ness to admit that there had been errors in the past. The Church, being human as well as divine, has its limitations. Formerly, it was considered that public admission of error might be a scandal to the faithful, and ammunition for the enemies of the Church. In the same way, religious institutes must be ready to admit their own limitations and their past errors.

Again, it was accepted that the Church, though always the same spouse of Christ, must always be changing. In the past, the emphasis had been on preservation and conservation; and the prevalent images were those of the fortress, the rock. The new emphasis is on the Church as the body of Christ, which must grow and change whilst remaining the same. So also must it be with religious institutes. Change must not be regarded as something unsettling and unfortunate, which we are pressed into admitting. Rather, it must be considered as something good which the Church, speaking with her most authoritative voice, wishes us to do. Changes are necessary if each religious institute is to fulfil its mission, its service to the Church and to all men. A religious congregation, like the Church, is a body which grows and changes, and yet remains the same.

The Council also laid great stress on the community aspect of christian life; this applies to all groups within the Church, to their relations with one another, to their apostolate, and to their relations with those outside the Church. And this aspect of the Church's life has its source in the liturgy. A religious institute, which follows Christ by way of the counsels, should be a perfect expression of christian community in the Church. This is one way in which the religious state manifests its value as a sign and a witness.

In this context, religious must ask themselves whether the structure of their life is such as can give real expression to the new understanding of christian community. Does the community spirit really find its source in the liturgy? Are there forms of community prayer, or prayers of obligation in the institute, composed, in most cases, when the Church had not the same community liturgical sense as she has today, which are now obsolete, as having no reference to liturgy?

The Council also emphasised the need to respect the operation of the holy Spirit in each individual and each group of individuals. This must lead to a reconsideration in religious institutes not of obedience itself, but of its exercise: the relationship between superior and subject, and, even more important, the structure of government in the order or congregation, the relationship between the general

and the local superiors, or the general chapter and provincial chapter. By means of the Council, the Church herself has modified her legal structure, in order to accommodate herself better to her mission throughout the entire world. The same efforts are needed in religious life, to bring about a harmony between obedience and initiative and to achieve a greater respect for the conscience of the individual.

### *The evolution of renewal*

The Council, particularly in the Constitution on the Liturgy, has restored the mass, the paschal mystery, to its central place in the christian life. Here a new balance has been achieved. The undue emphasis on the element of sacrifice has been corrected by stressing that the eucharist is the act by which the people of God is constituted and renewed, and becomes more and more one people in the risen Christ, the action by which God communicates himself and man replies. We can apply these new emphases most appropriately to the life of any community. For our purposes here, it is particularly important to notice the way in which these liturgical changes were brought about.

1. The liturgical movement did not start from the centre of the Church, but from the fringes. We must be willing to accept that certain elements in religious renewal will also take their rise from the fringes. We must have a sincere attitude towards this, or we will be unable to perceive the authenticity of such movements; regarding them, as indeed for a long time ecclesiastical authorities regarded elements of liturgical renewal, as fanatical proposals. In the very recent past, certain liturgical ideas or practices in some parts of the Church were regarded as excesses. Now, only a few years later, these excesses have become part of the new liturgical expression of the sacred mystery of christianity, the Mass. This is not to say that we should approve of excesses; it is merely a recognition of the fact that we might be mistaken and that a distinction is to be made between the mode of what is presented, and the content of the presentation. In efforts at religious renewal, it is almost certain that, given the possibility that all members will express their own opinions freely, there will be similar excesses. If we are not ready to admit that there may be real truth hidden in what appear to be outrageous proposals, we shall not be able to recognise the truth, nor, indeed, shall we be really looking for it.

2. The mass is the expression of the Church's central mystery; and yet it has changed its form while remaining exactly the same, in order that this form may express in a better and more intelligible way to the faithful and the people of our time what is contained within that mystery. Religious institutes must have confidence in the Spirit of Christ that their form can and must be changed whilst the content remains the same.

One of the most striking aspects of the Council, for Catholics as well as for non-catholics, was the fact that devoted and wise bishops could hold with such tenacity to contrary opinions, in their desire to do what was best for the Church. We must expect the same in all discussions on religious renewal: good and devoted religious will hold contrary opinions, in their desire for the good of their congregation. The dangers of disruption are obvious. The preservation of unity and harmony throughout the process of renewal will be for all concerned a task demanding the greatest tolerance and the greatest delicacy. It is true that renewal depends on union, but it also depends on truth. The way to truth is through dialogue, and dialogue must obviously begin and continue in the frank representation of contrary opinions.

### *Preparation for renewal*

The Council has stated that the religious state is a gift to the Church. The reason for its existence is to be at the service of the Church and of all mankind. There has to be a renewal of the spirit in each religious family and in each member of that family in view of its service to the Church and mankind in the modern world. This renewal of spirit will demand the reformulation of the constitutions, customs and other such documents, in view of the Church's needs today and of the spirit of the particular institute. It is clear that this reformulation will achieve nothing without the renewal of spirit. It would be rather like the sudden imposition of liturgical reform on a parochial congregation which had had no previous instruction in the new liturgy. The reform would be meaningless in such a situation: the blind acceptance of rules imposed from above without the slightest understanding of them. Those who are most concerned in guiding towards renewal (major superiors, whether generals or provincials) must present the material for reform to the general chapter of the congregation, material which is a true expression of the mind of the institute or of the province. In practice, this

material must be presented in a form which will make the work of the general chapter easier. Clear formulation (though we must always be on our guard against over-simplification) will save a great deal of time, and help towards wise and firm decisions. There ought also to be some substantial uniformity of presentation from the various provinces.

At the same time, it is the task of the provincial to aid the interior renewal of all the members of the province, so that the Sisters<sup>1</sup> may grow in their own total commitment to God, so that the means by which this dedication is expressed are more in keeping with the world of today both within and outside the convent. It is taken for granted, of course, that the provincial will follow whatever instructions are given by the general council.

### *The Tactics of Renewal*

Our intention here is to propose in outline how renewal can be implemented by stages; to comment on each stage and to suggest what stages can be curtailed or omitted altogether if time does not allow; and finally to conclude with some remarks on possible dangers, since each stage may appear to have been carried out when it has not. The overall guidance at each stage is the responsibility of the provincial; perhaps the most important task is to ensure that the renewal will be authentic. Throughout the whole programme of renewal she must bear in mind that she is seeking a true representation of the mind of her province as a whole.

We envisage four stages of renewal: first, the acquisition of information and knowledge by the provincial and a select group of sisters, so that specific guidelines may be given to all on which to form their judgements. Secondly, the necessary information and guidelines must be disseminated to all the houses of the province. Thirdly, this knowledge must be assimilated and applied to the religious life of the institute as a whole and to the particular house, by means of questionnaires, discussions and experiments. Fourthly, the formulation of the conclusions reached must be expressed in a form suitable for insertion into the constitutions, directory, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was conceived primarily to help religious institutes of women; we have therefore used the feminine gender in referring to the religious.

*Stage I: acquisition of information and knowledge*

The provincial's first task is to study and assimilate the relevant documents. It was Pius XII who started the movement towards religious renewal some years ago, by establishing the four general principles which are now incorporated into the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*: the gospel, the essential spirit of the foundress as it reflects the gospel in the light of the essential aims of the institute, the needs of the Church today, the needs of mankind today. Thus, all that was due to the circumstances and atmosphere of the foundress's own time, to the attitude, perhaps, of the Church towards religious orders of women at that time, to the theology, liturgy, the state of scripture studies and the actual mode of expression used in formulating the constitutions during the lifetime of the foundress: all these things should be set aside as accidental. What will remain will be the substance, the essential spirit; and this has to be clothed anew, in order to meet the needs of the Church and of mankind in this day and age.

These basic principles have been further defined and added to in the documents of Vatican II. The fifth chapter of *Lumen Gentium* may be considered the master plan for religious renewal. However, religious are part of the Church and this chapter on religious life must be considered in the context of the whole document. Then, of course, there is the *motu proprio*, *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, which contains the norms for the implementation of the decrees on bishops, priests, and on the missionary activity of the Church as well of *Perfectae Caritatis*. The whole of this document demands assiduous study. A major superior needs to assimilate the conciliar and post-conciliar teaching and directives contained in this large body of documents, so that she can make her own personal application of the Church's teaching to the several large problems of religious life as it is lived in her own congregation, reflecting on what changes she would make if it were up to her personally: what she would discard, what she would insert. Only in this way can a major superior really face up to the problem and begin to penetrate it; and without this penetration she is not really capable of guiding the Sisters.

On the other hand, the superior is one individual with limited talents and understanding; so that if the required knowledge is to be disseminated throughout the province it will wise for her to see to it that others gain the knowledge which she has to gain. All local superiors, for example, need the same sort of knowledge; and besides superiors, other sisters who have special wisdom, insight, talents or

influence; and this not merely among the older sisters, but the younger ones as well. In this way a representative body in the institute will be formed of those who have taken special pains to assimilate the teaching and directives of the Council so that they can formulate this teaching in the context of the renewal of their institute. These will thus be ready to help their fellow religious in acquiring the same knowledge, or some of it, and making the right sort of judgements.

It must be realized that in many provinces it will not be the major superior who has the greatest insight or the greatest intellectual capacity. Among nursing sisters, for example, the matron of a hospital may be a far more suitable person for this work than a major superior, the headmistress of a school more capable than the superior of the convent which administers the school. In selecting this representative body, the major superior will require the advice of others. She will know what her aim is: that the requisite knowledge be gained in order that it may be communicated to all the houses of the province in a way that is as open and clear and free from any bias or prejudice as possible.

This representative group will need expert help from outside the institute, in the way of conferences and organized discussions. These preliminary conferences need be very few, but the sisters who attend them should know well in advance so that they can face up to and formulate in their own minds the actual problems in religious life that they themselves have experienced in the past, or in the house in which they now are. They should also formulate their views on what they feel needs to be changed or introduced. In this way, they will come to a conference well prepared, much more capable of asking questions and engaging in discussions. Without such previous preparation, it is unlikely that they will get any real help from such conferences. Conferences often tend to create a passive attitude. There is listening, instead of thinking, a waiting to be told, hoping that someone will do the thinking for them. This is one of the main problems which has to be faced in the context of religious renewal.

After the preliminary conferences, and frequent discussions by this representative group, which will also include the sounding out of opinion in their own communities, other conferences on specific topics proposed by the group can be given. These will prove to be of much greater value, because the awareness of difficulties and possible solutions to them will have become more acute.

This personal knowledge, on the part of the provincial and the

representative group, is particularly necessary in view of the fact that the means towards renewal proposed by the general council may not be truly suited to the end proposed in a particular province. Conditions and circumstances can differ widely from region to region: and it is easily conceivable that the provincial may have to make representation for the qualification of certain norms proposed by the general council. Such proposals can only be made in the light of a clear and comprehensive knowledge.

*Stage II: the dissemination of knowledge through the houses of the province.*

In each convent, the provincial, superior, or some competent sister from the representative group will expound and initiate discussion on the essential spirit of the foundress and its relationship to the Gospel, and also the aims of renewal in the light of Vatican II, the means that the province is proposing for the implementation of this purpose, the adaptation of norms to fit the experience and capacity of individual sisters. The purpose of such talks will be to help the various communities to formulate their answers to questionnaires or to take part in discussions. It is clear that such talks cannot contain authoritative statements. Few, if any, could speak authoritatively on what is the essential spirit of the foundress or of the aims and norms of Vatican II; but with the knowledge that they have already gained, such speakers can certainly explain matters more lucidly and concisely. However, every sister in the audience should feel free to use or not to use what is said, as seems best to her. She may have something of her own to contribute, and the presentation of fixed norms or guiding lines may simply be confusing.

For this reason it must be made quite clear to each and every one that whatever she says or writes will not be held against her. There are bound to be situations in which fear and anxiety, real or apparent, occur. It is precisely in these situations that some will lack the assurance which enables them to say exactly what they have in their minds. It should be made known, in clear terms, that every sister is at liberty to write to the provincial, by-passing the local superior, what she wishes to say and that, though the purpose of such a letter will be that the material be used, her name will be kept secret, and that what she has written will be used in such a way that her name will not be revealed, even indirectly. In all discussions there must be the greatest charity, and respect for all those who speak. Everyone, even the youngest, must be helped



to feel perfectly free to say what she wishes; and even though both the way of speaking and what is said may be over-vehement, naive, obvious or outrageous, the speaker must be accepted as giving her sincere opinion and should therefore meet with respect, patience and love. This is clearly the mind of Vatican II, which stresses respect for the conscience of the individual, even when it is erroneous, because it is sincere. It can happen in discussions that certain people, whether because they are superiors or have other positions of importance in the community, or are held in special respect, unwittingly limit the freedom of discussion of some or all in the particular assembly. In these cases there ought to be meetings of the particular group at which such personalities are not present. The findings and the opinions of the group can be communicated to them later; and they can take part in other discussions with the same group, at other times.

It should be noted particularly that the study of the spirit and the essential aims of the foundress is a task which will entail the full-time work of one or two competent nuns, with a good historical sense, some knowledge of theology and really open minds. The choice of suitable persons for this work is clearly of the highest importance, since it will be a source from which all the rest will need to draw. Though it will not be necessary for each province to provide sisters for such work – it could be done by one or two for the whole congregation, it will be necessary for one or two in each province to be concerned with a more intimate knowledge of the spirit of the foundress. These individuals would keep in touch with those who are fully engaged on this important work.

*Stage III: means for the assimilation and application of this knowledge*

This is the most important stage, and the one which contains the greatest dangers. Discussions can lack true freedom and sincerity; questionnaires can be filled up without real thought; experiments can be hedged around with so many conditions as to make them practically useless. Throughout this stage, the guiding principle for the major superior is that she is seeking a true representation of the mind of her province. Therefore, every sister must take part in the discussions, and in filling out questionnaires. She must be really, and not merely apparently, free to express her sincere opinion.

It must also be borne in mind that this stage will require an honest re-appraisal of the life and work of the Institute and the

community in the light of the needs and desires of the Church as expressed in the Council documents. In many cases, this will prove to be an agonizing examination of conscience, which will demand the courage to face the facts as they are, and not to hide them or gloss over them.

It would seem better to have one preliminary questionnaire of a general nature without previous discussion. Discussions are of value, but it often happens that some are persuaded against their own judgement by opinions expressed by others, and in this way are effectively prevented from forming opinions of their own. It is important that all should realize their responsibility in taking part in this work for renewal, seeing it as part of their individual service to the Church and to their congregation, with the assurance that this is precisely what the Church is asking them to do. They should realize that they are co-operating in this work with the holy Spirit, and at the same time achieving that interior renewal in themselves, on which the total renewal depends. This preliminary questionnaire should cover the main aspects of religious life in the light of the Council. One suitable form of it would be the following: a quotation from one of the relevant documents of the Council at the head of each page which deals with a particular aspect of religious life, and beneath it a few questions relevant to the citation. The questions asked in each section should be very few – no more than four. A preliminary questionnaire of this nature containing more than ten sections would be overloaded. Sisters should be urged to draw up their answers to this questionnaire as shortly as possible, and in point form. The answers should be sent directly to the provincial, not through the local superior, in order to secure freedom and privacy. The answers should not be anonymous, precisely because the work which a particular sister is doing and her actual experience in religious life will be in itself a pointer towards the value of her answers. Only the major superior and one or two others should see and correlate the answers, and the names of these sisters should be known to the whole province. The purpose of this is to ensure freedom, because some individuals might prefer that one or other of the selected sisters should not see her answers; in which case it would be the provincial alone who would see them, and all should be made aware of this arrangement. The answers would then be collated and synthesised in a short form of two or three pages, which would give a profile of the opinions, difficulties, problems, proposed solutions as seen by the province as a whole. If every province in the congrega-

tion used a similar questionnaire, and used similar methods of synthesis, a profile of the whole congregation would be available for the general chapter.

The material collected and arranged in this preliminary questionnaire would form the basis for more detailed questionnaires limited to individual communities. This further questionnaire will deal with actualities: the community life, prayer, work, recreation and the apostolate in the individual community. Here the sisters would be asked what they think should be changed and introduced in the light of their foundress's spirit and the teaching of the Council. Great care will obviously be needed in drawing up such a questionnaire or subjects for discussion, since the questions could so easily dictate or produce stereotyped or superficial answers. For the drafting of this further questionnaire, it would seem necessary that a further committee be formed, one which would be truly representative of the province at various levels. Such a committee would contain an older superior and a younger one; if the work of the province is education, it would contain a headmistress of great experience and also a younger one; if there are various types of schools, then each should be represented in the same way. Those in formation or in domestic tasks would be likewise represented, and also those who are not yet finally professed. Adequate representation from the various groups of age, experience and the various apostolic works undertaken by the province is of vital importance in the composition of the material for these further questionnaires and discussions. The actual formulation of the material should be left to a few, perhaps one or two: it could then be submitted to all the members of the new committee, for their additions and emendations. It should be remembered, however, that no commission of this sort has any power. It is for the major superior to send out the questionnaire, with or without any proposed changes, but she will use her power with great discretion. She wants more than all else freedom of expression amongst the sisters in order that the truth may be known and the right solutions found. Discussions can then be held in the various houses and the opinion of the community as a whole sent to the provincial. It is almost certain that there will be a variety in the opinions of any individual community; so that a majority and a minority opinion should be expressed. The sisters should know beforehand that this is going to be done, and this knowledge will make for patience and tolerance in the discussions. The only alternative would be to send in one opinion which has been decided by

vote; but if this method is used there will be, inevitably, in the course of the discussions attempts on the part of some to persuade others; there would also be lobbying, abstentions and so on, and none of this makes for peace and unity. The document which expresses the opinions of the majority and minority of the community could be formulated by the local superior, or someone appointed by her; but all the sisters should have the opportunity to read the document and, if necessary, to offer amendments and suggestions. All should know what is being sent in from their house to the provincial and to the committee appointed by the provincial; they should also have the freedom to send in private reports directly to the provincial. The knowledge that this also can be done will help patience and tolerance in the discussions.

It may be necessary in some congregations to have further questionnaires or questions for discussion by specific groups in the province. It is true that the community questionnaires and discussions will have covered a great deal of ground; but there are groups in the province, for example those engaged in study or domestic work or nursing, who may need discussions in their own particular field. There certainly ought to be separate and specific discussion on the question of formation. Here the material provided in the earlier stages should help towards preliminary decisions on formation. The constitution of Vatican II on the training of priests could serve as a guide here. The novice mistress, the mistress of juniors, and one or two others who have to deal with the junior professed once their professional studies are completed, could form a special committee to deal with formation.

With regard to experimentation, we have seen how the document *Ecclesiae Sanctae* consistently recommends experiments. There can be no doubt that to introduce permanent changes, especially in the constitutions, without previous trial, would be highly undesirable. A new order of the day, more suitable for the apostolate in a particular house, could be tried out for a particular period.

Similarly, experiments can be carried out with regard to community prayers, their length and their content. Other such experiments might be the granting of general permission, to go out with or without a companion within certain hours; meditation and spiritual reading in private, for all or for the finally professed. Some experiments, such as the order of the day, could be carried out in all houses. For others, one might have to choose a particular house. Too many changes in every house would, however, be disturbing. Also, when

an experiment allowing greater liberty is clearly shown to be unsatisfactory, it is easier to discontinue it in one house than in a whole province.

*Stage IV: attempts at formulation*

When the third stage is completed, and the results of the various questionnaires collated, synthesised and communicated to the various communities, then the actual constitutions, rules, custom books of the congregation can be studied afresh. Each community should then begin to try and formulate how the various proposed changes can be inserted into the constitutions, remembering that constitutions are meant to be permanent. If it is thought that some of the proposed changes might need further adaptation at a later date, these should be put into a directory or other document which is more easily alterable; to put all such proposed changes into the constitutions would be to institutionalize change, so that the congregation, instead of being able to develop and grow in accordance with the future needs of the Church, would become as static as before. The difficulties and the aims of this task should be explained as clearly as possible to the various communities. All will find how difficult it is to express the spirit of the institute in words; but they will certainly gain a fresh insight into the nature of religious constitutions, and they will at the same time grow in maturity and in true responsibility for their own development and for that of their institute.

These final formulations are intended for the formed religious (in some cases a sister is considered to be fully formed at her final profession, in other cases after ten years in religious life). The formed religious is to be considered a mature person and should be treated as such. She is the one who should have the maximum freedom in her life of prayer and in her apostolate and in all that pertains to it: permission to go out unaccompanied, to send and receive letters sealed, etc. For those who are not formed, certain restrictions in liberty will be necessary. It must also be borne in mind that the religious regime of any community must be balanced and that it cannot be uniform for all. Without this balance suppleness will go and service to the Church will be hindered; but there must also be a minimum of uniformity for the sake of the community. To achieve balance in any situation always demands the maximum of effort, particularly when the balance which we are seeking is the expression of a living

spirit in an external form, which will provide a common regime and yet still give liberty to the action of the holy Spirit in each individual.

We will be right to expect that as a religious grows older she will mature in Christ; if we cannot expect this, then we need to look even more carefully at the form of our religious life and the way in which authority is exercised. At the same time, because human nature is what it is, growing older will not always mean growth in Christ; and therefore a religious congregation, for the good of the whole and of the individual alike, must have the power to exercise vigilance. Though we take risks, they must be prudent and calculated. It is certain that there will be some unfortunate lapses, but unless we take the risks, the world of today will slip away from us, and we shall fail to give to the Church the sort of service that she is asking of us today.